

The World Congress of Families: Anti-Gender Christianity and Digital Far-Right Populism

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Anti-gender groups defend heteronormative and traditionalist views of family values and include both conservative Christian and far-right political actors. Moreover, these groups often rely on digital communication. Through a qualitative analysis of videos, tweets, and press releases produced during the World Congress of Families (WCF), an anti-gender event held in 2019 in the Italian city of Verona, this article discusses anti-gender movements' digital communication as an example of online populism. The analysis suggests that the WCF used the Internet to enhance affective communications and connections among different religious and political actors. In particular, speakers at the event emotionally articulated antagonism between pro-family actors and those allegedly against family values, enacting the populist trope of "the people" against "the elites," and also embedding anti-feminist, racist, and anti-migration discourses. The article shows how a focus on Christianity and digital hypermediated communication can better help to understand some characteristics of contemporary far-right populist politics.

Keywords: anti-gender, Christianity, far-right, populism, politics, religion, emotion, affective public, hypermediation

The World Congress of Families (WCF) is an international yearly public event, which, in March 2019, took place in the Italian city of Verona with the title "The Wind of Change." The official page of the WCF Verona (www.wcfverona.org) features a short promotional video (International Organization for the Family, 2019) where a man talks in Italian about the importance of life. By quoting science and literature, the man explains that, together with chemical elements, life is created thanks to a primordial energy: love. He then concludes the video by saying that life is a "miracle" resulting from the love of families and the union of a man and a woman. In the official websites of the WCF Verona there is no clear indication of religious or political missions, apart from vague references to terms such as "miracle."

However, the WCF Verona website lists numerous religious and political figures among the speakers. Together with Catholic actors, such as Verona's Bishop Giuseppe Zenti, various religious leaders gave speeches, including Church of Latter-Day Saints Elder Massimo de Feo and Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Antioch Ignatius Joseph III. At the same time, several Italian and international politicians from right-wing parties intervened in the event, including Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right party Lega Nord, and then

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deputy prime minister of Italy. The event had the endorsement of the Italian Republic and it was sponsored by the city of Verona, administered by politicians affiliated with Lega Nord. It was also supported by some pro-family associations, such as the Italian Pro Vita e Famiglia and the American National Organization for Marriage. These are generally defined "anti-gender" movements, an umbrella term that indicates a variety of actors united against the so-called gender ideology to protect and reproduce heteronormative social structures and traditional family values (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The WCF Verona formally aimed to support families, but it seemed to express an ideology that includes both Christian leaders and far-right politicians in a transnational populist mobilization against the perceived threat of gender ideology. While various studies have examined anti-gender groups either from a religious (Garbagnoli, 2014) or political (Harsin, 2018) perspective, this article explores the connections between religion and politics to analyze instances of online populism within these groups. Elsewhere (Evolvi, 2020) I have analyzed anti-gender movements in Italy and France, claiming that they involve a new type of public religion and are successful because of their innovative use of online communication. Building on this research, I argue here that digital media are a pivotal arena for these groups' discourses as exemplified by the video on the home page of the WCF Verona. By looking at discursive strategies and media content produced during the event, this article addresses a literature gap, since "populist communication has been substantially under researched" (Sengul, 2019a, p. 89).

Hence, I will explore the following questions: How does the WCF Verona exemplify the connections between religious and political far-right populist ideologies within anti-gender movements? What is the role of digital media in diffusing such ideologies? By addressing these questions, the article aims at adding complexity to the current understanding of online populism. The first part of the article will describe anti-gender movements and their understanding of gender ideology by means of a review of relevant literature. It will also reflect on these groups' connections with religion and politics and on the use of the Internet by populist far-right groups, discussing the notions of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016). Then, through a qualitative analysis of tweets, videos, and press releases produced in the context of the 2019 WCF, the article will show how the event allowed for the creation of discourses delivered by different actors that antagonistically create an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. The conclusion will discuss how the WCF Verona employed the notion of family as a unifying ideology to connect a certain type of conservative Christianity to far-right actors and explain how this example may help to better understand contemporary populism and its hypermediated communicative strategies.

