

## CHAPTER 7

# ‘Gender Activists Will Kidnap Your Kids’

## The Construction of Feminist and LGBT+ Rights Activists as Modern Folk Devils in Czech Anti-Gender Campaigns

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There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked about and written about. (Salazar Frias, the Spanish Inquisitor who stopped the witch-hunt among the Spanish Basques, quoted in La Fontaine 1998, 33)

### The Roots of the Anti-Gender Moral Panic

In 2011, Eva Michaláková, a Czech immigrant to Norway, accused the Norwegian child protection service Barnevernet of unjustly taking her two sons away due to a suspicion of abuse. Michaláková, who desperately tried to get her children back, contacted Czech media and mediatized the case. The case attracted significant public attention, people organized protests in the streets, and a massive campaign against Barnevernet was launched, turning the case into an issue for the entire Czech nation – Czech children were being stolen by Norwegian

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#### How to cite this book chapter:

Svatoňová, E. 2021. “Gender Activists Will Kidnap Your Kids”: The Construction of Feminist and LGBT+ Rights Activists as Modern Folk Devils in Czech Anti-Gender Campaigns. In *Modern Folk Devils: Contemporary Constructions of Evil*, edited by M. D. Frederiksen and I. Harboe Knudsen, 135–155. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-13-8>.

social services. Not only were ordinary citizens protesting but Czech celebrities and politicians got involved in the campaign as well. One of them was the Czech president, Miloš Zeman, who addressed the Norwegian king with a letter asking him to return the children to their biological family.<sup>1</sup> While I am by no means trying to downplay the pain and the trauma Michaláková had to experience after losing her two sons, and while I am not claiming that the case was not controversial, the narratives about Barnevernet started taking various directions and were blown up to an extent that was surreal. Stories emerged about the Norwegian child protection service stealing children from immigrants and using them as organ donors, giving them to homosexual couples, or allowing employees of Barnevernet to sexually abuse them. Barnevernet was portrayed as a totalitarian Norwegian apparatus that citizens of Norway were afraid to criticize because they thought they might lose their own children or jobs.<sup>2</sup>

Seven years later, on 28 September 2018, a Czech Catholic priest and former minister of education, Petr Piřha, made a speech during a church service on the occasion of the state holiday commemorating the death of St Wenceslas, the patron saint of Bohemia. Wenceslas, a martyr who was killed by his own brother in around 930, is often depicted as a witness of Christ's truth in the Czech national consciousness. According to a legend, St Wenceslas is one of the Czech knights who lie sleeping beneath Blaník Mountain in central Bohemia, awaiting the moment when they will rise and return to save the nation from its enemies (Holy 1996, 35). During his speech, Father Piřha did not focus in particular on the importance of Wenceslas's personality for Czech history. Instead, he dealt with the topic of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. This mundane piece of legislative work, the aim of which is to ensure that all states have a legislative framework tackling gender-based violence, fuelled an unexpected number of emotionally coloured responses – the convention was accused of smuggling a dangerous ideology into Czech territory. It is no coincidence that Piřha chose the national day of Wenceslas's death for his prophecy, as the claim of his speech was to warn his followers that the Czech nation was in danger.

In his passionate speech, Father Piřha claimed that the politically indifferent society of Czechia had no clue about the threats that lay ahead, and uttered following prognosis:

Freedom either exists, and then all other types of freedom naturally evolve from it, or it does not exist and then there is no freedom at all. Due to the Istanbul Convention and pressure groups such as 'gender lobbyists' and 'homo lobbyists', there will be no freedom. ... Your families will be torn apart and dispersed. ... They will kidnap your kids and they will never tell you where they have hidden them, to whom they have sold them and where they have imprisoned them. And all that just due to a false accusation.<sup>3</sup>

He further elaborated that the ratification of the convention would lead to the introduction of what he referred to as 'other pervert laws' that had already been introduced in other Western countries that had already ratified the document, 'whose only aim was to ruin the concept of the traditional family.' Exploiting the narratives of kidnapping Czech children, which were already well rooted in the Czech collective consciousness owing to the Michaláková case, he constructed a threat that could easily resonate. He also stated that the protagonists of the proposed undemocratic and dictatorial laws derived from both Marxism and Nazism, predicting that parents who call their son a boy and their daughter a girl will be sent to concentration camps. In his speech, such narratives were used as a powerful metaphor in a country that had experienced occupation at the hands of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. He finished with a threatening statement portraying a Czech, heterosexual majority as the oppressed group: 'In this hierarchical order, you will end up under all kinds of animals, because for cats, frogs and insects these laws do not apply.'

It seems unlikely that Father Piřha actually believed that ratifying the Istanbul Convention could eventually lead to such catastrophic outcomes. What he was doing was using rather a well-designed strategy to draw people's attention to a political cause. This kind of strategy is not uncommon among religious leaders, who often believe that politics requires strong, even provocative language that will arouse people's enthusiasm for change (Irvine 2005, 6). To achieve his goal, Father Piřha based his tactics on spreading fears by the creation of persuasive images of folk devils (he called them gender lobbyists and homo lobbyists) that can serve as the heart of moral fears. Stanley Cohen, who coined the term 'moral panic', described it as a condition, episode, person or group of persons that become viewed as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen 2011 [1972], 1). This moral panic is often based on a little piece of evidence whose extent and significance were amplified (*ibid.*, vii).

Although Father Piřha's speech was extreme and quite novel in a Czech context, it was in fact not new within the transnational context. Quite the opposite. His words were derived from more than two decades of struggle by the Catholic Church to regain power in the context of secularism and gender and LGBT rights – progressive tendencies that gave rise to new forms of transnational anti-feminist projects underpinned by nationalist ideology all around the world. We are currently witnessing the same kind of reactions in most of the Central and Eastern European states. For instance, Hungary banned gender studies programmes at universities in 2018, arguing that gender studies was an ideology not a science.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Hungary passed a law that made it impossible for transgender and intersex people to legally change their gender.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Polish right-wing populist governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) began the process of withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified by Poland in 2015.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, Poland's right-wing government attempted to ban abortion, granting exceptions only in cases of rape and incest.<sup>7</sup> In addition to a backlash against women's rights, there

is strong evidence of rising homophobia in the country as well. For example, in July 2020, the re-elected Polish president Andrzej Duda based his presidential campaign on anti-LGBT rhetoric, claiming that 'LGBT ideology' is more destructive than communism.<sup>8</sup> Slovakia has repeatedly refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention<sup>9</sup> after massive campaigns based on misinformation against the document, and in 2015 the country held a referendum on banning same-sex marriage, although the result was not valid due to insufficient turnout.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the four Central European states known as the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are perceived as rebels against the democratic norms of the European Union (EU),<sup>11</sup> such mobilizations against gender ideology are not only a regional phenomenon typical of Central Europe. In fact, such mobilizations have occurred worldwide, including Western European states such as Italy (Garbagnoli 2016), France (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017) and Germany (Blum 2015), but also Latin America (Corredor 2019) or Russia (Moss 2017). They are represented by different actors and oppose different laws and reforms in different local contexts, but they are strikingly similar in their discursive strategies and repertoires of action (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, 253). The individual national mobilizations influence each other, and their actors cooperate, meet in international gatherings and borrow themes and argumentative strategies from each other.

What all these campaigns have in common is that they are no longer in opposition to women's liberation alone. Some representatives of the Catholic Church, conservative politicians, journalists and intellectuals have joined forces with nationalist and far-right politicians and activists to produce discourses that intersect nationalism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, misogyny, opposition to abortion, opposition to leftist projects in general, and globalization and transnational bodies such as the EU and the UN: discourses known under the notion anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

In this chapter, I start by touching upon the genealogy of the anti-gender panic in Czechia. Then I analyse the attempts to stir moral panic made by Czech anti-feminist organization operating on social media, and describe how feminists and LGBT rights activists (as well as members of the LGBT minority) are constructed as the embodiment of modern folk devils. Finally, I discuss the multiple semantic of the anti-gender discourse in Czechia and how the empirical case analysed in this chapter can contribute to the debate regarding the theoretical framework of moral panic.

### **How to Do Anti-Feminism without Feminism? Invent and Stir a Moral Panic**

As was the case with witches (see the quotation with which this chapter started), the concept of 'gender ideology' did not exist until it was invented and written about in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> While the discourse has some aspects that can be found

in the American discourses opposing sexual education in schools emerging as early as the 1970s, such as the emphasis on endangered children (Herdt 2009), the notion of 'gender ideology' only emerged in the 1990s as a result of the initial reactions of the Vatican to the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). It is a catch-all term that covers anything relating to gender and sexuality. The anti-gender campaigners ignore the origins of the term gender and describe it as a new form of cultural Marxism whose aim is to abolish all biological differences between men and women. Finally, they mix together all the aspects and scholars of feminist theory and portray Judith Butler as the mother of the ideology (*ibid.*). To achieve their goals, they use inflammatory language and create persuasive scenarios in order to trigger a collective hysteria known as moral panic (Cohen 2011 [1972]).

Unlike in other countries, where opposition to 'gender ideology' has been ongoing for a while, in Czechia it is a very recent phenomenon that did not arise until about 2018. The first obstacle that Czech moral entrepreneurs who were willing to lead a war against 'gender ideology' faced was the fact that there was no real enemy they could point at. Czechia had not experienced much progress regarding gender equality,<sup>13</sup> so it was difficult for the guardians of patriarchal order to claim that feminism was 'pushing too far'. In fact, most of the Czech population, including both men and women, hold conservative views on gender roles (Jusová 2016), and a majority of Czech women take pride in managing to work, care for their children and do the housework as well. Until very recently, feminism was still used as a swear word (Ferber and Raabe 2003). Owing to the fact that most of the women's rights for which women had to fight in the West, such as voting rights for women, the right to work and the right to abortion and maternity leave, were introduced top down either in the First Czechoslovak Republic or under the socialist Czechoslovakia, Czechia has not witnessed any mass mobilization of women, and most of the feminist campaigns have been conducted through NGOs and lobbyists (Korolczuk and Saxonberg 2015). LGBT minorities have been able to become registered partners since 2006, but they do not enjoy the same number of rights as they do in other democracies.<sup>14</sup>

So, in order to create mass hysteria and mobilize people, these campaigners needed to create a new, persuasive narrative to convince the population that there was a serious threat. The Istanbul Convention was handy in this connection, because it gave them a pretext for starting the campaign. Furthermore, owing to the convention's transnational nature, it could easily be framed as a foreign, unwelcome influence – as proved by the usage of the foreign word 'gender', which does not have any equivalent in the Czech language. It also opened the opportunity to blame the European elites and transnational bodies for being detached from the needs of real people. The convention was described as a document that would open the door for the atrocities that were according to the anti-gender campaigners already happening elsewhere, just around the

corner (i.e. in the West). Czech Traditional Family is one of the most active activist groups opposing the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and they described the possible consequences of its ratification in a newspaper interview as follows:

In the Netherlands, people already have ID cards with the possibility of choosing between three genders, in Germany they have ‘hanky panky’ corners in kindergartens, and in the UK they have injections preventing children from developing so they can decide what gender they want to be themselves.<sup>15</sup>

As in other Central and Eastern European countries, the Czech campaigners used the discursive manoeuvre of talking about the unwelcome colonialism of ideas and Western imperialism (Graff and Korolczuk 2018) and warning against the atrocities that were happening in the West, especially in EU countries.