Anti-Gender Groups: Christianity, Political Populism, and Digital Media

Anti-gender groups feature prominently among the organizers of the WCF Verona. The term "anti-gender" refers to the opposition to the so-called gender theory or "gender ideology." These groups employ the notion of "gender ideology" to negatively describe those supporting same-sex unions, adoption, and assisted reproduction for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) couples, pro-choice movements, feminism, gender studies in academia, and sexual education in schools. The use of the term "gender" also refers to the academic scholarship in gender studies, with prominent scholars such as Judith Butler (2006) theorizing gender identities as socially constructed and distinct from biological sex. Andrea Peto (2016) points out that anti-gender movements increasingly seek scientific legitimation by criticizing gender studies, a

field hardly institutionalized in places such as Italy, France, and Argentina where these groups proliferate. As I will analyze later in the article, anti-gender movements largely appropriate the terminology from gender studies to challenge left-wing intellectuals and feminist actors for allegedly seeking to erase sexual differences. It is important to note that the English term "gender" is frequently used also within narratives in non-English European languages (e.g., gender theory becomes "la teoria del gender" in Italian). This may reinforce the notion that gender theory is something foreign (Prearo, 2020). This use of the terminology arguably supports the idea that gender is not separate from sex and refuses to recognize the existence of gender-fluid identities. In this way, "gender" becomes a buzzword used by conservative and far-right actors to indicate a perceived social threat.

Most anti-gender groups were created in Europe starting from 2012/13 as a response to the decision of various governments to legalize same-sex marriage (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). While political actors and media often dismiss these groups as a social nuisance or a transitory phenomenon, they grew exponentially in European countries that are predominantly Catholic, such as France and Italy (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018), and post-socialist Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary (Vida, 2019). The WCF Verona exemplifies how these groups tend to frame themselves as pro-family organizations and refuse explicit religious and political affiliation, and therefore I refer to them as "pro-family" in this article. However, previous research on the topic suggests that religious and political ideologies often overlap in influencing anti-gender groups. In the following sections, I will describe the development of the concept of gender ideology, which was first articulated within Christian environments, then popularized in society at large, and used by right-wing actors in their struggle against liberal and progressive ideologies.

Religion, Far-Right Politics, and Populism

The opposition to "gender ideology," according to some scholars, has its roots in religion, Christianity in particular. Hence, anti-gender groups often draw from the Christian conservative notion of "natural" family as inextricably connected to heterosexuality and procreation (Righetti, 2016). The creation of "gender ideology" is attributed by some scholars specifically to the Catholic Church. The notion of "gender ideology," indeed, developed during the last half-century with popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI inquiring into matters such as contraception, women's rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, and continues to be promoted by Pope Francis (Case, 2016). "Gender" also constitutes a key term in the 2003 Lexicon, an encyclopedia published by the Pontificate Council for the Family (De Pittà & De Santis, 2005).

According to Garbagnoli (2016), the Vatican employs both the terms "gender ideology" and "gender theory" interchangeably as a rhetorical device to claim that sexual norms are natural rather than historical or political and to reiterate heterosexual and heteronormative family principles against secular culture. While, as explored in the previous section, "gender theory" originally indicates an academic field of study, it is used by Catholic actors to indicate a supposed conspiracy concocted by feminist and LGBTQ+ activists. This rhetorical device brings together religious and nonreligious actors against a "common enemy," creating moral panic about legal reforms on sexual health and LGBTQ+ rights (Garbagnoli, 2016, p. 192). Therefore, the notion of "gender ideology" goes beyond the Vatican to become culturally hegemonic, mobilizing citizens of different faiths, and influencing public policy. It also embraces universalistic values and incorporates nonreligious elements, focusing on human rights and the common good. For example, in France, where

state secularism is considered an integral part of national identity, anti-gender groups such as La Manif Pour Tous articulate a lay militant identity (Tricou & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2018) and insist on the protection of democratic values and freedom of speech (Carnac, 2019) rather than emphasizing Christian values.