### **From Pro-Russian Propaganda to Mainstream Media**

The EU plays a significant role in the discourse. Anti-European sentiment is the core of the campaigns and the EU is portrayed as a neo-Marxist, totalitarian project that funds feminist and LGBT NGOs in the region in order to make them EU agents.

This is evident from the fact that ultra-conservative Czech priests from a sect called Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate were among the first people who started campaigning against ‘gender ideology’ in the Czech context. This sect was founded by former Catholic priests who, after they were excommunicated by the Vatican in 2008, found refuge in Ukraine. The sect was particularly active before Euromaidan, the wave of public demonstrations and civil unrest after the Ukrainian government’s decision to suspend the association agreement with the EU. The sect’s main goal was to convince their followers to support Russia. To do so, they based their preaching on misinformation and conspiracy theories. During their services, they warned against the EU, such as in the following statement:

The ideology of global reduction of mankind seeks the spiritual, moral and physical genocide. Its main actors are: the United Nations, world bankers and Masonic lodges which, through the mediation of international structures, govern world politics. A world war unleashed with the aim of reducing humanity is guided by an antichristian system of professional lie which is being established worldwide. The basic principle applied in this war is ‘voluntary’ self-destruction. The main object of attack is no military bases but small defenceless children. The most

effective way to achieve their spiritual, moral and eventually physical destruction is to prevent their happy childhood, to tear them away from their loving parents, to rob them of a warm family home, and to make them homeless misfits exposed to violence, lawlessness, demoralization and satanization. Eventually these children become **programmed biorobots** who after several felonies end by suicide. The strategy used in this war is psychological manipulation and systematic deception on the part of the official authorities. ... The Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate calls upon the Ukrainian and Russian Governments and all MPs to cancel the ratification of fraudulent conventions, recommendations and resolutions of the UN, EU and PACE. We appeal to Russia and Ukraine to send away all foreign so-called charitable organizations and funds with their destructive projects. (Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate 2012, emphasis in original)

While the sect seems to be a fringe group of people whose rhetoric got out of hand, there are speculations about the sect being funded by Russia<sup>16</sup> as it has its own website, where it publishes articles and public letters addressed to different authorities in eight different languages (Ukrainian, Russian, Italian, Spanish, English, French, Polish and Czech).<sup>17</sup> It also sends mass emails containing misinformation.<sup>18</sup>

While the pro-Russian Czech sect based in Ukraine was among the first Czech campaigners against 'gender ideology', it is also connected with campaigns in Czechia's neighbouring country Slovakia, where anti-gender campaigns appeared as long ago as 2013, when the Slovak parliament was negotiating juvenile justice, against which the Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate also campaigned intensely. During the debates about juvenile justice, the anti-gender discourse was established in the Slovak public space. It became even more salient around the year 2015, during the campaigns against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Around this time, the concept of 'gender ideology' made its way into pastoral letters published by the Slovak Bishops' Conference. Among the most prominent Slovak anti-gender campaigners was a charismatic Catholic priest called Marian Kuffa, famous for his work with people on the fringes of Slovak society, who was at the launch of the campaign Stop Evil from Istanbul.<sup>19</sup>

In the year 2018, when the Istanbul Convention was about to be ratified in Czechia, Czech archbishop Jan Graubner visited the Slovak Bishops' Conference in Bratislava. After he returned, the Czech Catholic Church published a first pastoral letter warning against 'gender ideology' in May 2018, and Czech Catholic priests, including Father Piřha, started campaigning against the ratification of the convention during their services. In September 2018, Father Kuffa was also invited to hold a special service in the Czech town of Bystřice pod Hostýnem against the ratification of the convention.<sup>20</sup>

While the sect and Catholic priests undoubtedly helped to spread the discourse, it is relatively clear that they would have been unsuccessful if the Catholic Church had been the only organization involved. After all, Czechia is a country in which the majority of the population identify themselves as atheists or unaffiliated with any religion (Froese 2005). It was only possible to establish the discourse in the Czech public space using the help of other moral entrepreneurs.

The first mention of ‘gender ideology’ in Czech media occurred around 2010, when the Union for Defence of Parental Rights<sup>21</sup> protested against sexual education in schools. In that year they used the concept of ‘gender ideology’ in a petition signed by 7,000 people and a letter addressed to the minister of education. In addition, this petition was supported by 150 Czech Catholic priests. In the same year, Matyáš Zrno, a journalist and an employee of a conservative NGO called the Civic Institute,<sup>22</sup> organized a lecture entitled ‘The End of Men in Europe. Alias Gender Ideology in Practice’. The members of the Civic Institute and the Union for Defence of Parental Rights were therefore pioneers and providers of intellectual content in the anti-gender campaigns in the Czech public space.<sup>23</sup>

At that point, the concept of ‘gender ideology’ was still rather new in Czechia. Very few articles mentioning ‘gender ideology’ were published between 2010 and 2015, and those that were published appeared on right-wing platforms such as *parlamentnilisty.cz*, *euportal.cz* and *neviditelnypes.cz*, and in right-wing-oriented magazines such as *Reflex* and *Literární Noviny*.