The focus on nonreligious elements also by Catholic actors can be seen as a new form of Catholic militancy in an increasingly complex post-secular society. While religion loses visibility in the public sphere, it also becomes a resource for innovative forms of activism. Lavizzari and Prearo (2018) analyze this phenomenon as creating a "hybrid political space of Catholic action" (p. 17), where religious actors assume political relevance by extending their influence and creating allegiances with other movements, including religious and secular populist right-wing parties (Prearo, 2020). The connections between religious and right-wing actors are not unusual: For instance, the Christian right frequently focuses on pro-family ideologies in the United States (Dowland, 2009), and Christian values are often used against migration by the Italian Lega Nord (Molle, 2019), the main political supporter of the WCF Verona. This "hybrid space" where Catholic actors encounter right-wing movements is fueled by anti-gender ideologies but often criticizes the liberal consensus more generally. Indeed, the term "gender" (as short for "gender ideology") becomes the symbol of a right-wing fight against progressive forces in a struggle for hegemonic power (Kováts, 2018). This results in the effort of anti-gender groups to appeal to the masses, often by displaying populist traits.

Populism can occur within both left-wing and right-wing movements and is generally characterized by simple and emotional communications of political and religious leaders (Demeter & Toth, 2019). When associated with the so-called far-right, populism assumes some peculiar characteristics. Dubbed also "radical right" or "extreme right," the term far-right indicates groups that distinguish themselves from classical right-wing parties through an emphasis on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). Far-right parties, such as the Italian Lega Nord, tend to promote the idea that the state should be inhabited exclusively by members of "the nation" and are often uncritical of authoritative figures. In this context, Mudde (2007) defines populism as based on the notion that politics should be the expression of the will of the people. It is an ideology that considers society as separated into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde 2007, p. 23). This separation entails that these two groups are homogeneous and in antagonist opposition with each other. Anti-gender movements can be considered populist because, according to Bracke and Paternotte (2016), their narratives draw on the populist tropes of "us versus them" (p. 144). By criticizing political correctness and framing progressive politics as a form of totalitarianism, these groups describe themselves as a silent majority against the elites. In exploring the connections between religion and politics within the WCF Verona, this article aims at showing that the event displayed far-right populist traits by creating antagonism against the perceived elites. This type of populism is often enhanced by digital media circulation, which I will address in the following section.

Digital Media and Affective Communication

The anti-gender populist right usually employs a subversive and antiestablishment repertoire of activist strategies, and includes actors who are "well dressed, witty, great at using modern media (including social media), well versed in well as [sic] rhetorical strategies and communication styles associated with post-modernism (parody, sampling, pastiche, irony, drag)" (Graff, 2016, p. 271). The populist character of anti-gender groups is particularly evident in their digital communication, as Jayson Harsin (2018) explains through an analysis of Facebook pages of the French movement La Manif Pour Tous. Harsin (2018) describes

the group as exemplifying the intersection of post-truth politics and right-wing populism because of five communicative characteristics: It claims to represent “the people” rather than White and Christian actors; it promotes distrust against political elites and media; it spreads emotional narratives; it publishes “rumor bombs” that misrepresent or manipulate reality; and it displays a nostalgic attachment for the past. Harsin’s (2018) analysis not only summarizes some of the core characteristics of anti-gender movements in France and across the globe, but it also shows that these groups’ communication style is similar to that of other populist actors.

Far-right populist groups were among the early adopters of the Internet, and populist content on social networks usually aims at creating venues for user interaction (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019). In general, extreme-right groups use the Internet for recruitment, articulating common identities, fostering debate, and expanding transnationally (Caiani & Parenti, 2009; Froio & Ganesh, 2018). Fielitz and Thurston (2019) argue that far-right groups use online communication to also bypass editorial and governmental control and spread anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ+, and racist narratives. The authors define far-right online strategies in terms of “post-digital” because they blend virtual and street-level campaigns. Post-digital characteristics are enacted by hybrid online actions that increasingly blur the boundaries between participation and consumption and blend newer and older media logics (Chadwick, 2013). Besides, the post-digital can also be framed in terms of hypermediated spaces (Evolvi, 2018), which are online venues that are connected to material and institutional forms of media through a constant mediation of narratives on different platforms. As will be analyzed in this article, the WCF Verona seems to display hybrid and hypermediated characteristics because it was a highly mediated event that happened in a conference venue but was also connected to public demonstrations and live-streamed on various Internet channels. This might have been an effort to attract media attention and create a hybrid and personalized style of communication.

Furthermore, hybrid events that invite public attention are characterized by affective communications (Sumiala, Valaskivi, Tikka, & Huhtamäki, 2018). By looking at hashtags and news sharing employed by social movements, Papacharissi (2016) adopts the term affective publics to describe people creating hybrid venues on the Internet to tell their stories in their own terms. These stories are characterized by the spreading of sentiment through the circulation of news, use of humor, and the display of affective language. Papacharissi (2016) analyzes affective publics as enacting connective actions, a framework elaborated by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). The term describes online communications occurring when traditional organizations are increasingly replaced by non-centralized networks and when the Internet allows for personalized messages that reach people holding different ideologies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Fringe political groups such as the populist far-right tend to use digital activism to create connective actions (Xu, 2020). The WCF Verona also connected social, political, and religious actors who do not necessarily share a common identity beyond the opposition to gender ideology.

Concerning affective and connective communications, Boler and Davis (2020) further elaborate on Papacharissi’s (2016) work by conceptualizing affect as inherently political and involving the collective manifestation of emotions. From this perspective, the emotional rhetoric of far-right populist political characters such as Donald Trump (and, one might say, anti-gender groups) in diffusing post-truth messages weaponize information to reproduce racist, misogynist, and nationalist discourses. Communication, in this case, is not only characterized by the collective expression of sentiment but also by the articulation of individual emotions within

public spaces. As Ahmed (2014) writes, emotions then become “sticky” to specific objects and bodies and define how narratives about such objects and bodies affectively circulate. Specifically, queer and gender-nonconforming bodies are often criticized for failing to conform to heteronormative standards. I would argue that exploring emotions within online narratives can give a better understanding of how the WCF Verona creates online narratives to marginalize certain bodies, such as those of LGBTQ+ and women. Besides, emotional narratives reinforce the post-truth characteristics of anti-gender groups individuated by Harsin (2018).

Emotional narratives can enhance connective participation and contribute to the normalization of certain discourses, creating a type of online communication that may be more complex than the simple circulation of post-truth messages. By researching the content of WCF Verona discourses about religion and far-right politics, this article will discuss the affordances of the Internet in a hybrid event that took place in a physical place but was highly mediated. Moreover, it will explore emotional discursive strategies of anti-gender actors who gave speeches at the WCF Verona. This will be done by analyzing the Internet narratives produced during the WCF Verona.

The WCF Verona: Exploring Discourse

The WCF Verona took place as a three-day conference from March 29 to March 31, 2019. While the speakers addressed different topics, and some were more colloquial than others, the speeches tended to hold a similar style: Speakers would talk from a stage, sometimes showing images and data in the background. The WCF also involved roundtables, plenary sessions, and a Catholic mass. At the end of the conference, a “March for the Family” public demonstration was organized in Verona. The event was live-tweeted and live-streamed on Facebook and YouTube and discussed in various blogs and newspaper articles. These characteristics suggest that the event needs to be analyzed by looking at different platforms and with a focus on its discursive production. This is consistent with the approach of Sengul (2019b), who calls for interdisciplinary research on populism that highlights its performative, communicative, and affective dimensions. This approach draws from Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) theorization of populism as constructing discourses to spread antagonism between people and elites.

Therefore, I explored the narratives circulated at the WCF Verona through textual and visual qualitative analysis inspired by critical discourse analysis (CDA). The CDA approach focuses on ideology and power as constructed and legitimated through discourse (Fairclough, 2010). According to Sengul (2019a), the CDA is appropriate for the study of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia within political communication and far-right narratives because of its focus on how social inequalities are reproduced, perpetuated, and circulated. Sengul (2019a) describes a speech of far-right politician Pauline Hanson as discursively framing “the people” in binary and exclusionary terms. Similarly, speakers at the WCF Verona narratively marginalized and antagonized certain social actors while reiterating the importance of the anti-gender and pro-family ideology.