As Table 7.1 shows, the concept became used more frequently by Czech mainstream media only in the year 2018, after Father Piřha delivered his speech. His strategy of constructing moral panic in order to attract public attention to the issue had tangible outcomes, with the use of the concept spreading enormously after his speech.<sup>24</sup>

However, the success of the anti-gender campaigns can be demonstrated not only by the spread and normalization of the anti-gender discourse. The campaigns also succeeded in postponing the ratification of the convention. The populist Czech prime minister Andrej Babiř promised that it would be ratified by the end of the year 2018, but the discussion about its ratification is still ongoing in 2021.<sup>25</sup>

### Anti-Gender Moral Panic Goes Online

While this top-down stirring of moral panic helped to embed anti-gender discourses in the Czech public space, these campaigns would have been less successful without the efforts of grass-roots activists running pro-family and far-right organizations. These activists did not only collect signatures for petitions against the ratification of the convention and organize protests and public seminars



**Table 7.1:** The number of appearances of the notion 'gender ideology' in Czech media database each year.

Year	No. of appearances
2010	2
2011	3
2012	0
2013	3
2014	14
2015	17
2016	11
2017	33
2018	108
2019	176

**Source:** Author (see endnote 24).

about 'gender ideology'; they also helped enormously by creating and spreading moral panic through the use of social media. This media allowed them to blur the borders between mainstream and alternative media, real and fake news, and serious and jokey modes of communication (Shifman 2014). Despite the humorous and parodical alt-right aesthetics typical of Facebook public pages, social media also allowed the activists to practise serious political participation and the negotiation of political opinions and identities (Shifman 2014).

To analyse the reactions of ordinary citizens to such discourses, I scraped one of the most popular Facebook pages that engaged in the anti-gender campaigning: Anti-feminist Strike. This page was run by a far-right organization called Angry Mothers,<sup>26</sup> which joined other organizations in campaigning against the spread of feminist ideas and LGBT rights after making a significant appearance on the Czech anti-Islam scene. In particular, I studied the way in which this organization constructed folk devils and what strategies they used to provoke emotional reactions from their followers. The Facebook page Anti-feminist Strike was founded in October 2018, a month after Father Pitha's speech, and was shut down in March 2019 for spreading hate speech. During this time, they posted 379 posts, which I analysed for this chapter.<sup>27</sup>

First, to understand how modern folk devils were constructed in the online communication of the group, I focused on the images of folk devils and the attributes that were ascribed to them. To find out I used Sketch Engine, which helped me to identify the most common collocations.

According to Cohen, we can distinguish between two types of folk devil (Cohen 2011 [1972], xxvi). The first type are the actors who embody the problem, in this case LGBT minority and masculine women, meaning feminists. The second type are the folk devils that are ultimately responsible for societal change: politicians, NGOs, feminist and LGBT rights activists, and employees of European institutions.

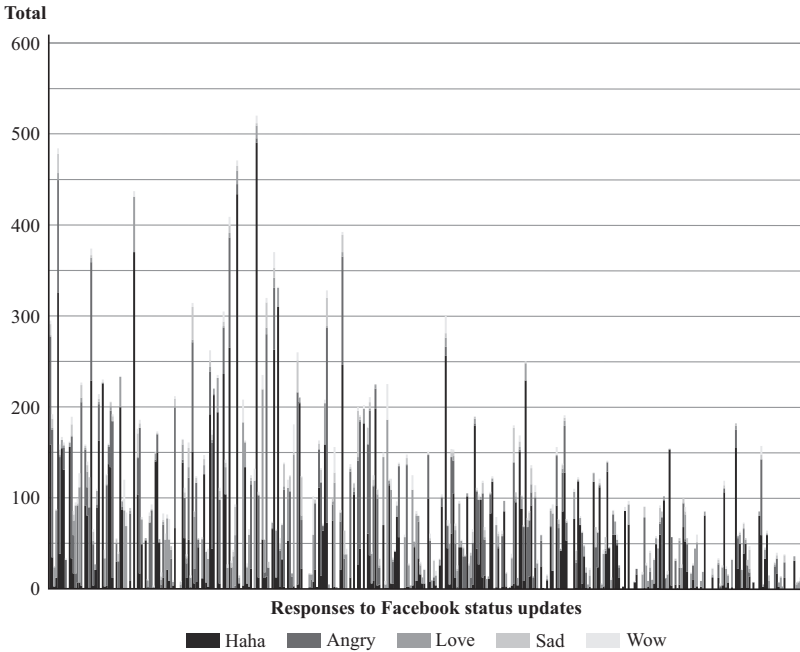
To construct the first type of folk devil, the activists running the page purposely used material that exaggerated the reality and made both LGBT minorities and feminists look much more radical and extreme than they are in reality. The word feminist appeared 58 times and activist 28 times. The Sketch Engine showed that the adjectives in colocation with such nouns were *crazy, insane, sensitive, irrational, pervert, hysterical*. They were depicted as brainsick perverts on the fringes of society. Rather than being portrayed as evil people, they were portrayed as the confused victims of the ‘gender ideology’.

On the other hand, the activists and NGO workers were the real immoral devils who run their perverted projects to suck money from the state. This is already well illustrated in Father Pitha’s speech, in which he emphasized: ‘we are supposed to legalise unfreedom in the name of gender lobbyists and homo lobbyists – I am stressing homo lobbyist not homosexuals, who very often disagree with the aggressive opinions of those homo lobbyists’ (Pitha, 2018). Such folk devils were described using adjectives such as *smart, cunning, immoral, oppressive, totalitarian, cruel* and *emotionless*. However, by contrast, they were also portrayed as silly people with good intentions that lead to bad consequences, and were often labelled ironically as *naive, sensitive, elfs* and *dogooders*.