The videos of the speeches were made available on the YouTube channel of Pro Vita e Famiglia, an anti-gender group that organized and supported the WCF Verona. There are 74 videos available on the YouTube Channel, and they include both speeches delivered at the conference and at the March for the Family. These videos span from 1 to 15 minutes on average, with two roundtables—one involving religious leaders and one about politics for the family in Europe—lasting more than 40 minutes each. Two of the videos do not feature speakers but are promotional clips for the event. The videos taken into account for this article include 47 male

and 15 female speakers, with some of them giving more than one speech. Among the speakers, 34 are Italians and 28 are non-Italians, with a predominance of participants from the United States, Spain, France, Hungary, and Moldova, probably also because the 2017 and 2018 editions of the event had been organized in Budapest and Chisinau, respectively. I analyzed speeches in English, Italian, and French (translating the quotes into English for this article), and I left out two speeches in Russian, taking into account a total sample of 72 videos. Together with the live-streaming of the speeches, I also analyzed 292 tweets sent by the account of the WCF Verona during or after the event. Of those, 164 are live tweets that quote the words of the conference speakers, usually tagging them and sometimes also including pictures and linking Facebook live-streams or YouTube videos. Then, I collected 18 press releases about the WCF Verona published on the official website of Pro Vita e Famiglia that are generally between 250 and 500 words and contain the point of view of the event's organizers.

The YouTube Channel of Pro Vita e Famiglia and the Twitter account of the WCF Verona have, respectively, 1,560 and 748 followers as of April 24, 2020. In general, there does not seem to be great engagement on these platforms, as the number of retweets is limited, and no comments are present on the YouTube channel and the website of Pro Vita e Famiglia. However, these sources are valuable to understand the narratives that occurred during the WCF event, and they show that the event's media strategy included a constant presence of media technology for streaming and tweeting as well as a willingness to attract media attention, as will be discussed in the next section. I qualitatively analyzed this material, paying attention to discourses that point to hegemonic social values and the creation of in-group and out-group dynamics in the articulation of ideologies. In doing so, I analyzed how the construction of these narratives addressed the categories of religion, politics, and media.

God, Fatherland, and Family: Analyzing the WCF's Speeches

The WCF Verona involved both speeches and performances, such as public prayers and one that involved a group of pregnant women on a stage amplifying the sound of their babies by placing a megaphone on their bellies (Congresso Mondiale delle Famiglie, 2019). Some speakers tried to engage the live audience: Antonio Brandi, president of the aforementioned association Pro Vita e Famiglia, finished his speeches with expressions such as "Long live the family!" and "Long live Christ the King!" and explicitly asking the audience to clap their hands (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019i).

In terms of dominant narratives, the speeches generally avoided directly talking about same-sex unions or LGBTQ+ rights, focusing instead on the need to protect the family, women, and children. "Family" was a recurrent topic in all the speeches, which often described it as "natural" or "traditional," based on heterosexual marriage and being a fundamental unit of society but also sanctioned by state rules and important for the economy. In these narratives, family is associated with love and life and considered to be under the threat of the "enemies" who allegedly propagate a "war" against it. The speech of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right Italian party Fratelli d'Italia, exemplifies some of these narratives. In denouncing abortion, surrogate pregnancies, euthanasia, and hormones for transgender youth, as well as the lack of economic and social support for families in Europe, Meloni said:

Why is family an enemy? Why is family so scary? There's only one answer to all these questions: because family defines us, it is our identity. Everything that defines us now is an enemy for all those who would like us to not have an identity, and only be slaves,

perfect consumers. So they attack national identity, religious identity, gender identity, family identity (. . .) We will defend God, fatherland, and family. (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019g, 12:22; translated from Italian by the author)

In this speech, Meloni defined family as an “identity” that some people seek to destroy in the name of consumerism and the neoliberal market as families supposedly hold less purchasing power than single people. Meloni’s talk connects the perceived threat against family identity with the attempt of silencing national(ist), religious, and gender identities (where gender, as mentioned in the previous sections, is considered a synonym for biological sex). The relationship between family and religion and politics is exemplified by the sentence “God, fatherland, and family” (Dio, patria, e famiglia), a highly problematic slogan associated with the Mussolini dictatorship in Italy, which Meloni and other speakers at the WCF Verona may have used to show the closeness of their political views with fascist ideologies. With the term “fatherland” (patria), Meloni might have tried to kindle nationalist feelings also connected to patriarchal values. In Meloni’s speech, family is framed both in connection with (Christian) religion and (far-right) politics, two topics I will describe in more detail in the following sections. Then, I will also analyze narratives about media that give insights into the communication style employed during the WCF Verona.

Religion

Speakers at the WCF talked about family as the natural and traditional unit of society, inextricably linked to heteronormative structures. This view has strong religious undertones both because family was often described as holding a quasi-sacred and spiritual value in connection with love and life-creation and because of explicit references to Christianity. Many speakers described the so-called Western civilization as having its roots in Judeo-Christian values and associated Christianity with dominant social values that are naturally part of contemporary society. Hence, the focus on family was not described as part of conservative ideologies but rather as an effort to protect the “natural” or “traditional” Christian family that allegedly represents the only historical and unchangeable form of Western social life.

More than half of the talks, 41 of the 72 analyzed, addressed religion. Interestingly, only 18 tweets specifically mention religion, and this may be because the WCF communication officers did not want to focus on religious belonging but rather present an inclusive character. Often, Christianity and Christian family values were presented as being under threat because of an increasing loss of the sense of sacredness. This is exemplified by the speech of Ignacio Arsuaga, founder of the Spanish-based pro-family association CitizenGo:

The enemies of the natural family act in all countries (. . .) they are the gender ideolox [sic], also the LGBT totalitarians that want to control the minds of our sons and daughters and they want to impose our silence, they want to shut us up, as we’ve seen here in Verona at the WCF. They are the secular liberals who want to prohibit our faith to play any role in the public space of our society. (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019b, 0:28; in English in original)

In delineating what he defined as a “cultural war” against family, Arsuaga described “secular liberals” as representing a perceived threat to the family. He reiterated the importance of religion at the end of the speech, when, after encouraging the audience to spread information and mobilize citizens, he said

that the most important action to protect family was praying: "Please pray, pray for the natural family, pray for our families, trust God, trust the divine providence" (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019b, 6:47).

The importance of religion in Arsuaga's and other WCF speeches point to an idea of Christianity as monolithic. Most of the speeches assume that all Christians naturally agree with anti-gender ideologies, while the "enemies" of the family are secular actors. Even if the WCF Verona was nominally open to people of different faiths, some speeches contained direct or indirect Islamophobic allegations. For instance, the Catholic patriarch of Antiochia Joseph Ignatius (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019d) denounced multiculturalism and the "Christianophobic" persecution of Christians occurring in the Middle East, allegedly ignored by media. Far-right politician Matteo Salvini, in a speech live-streamed on his Facebook page, criticized feminists and left-wing politicians for not understanding that gender inequality occurs within Islam, and not Christianity (Salvini, 2019). These discourses suggest that Christianity was a fundamental identity trait for the WCF speakers and that it was used to marginalize non-Christian, non-"natural" families. As a result, Christian values were framed as needing political protection in an increasingly secular society.

Politics

During the WCF Verona, various speakers presented religion and politics as two connected and complementary forces, implying that Christian values should influence politicians. The event saw the participation of many political leaders, with 22 of 62 participants holding political offices in Italy or elsewhere. Interestingly, 46 tweets explicitly mention politics, sometimes openly praising political characters such as Donald Trump, displaying a far-right political agenda. Many speakers addressed the need for politics to protect family values as well as women and children. Narratives about politics generally reiterated how national laws in various countries consider family as based on heterosexual unions. Also, these speeches often implied that governments should improve the economy by creating measures to help families, especially where production is based on family businesses and the natality rate is decreasing, as was happening in Italy. In describing the importance of family-related politics, many speakers described pro-family efforts as going beyond the traditional categories of left and right, as exemplified by the words of Massimo Gandolfini:

Family belongs to everybody. Family is not left-wing or right-wing. Today, the categories left-wing and right-wing are no longer those of the 1970s (. . .) There are forces that are promoting politics against family, surrogate pregnancy is against family, adoption for same-sex couples is against family, legalization of cannabis is against family, euthanasia and assisted suicide are against family, and we need to stop these policies. (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019h, 2:39; translated from Italian by the author)

Gandolfini is not a politician but the organizer of the Catholic-inspired demonstrations called "Family Day." Gandolfini's speech exemplifies the strategy of the WCF Verona to present itself as moderate and "post-political" by avoiding associations with specific parties. However, the politicians who intervened at the event predominantly belonged to far-right parties, and their narratives pointed to a still existing distinction between left and right politics for various reasons.