### The Emotions Underpinning Anti-Gender Moral Panic

Logically, to make people react to its posts, Angry Mothers could not describe the folk devils in emotionally neutral language. Instead, they used diverse strategies in order to generate different type of emotions – mostly powerful visual material combined with comments that consisted of irony and ridicule, but also expressions of anger, indignation, and the ‘silent majority’s’ feeling of injustice. As shown in Figure 7.1, the most frequent emotions performed by followers were ‘laughter’ and ‘anger’.<sup>28</sup>

To demonstrate the strategies used by the organization to arouse reactions from its followers, I describe the posts that received the most reactions and comments that received the highest numbers of likes by other followers. The posts presented in this chapter do not stick out from the style of other posts and represent general tendencies in the depiction of folk devils on the Facebook page. Most of the posts had a negative tone, and when admins tried to evoke a positive reaction, such as a laugh, they did so by posting politically incorrect jokes to ridicule and humiliate LGBT minorities and feminists. Most



**Figure 7.1:** The number of different types of FB reactions the posts posted on the Anti-feminist Strike Facebook page during its existence.

**Source:** Author.

of the posts were coded as political commentary, in which the admins presented themselves as a true alternative to mainstream, corrupted media. However, they also posted messages that had only entertainment purposes or served as self-promotion.

The status that received the highest number of laughing reactions (490) was posted on 24 January 2019. The post showed an image of Lynn Yaeger, an editor of a fashion magazine and a columnist. The picture depicts a full-figured woman approximately in her sixties wearing a playful outfit that can be read as a confident and creative endeavour of self-expression. Her hair has been dyed a shiny ginger colour and cut into a mushroom shape. The facial features are enhanced by a bright pink circle painted on each cheek and she has used a dark purple lipstick to highlight her cupid's bow by shaping it into two sharp triangles. She is wearing an A-shaped, purple-and-green cloak with a pattern of roses that are covered in glitter. Over the cloak, she has put a black, fluffy feather boa. The admins accompanied the image with a comment: 'Lynn Yaeger – editor of fashion magazine Vogue, who often criticises Melania Trump for her clothes.-) Ehm...Shouldn't it be the other way round?' suggesting that her nonconventional style was a representation of the perverse fashion sense, dictated by elites, and lost feminine beauty in modern times.

This post received 123 additional comments from the followers. They mostly despised the figure in the image, calling her a ‘monster’ and a ‘freak’. But some of the followers also developed the theory in which she symbolized everything that had gone wrong with modern society: ‘Normal people are silent. ... Whereas perverts scream wherever they can and they want more and more’ (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 24 January 2019). ‘Exactly, it should be other way round, but governments support freaks nowadays, they are allowed to scream and dare to do whatever they want. :-’( FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 24 January 2019). ‘I have been saying this for a long time, everything is upside down ... what is normal and ok, is wrong and unacceptable. ... And what is weird and perverse, that is right. ... Dear Lord in heaven!!! Why don’t people go away with all this nonsense’ (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 24 January 2019).

On the other hand, the post with the second highest number of laughing reactions (434) was the image posted on 27 January 2019 presenting a fictive, Photoshopped soldier from the future army of the EU. The meme (which can also be found on the internet in the US Army version) depicts a male figure in a pink uniform with a little logo of the EU on his chest and a pink army hat that is decorated with a heart on the front. The man standing in front of the EU’s flag has a perfectly groomed beard and the authors of the meme have further photoshopped his face with bright pink lipstick, rosy cheekbones, eyelashes highlighted with a significant amount of mascara, bright pink eyeshadow that covers the entire area under his eyebrows and drop earrings made of pink diamonds. The admins of the page simply wrote a comment: ‘The design for the uniforms for the new EU army.’

The aim of the image was to use this fictive soldier deemed as being feminine and emasculated, and to reinforce the right’s narrative portraying the entire European Union as weak. This post also received 106 comments, consisting mainly of homophobic jokes, despising and humiliating the person in the image, despite the fact that it is obviously a photoshopped picture. This response may serve as evidence that even humorous and fictional posts can create emotional, negative reactions in the receiver.

Drawing on this conspiracy theory was one of the most frequent strategies of the organization. It was often posting ‘funny’ pictures of ‘emasculated’ men similar to the one described above in an attempt to support the right’s conspiracy theory that modern society is dealing with a serious crisis of masculinity as a consequence of feminism and the action of folk devils: ‘The public space is contaminated by opinions of sensitive boys and naive girls who know very little about relationships between two partners running a family. Unfortunately, they are f\*cking up with brains of young men and women who are not able to start a high-quality relationship’ (Anti-feminist Strike, 13 November 2018). According to the page’s admins, the consequences of such brainwashing are useless, powerless men: ‘Men failed. ... Nowadays, men are no longer breadwinners and are not the only ones who work hard and thus are not respected automatically’ (Anti-feminist Strike, 26 November 2018).

However, this Facebook page did not only serve as an entertainment site. The admins further managed to evoke anger by posting inflammatory messages. The post that received the highest number of angry reactions (266) was a post showing the title page of a magazine called *Parents*, posted on 22 January 2019 with a comment: 'They will impose it on us, no matter what.'