First, several speeches openly criticized central-left governments and associated left-wing ideologies with feminism in negative terms. Some speakers accused feminists of exerting “force” on women to renounce motherhood and family values and claimed that women should have the freedom to choose to be mothers rather than having an abortion, in an interesting twist of the notion of “pro-choice.” These narratives also criticized gender theory as a conspiracy allegedly promoted by academics and left-wing intellectuals. Second, criticism of left-wing ideologies and feminism often led to nationalist and anti-migration narratives. The event had an international character, and various speakers lamented the increasing secularization and decreasing natality in Europe, praising non-European countries where family values were allegedly still pristine. However, globalization and multiculturalism were often criticized as going against national values. For instance, the Hungarian secretary of state for family affairs Attila Beneda said: “We consider it crucial to solve demographic problems by the support [sic] of having children, not migration” (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019a, 1:26). This view, which was echoed among other speakers, including Italian vice prime minister Salvini, suggests that increased natality would reinforce national values by creating an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation, an idea that supports a xenophobic and anti-migration political agenda. Therefore, while the WCF Verona tried to frame the defense of family as an effort beyond political belonging, its participants frequently employed family values to criticize left-wing parties and feminism and reinforce nationalist far-right ideologies.

Media and Communication

The WCF Verona’s speakers talked about religion and politics by offering reflections on media and communication. In general, they criticized the media for silencing anti-gender messages, but they also described the media as potentially helping the spread of pro-family ideologies. Many speakers lamented that the so-called mainstream media allegedly promoted gender ideology and anti-family messages and valued political correctness over freedom of speech. In some cases, this criticism came from media experts, such as writer and journalist Maria Giovanna Maglie:

I am an attentive and engaged observer, who desperately tries to do her job, without prejudices, in a world and in a society of media, and information that is pervaded and corrupted by political correctness (. . .) This unique media party doesn’t care about your freedom of speech and expression, and that of WCF organizers, delegates, and speakers, of all of us. On the contrary, [media] are ready to prevent this freedom. (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019c, 0:27; translated from Italian by the author)

In talking about the “unique media party,” Maglie described the media as a monolithic entity that prevents a plurality of opinions. A frequently used expression during the WCF Verona was “silent majority,” to describe how the media avoided talking about family values even if the majority of the population allegedly agreed with the ideologies promoted at the congress.

This criticism was probably motivated by the generally negative portrayal of the WCF Verona in Italian and international news outlets, a fact many speakers mentioned. Various newspapers, for instance, reported that Luigi di Maio, leader of the prominent Italian political party Movimento Cinque Stelle, had defined the congress as “medieval” (Ferro, 2019). The reactions of the speakers to this reporting show some of the predominant communicative strategies of WCF actors. On the one hand, some speakers refuted this

narrative by claiming that politicians misinterpret the message of the WCF, and that the media circulate false allegations in the form of “fake news” to portray the event in negative terms. The organizers of the event even framed this media reporting as a form of bullying and marginalization against pro-family ideologies, arriving as far as claiming that “We [WCF organizers] are like Blacks during segregation” (“WCF Verona XIII, Gli Organizzatori,” 2019). On the other hand, other speakers implied that negative media coverage could still attract attention to the WCF. Some even appropriated and changed the negative narrative about the congress being “medieval” by displaying nostalgia. For instance, Louis de Bourbon, a member of the French and Spanish nobility, praised the *ancien régime* for being able to protect families by promoting rigid social structures (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019f). The congress’ communicative strategy not only focused on nostalgia for the past but also described positive future outcomes, for example, defining pro-family activists as “heroes” and reiterating that Christian people were quickly becoming a numeric majority because they tended to have numerous children. The title of the event itself, “The Wind of Change,” implies optimism for the social impact of the congress against negative political and media reporting.