The title page, with a big headline 'Parents' and subheading 'Feel the Love', depicts an extremely happy-looking and handsome family. It is a same-sex couple with two children. One of the men is a black, sits on a chair and holds the hands of a cute, chubby, white toddler who seems to be about to start to walk. The man wears a bright yellow T-shirt under a green shirt, pale purple trousers and white trainers. The toddler is dressed all in blue. Next to them stands a tall white man. He wears a pink hoodie under a turquoise jacket, khaki trousers and white trainers. He holds a laughing one-year-old boy of colour who seems to enjoy being 'in the air' very much. The two adult men on the picture lean towards each other while showing their perfectly white and straight teeth to the camera.

In addition, the post received 239 comments. As the comment made by the organizations indicates, the post serves to convince the followers that 'gender ideology' and multiculturalism are new, totalitarian ideologies ignoring the law of nature. The post is not only homophobic but has obvious racist aspects as well.

The reactions to these posts provide evidence of the way conspiracy theories find their way into public opinion and are re-produced. As the comment section showed, the post inspired some of the followers to re-produce the 'white race/European population genocide' conspiracy theory: 'White people are supposed to die out. Even the children on the picture are dark. Reverse racism. They want white people to stop reproducing and the world to become black' (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 22 January 2019). 'American barons want Europe to get poor' (FB User; Anti-feminist Strike, 22 January 2019). 'Plans for human kind are much more terrifying than any fiction or horror – and this all was done thanks to world environmentalists that enslaved the world by all the orders and prohibitions in the name of saving the planet' (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 22 January 2019).

The post with the second highest number of angry reactions (214) was posted on 10 January 2019 and consisted of an image of a rainbow family with an ironic comment: 'And here we have the wonderful family of the future. ... Happy and beautiful people, who are stable, and create safe and calm haven for their child that will have the opportunity to fully develop. Much better than a stupid, ordinary family ... soon in our country!'

The image depicts another same-sex couple with a child. This time, we are talking about two women. One of them has a short hair coloured black in the back and bright red in the front. She has one piercing on the very top of her nose, and two more piercings in her chin. She wears an all-black outfit. Her supposed partner has shorter hair dyed blonde, wears glasses and has one

piercing in her nasal septum and two more piercings in her chin. She wears a vest over a black, sleeveless top and her strong arm is decorated with a tattoo – two wings. In between them sits a little child around the age of five. The child has long blond hair tied in a ponytail and their smile shows a few gaps from the loss of some baby teeth.

As the comments of the followers suggest, this image is deemed to represent something much bigger: a degenerate world in which children in particular are in danger: ‘Where are the children’s rights? Children have the right to have a mother and a father, but perhaps not in this degenerated and deviant world as we can see’ (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 10 January 2019). ‘I believe that a small group can create a huge crowd of insect, that will deform the society’ (FB User, Anti-feminist Strike, 10 January 2019).

This narrative is also linked to the narrative developed in the post, which generated the third-highest number of angry reactions (211). It was posted on 14 January 2019 and included a link to an article (published on an American far-right Facebook page) about the case of James/Luna Younger and his mother, who was accused of forcing her six-year-old son, James, to change his gender against his own will. Such posts inform the Facebook page’s followers that the threat to children is not only a potential threat in future: the atrocities and crimes against children are already happening, as suggested by the comment:

Protect your children from people who will try to convince them that they can go against the nature and change their gender by using chemicals. ... Times when natural things will be prohibited are coming. (Anti-feminist Strike, 14 January 2019).

In reality, a three-year-old James started asking to wear dresses; around age five she declared she was a girl, persistently identified as such and was diagnosed with gender dysphoria by three medical experts, which angered her father, who insisted his child was a boy. Since Luna’s mother let Luna wear whatever she chose, her father launched an online campaign based on misinformation. The case ended up in court, where physicians, school staff and family members all testified that Luna consistently, persistently identified as a girl. The case eventually mobilized various conservatives and Christian fundamentalists from Texas into action and they helped to spread the moral panic.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to the discourse of the Catholic priests and conservative intellectuals that portrayed ‘gender and LGBT activists’ as servants of a totalitarian neo-Marxist apparatus, the online campaigns used a more tabloid style, focusing mostly on the sexuality and performance of gender by their enemies, a strategy that has been previously described as sex panic (Fejes 2000; Herdt 2009; Irvine 2005; Rubin 1984).

Here, we are not dealing only with an opposition to Istanbul Convention itself. The LGBT rights activists and feminists perceived as folk devils are seen not as a random event but as part of a bigger problem that the whole society

is facing: 'What is typical for modern times in respect of relationships? – Concentrated egoism ... the lack of respect to others' (Anti-feminist Strike, 21 December 2018). 'We live in times of freaks' (Anti-gender Strike, 20 December 2018). 'What is happening in the Western world is perversity and it is harming young people that solve their insecurity and lack of confidence by changing their gender' (Anti-feminist Strike, 10 December 2018). 'The world is changing in front of our eyes. We have so many new laws that it is confusing and there is nobody who would know them all very well. ... Modesty is gone with the wind, because we only appreciate pride and self-esteem. Demonstration of decency is gone, because you no longer need it to achieve your goals' (Anti-feminist Strike, 3 November 2018).

### **The Multiple Semantics of the Czech Anti-Gender Panic**

The speeches made by the priests and political elites mentioned in the first section of this chapter, and the discourses used in the online activism, can be regarded as textbook examples of attempts to stir moral indignation. They illustrate the way in which even one of the most ordinary pieces of legislation can be depicted as a devil's pact that could corrode the very bonds that hold society together and can be used to mobilize society, or rather create hysteria. Content analysis showed that the discourse of highlights children as the most vulnerable victims of the ideology:

Children are being sacrificed in the name of human rights. Nobody is questioning what they feel and what they need for their healthy development. The most important is that any sort of minority will have its rights guaranteed ... why should we care about the children, right? (Anti-gender Strike, 10 February 2019)

The campaigners try to make their narratives look real by building them on some real-world evidence. On the one hand, it plays with the narrative of kidnapping children based on the well-remembered story of Eva Michaláková, mixed together with traumas and misused imagery from the darkest places of the national collective memory. Furthermore, when the anti-gender campaigners talk about 'kidnapping' they are referring not only to a physical action but also to a symbolic one. According to them, children will be allowed to change their gender identity regardless of their parents' opinion, and will be brain-washed by sexual education in school on which their parents will have no influence – as well as being killed during abortions.

Folk devils, on the other hand, symbolize the moral degradation of the entire society. They represent the loss of traditional masculinity and femininity, and consequently the loss of traditional family and heterosexual relationships. The women are portrayed as not wanting to have children, which should be their

natural desire, but they also look masculine and are no longer desirable. On the other hand, men are portrayed as emasculated, weak and feminine, unable to take care of and protect their women. The fault of these folk devils is that they do not even look like real men and women anymore – they have become detached from the law of nature, they no longer resemble humans who are naturally either a man or a woman, they perform in-betweenness, and both their behaviour and their appearance are stuck between masculinity and femininity. Therefore, they are presented as sick, irrational and deviant people. As one of the posts on the Facebook page posted on 11 February 2019 said:

The certainties on which one could have relied are disappearing. Today even a person with a penis can be a woman and a person without a penis can be a man.

### Culture Anger and Moral Panics

This chapter has sought to introduce the reader to the development of attempts to create moral panic by the anti-gender campaigners in Czechia, and to unpack the multiple semantics that underpin it in this local context. I have argued that some Catholic priests, representing the more conservative circles of the Czech Catholic Church, stood at the very beginning of spreading the moral panic. Conservative think tanks, journalists and politicians made a significant contribution towards establishing these discourses in the public sphere in Czechia, but the panic started spreading faster thanks to grass-roots activists who ran social media pages in which they used tabloid style accompanied by powerful visuals. Such online activism helped to reach more people and allowed them to actively participate in negotiating what the contemporary world should look like. But social media was also used as a site of entertainment – a place where people could go to laugh at folk devils, who are presented as a freak show with identities that are regarded as public property.

Finally, as Ondřej Slačálek, using the critique by McRobbie and Thornton (1995), points out in Chapter 9, societies are not only made of people who are against the folk devils. Quite the contrary: modern folk devils are also supported by a camp of the defenders of their rights and interests. Those can and indeed do find back. As a result, they portray such anti-gender campaigners as contemporary folk devils who are evil and dangerous. Feminist and LGBT rights activists also run their campaigns in which they mock both Catholic priests and pro-family activists. As a result of such discursive wars based on moral panics, we are witnessing a more polarized society and a democratic debate about sensitive and complex issues is becoming more difficult as actors involved in such exchanges radicalize their discourses.

Lastly, to contribute to discussions regarding the theory of moral panics, it is important to note that these anti-gender campaigners did not emerge in a vacuum. Some of them were the very same people who engaged in creating moral



panics even before they started fighting 'gender ideology'. Before 'gender ideology' and its proponents became a clearly defined enemy, they were active in opposing multiculturalism, immigration, communists or the so-called Islamisation of Europe. This supports the argument presented by Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton (1995), which claimed that moral panic is not an isolated phenomenon but a connective strategy for moral campaigns. We live in times in which moral panic has become a daily strategy of the media, and one panic gives way to another. Gilbert Herdt calls this process cultural anger, which he describes as a process marshalling intense emotion across diffuse domains and arenas of action to unite disparate individuals and groups in political pursuit of a common enemy or sexual scapegoat (Herdt 2009, 5). While Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons (2000) have shown that such demonization, conspiracies and scapegoating were always at the core of the rhetoric of both the old right and the new right, Rosalind Petchesky (1984) has demonstrated that feminists and homosexuals have displaced communists as the scapegoats of the new right. The anti-communist sentiment specific to the post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe helped to equate those two as the ultimate scapegoats: 'neo-Marxist gender activists'.

### Acknowledgements

This chapter would not have been finished had I not received such generous comments from the editors of the book and my great colleagues and supervisors. I would specifically like to thank Christina Fiig, Måns Ljungstedt, Christoffer Leiding Kølvrå, Ondřej Slačálek and his colleagues at the Charles University in Prague, and Ida Harboe Knudsen. My thanks are also extended to the two anonymous reviewers for providing me with invaluable feedback and advice.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See 'Czech Pres Asks Norway King to Get Kids Back' (*The Local*, 12 June 2015, <https://www.thelocal.no/20150612/czech-pres-asks-norway-king-to-get-kids-back>).
- <sup>2</sup> See 'Zdechovský (KDU-ČSL): Mlácení a znásilňování dětí v ústavech přechází Barnevernet mlčením' (*Parlamentní Listy*, 14 June 2016, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-volicum/Zdechovsky-KDU-CSL-Mlacení-a-znasilnovani-deti-v-ustavech-prechazi-Barnevernet-mlceni-440346>).
- <sup>3</sup> See 'Mons. Petr Piňha – katedrála sv.Víta 28. září 2018 [video]'; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBiyz38PSdQ>. (All translations in this chapter by the author).

- <sup>4</sup> See Maya Oppenheim, 'Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban Bans Gender Studies Programmes' (*The Independent*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/hungary-bans-gender-studies-programmes-viktor-orban-central-european-university-budapest-a8599796.html>).
- <sup>5</sup> See Kyle Knight and Lydia Gall, 'Hungary Ends Legal Recognition for Transgender and Intersex People' (Human Rights Watch, 21 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/21/hungary-ends-legal-recognition-transgender-and-intersex-people>).
- <sup>6</sup> See 'Istanbul Convention: Poland to Leave European Treaty on Violence against Women' (BBC, 25 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53538205>).
- <sup>7</sup> See Shaun Walker, 'Poland Delays Abortion Ban as Nationwide Protests Continue' (*The Guardian*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/03/poland-stalls-abortion-ban-amid-nationwide-protests>).
- <sup>8</sup> See 'Polish Election: Andrzej Duda Says LGBT "Ideology" Worse than Communism' (BBC, 14 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53039864>).
- <sup>9</sup> See the Council of Europe website, 'Istanbul Convention – Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence', <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home>.
- <sup>10</sup> See 'Slovak Conservatives Fail to Cement Gay Marriage Ban in Referendum' (*The Guardian*, 8 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/slovak-conservatives-fail-gay-marriage-ban>).
- <sup>11</sup> See Matthew Karnitschnig, 'Brussels' Battle to Tame Visegrad Rebels' (*Politico*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/visegrad-poland-hungary-czech-republic-slovakia-brussels-battle-to-tame-visegrad-rebels>).
- <sup>12</sup> The notion of gender ideology was originally used in feminist theories to describe the unequal status of women and sexual minorities within the heteronormative order of society.
- <sup>13</sup> See European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2017: Czech Republic*, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2017-czech-republic>.
- <sup>14</sup> See Pamela Duncan, 'A History of Same-Sex Unions in Europe' (*The Guardian*, 24 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/jan/24/a-history-of-same-sex-unions-in-europe>).
- <sup>15</sup> See Radek Bartoniček, 'Členka SPD i širitelka fake news. Kdo je žena, která varuje zákonodárce před úmluvou' (*Aktuálně*, 12 November 2018, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/tradicni-rodinu-haji-fanyinka-spd-ktera-povazuje-spornou-umlu/r~0c8ff1e4e28e11e8b7c1ac1f6b220ee8>).
- <sup>16</sup> See Andrew Higgins, 'Ukrainian Church Faces Obscure Pro-Russia Revolt in Its Own Ranks' (*New York Times*, 22 June 2014, <https://www.nytimes>

.com/2014/06/22/world/europe/ukrainian-church-faces-obscure-pro-russia-revolt-in-its-own-ranks.html).

- <sup>17</sup> See the website of the Byzantský Katolický Patriarchát (Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate) at <http://vkpatriarhat.org/cz>.
- <sup>18</sup> In fact, the chairperson of the organization Czech Traditional Family quoted above admitted in an interview I conducted with her in July 2019 that she first learned about gender ideology and the Istanbul Convention from an email she received from this sect.
- <sup>19</sup> See 'Zastavme zlo z Istanbulu' (Slovenský dohovor za rodinu, 26 October 2017, <https://slovenskydohovorzrodinu.sk/zastavme-zlo-z-istanbulu>).
- <sup>20</sup> See the poster for the event 'Noční modlitební procesí proti ratifikaci istanbulské úmluvy a na podporu tradiční rodiny' at <http://www.veceradlo.cz/plakaty/plakatek%2004.pdf>.
- <sup>21</sup> See the organization's brochure *Odpovědnost nebo promiskuita?* at <http://www.spov.org/data/files/letak-vorp.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> See the organization's website at <http://www.obcinst.cz>.
- <sup>23</sup> Jana Jochová, one of the founders of the Union for Defence of Parental Rights, is a wife of Roman Joch, the chairperson of Civic Institute.
- <sup>24</sup> I worked with the media database Newtonmedia, which contains an archive of all Czech media since 1996, both in published newspapers and magazines and on the internet, and looked up all articles containing the key words 'gender ideology'. The total number of articles between 2010 and 2019 was 367. Some of the articles were published on up to three internet platforms.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jan Wurnitzer, 'Březen: Ratifikujeme "Istanbul". Prosinec: Je k ničemu. Babišova otočka zklamala zastávce úmluvy' (*Deník N*, 17 December 2018, <https://denikn.cz/39556/brezen-ratifikujeme-istanbul-prosinec-je-k-nicemu-babisova-otocka-zklamala-zastance-umluvy>).
- <sup>26</sup> In general, the Facebook pages run by Angry Mothers were among the most popular on the far-right scene in Czechia. Before the Anti-feminist Strike, followed by 10,000 people, the organization had run another Facebook page followed by more than 45,000 followers, which was shut down by Facebook authorities in August 2018.
- <sup>27</sup> I used Netvizz to gather all posts from the Facebook page. In total, I worked with 277 posts including the reactions of the page's followers. I conducted a qualitative content analysis in which I focused on the adjectives used in the posts by the admins, as well as the interplay of the visual material with the comments. Through the application Netvizz I also gathered all the comments and reactions of the followers, which helped me to understand what kind of posts received the highest numbers of reactions and what type of reactions emerged the most. Finally, I went through all the posts several times and coded all the posts based on their type (political commentary, entertainment, self-promotion), rhetorical style (serious, ironic, frightening) and emotional tone (positive, negative, neutral).

- <sup>28</sup> After I scraped all the FB statuses with reactions and comments by followers, I used Excel to analyse the numbers of each type of reaction available on FB.
- <sup>29</sup> See Dawn Ennis, 'Texas Is Afraid of a 7-Year-Old Transgender Girl' (*Forbes*, 26 October 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dawnstaceyennis/2019/10/26/texas-is-afraid-of-a-7-year-old-transgender-girl/>).

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