While it criticized the media for allegedly spreading misinformation, the congress also contained reflections on how to use the media to support anti-gender and pro-family ideologies. Together with the journalist Maglie other media professionals intervened at the congress, explaining their efforts to defend family through various communication channels, sometimes praising Christian media outlets for being the only ones offering accurate portrayals of the congress. At the same time, the congress was mediated through the Internet and used various social media platforms to reproduce and diffuse the speeches, as the tweets, videos, and press releases analyzed in this article exemplify. Hence, some speakers openly talked about the potential of online communication to spread certain ideologies. For instance, Eduard Habsburg-Lothringen, a member of the Austrian nobility, gave practical suggestions on how to use Twitter as part of a pro-family effort. In a speech full of humor, Habsburg-Lothringen explained that he wants to present himself on Twitter as “gentle, but happy at the same time, and Christian” (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019e). Therefore, the WCF Verona discussed family from a religious and political perspective, often attracting negative media reporting and criticism from the media but, simultaneously, recognizing the importance of communication, the Internet in particular.

Discussion: Emotional Connective Actions

The speeches, tweets, and press releases produced at the WCF Verona suggest that “family” was used as a unifying ideology to bring together various religious and political actors, creating emotional and mediated narratives, which often implied antagonistic discourses. The WCF Verona employed the Internet to produce videos and live-streaming of information in various languages and from different viewpoints. The format of the speeches, usually concise and straightforward, suggests that the event was planned to also be adapted to platforms such as YouTube. The analysis of online narratives seems to confirm Harsin’s (2018) claim that anti-gender movements rely on post-truth and populist communication. The narratives analyzed in this article predominantly framed WCF supporters as representing “the people” against media and political elites, often employing emotional cues and showing a nostalgic attachment for the past. In addition, the event displayed a hybrid and “post-digital” (Fielitz & Thurston, 2019) character as it took place physically between the conference venues and the streets of Verona, but it was also mediated through various communication channels.

The WCF Verona hybrid character arguably did not result in great user engagement, as commenting on and sharing of online narratives was not specifically encouraged. On the contrary, the hybridity lies in the simultaneous use of various platforms and the live hypermediation of physical spaces, which contributed to the blending of different messages under the shared pro-family effort and the same slogans, such as the aforementioned "God, fatherland, and family." The WCF Verona allowed for connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) because it gave a platform to different actors that usually do not operate in the same fields and in the same national contexts. It employed the notion of family to articulate a common identity that could bring them together for that specific event. Narratives were quite homogeneous in terms of ideologies but also personalized in discussing pro-family movements within different countries and focusing on the individual characteristics of various social, religious, and political actors. By employing the social media options to tag people and create links to different Web pages, the WCF Verona likely did not aim at creating a permanent membership or an established leadership but rather at mobilizing different actors for a common goal and attracting social and media attention.

The Internet helped create emotional content. For instance, the WCF online narratives included emotional videos showing people clapping their hands or pregnant women placing megaphones on their bellies. The emotional and affective character of the event is evident from the hyperbolic and metaphorical use of terms such as "war," "slaves," "enemy," and "totalitarians" to describe people who are allegedly against family, and words such as "love," "miracle," "heroes," and "brave" to talk about the WCF organizers and supporters. Arguably, these terms aim at creating fear, anger, and emotional attachments in the audience. The fact that these words have been emphasized and circulated through social networks point to a typically populist narrative that creates a distinction between "us" and "them," and that discursively opposes hegemonic "elites."

Hence, the event's speeches tended to create a sharp antagonism between people who support family values and people who supposedly do not. Even if family was the term around which this distinction was articulated, the two groups seemed to hold a variety of characteristics. The "us" refers to pro-family and anti-gender actors, who follow Christian values and a traditionalist and conservative political agenda. Indirectly, many speeches implied that "us" is also prominently connected with far-right political ideologies and with a specific type of White and nationalist masculinity, which supports heteronormative values and strict gender roles. It is, indeed, unsurprising that the majority of the speakers were White males, even when women and motherhood were among the main topics of the event. On the contrary, "them" is the group that includes secular liberals, feminists, left-wing politics and intellectuals, and the so-called mainstream media that allegedly oppose family values.

These discourses are affective as they attach strong emotions to the "us" and "them" binary distinction. As per the work of Ahmed (2014), emotions may help frame certain behaviors in positive terms. For instance, White nationalists talk about the nation as an object of love, instead of propagating openly racist and xenophobic narratives. Similar discourses could be found at the WCF Verona, where communication tended to narratively identify family with love and life and describe children and women as weak and in need of protection. The emphasis on family and children, rather than LGBTQ+ activism or abortion, is likely a strategy to emphasize pro-family ideologies, which implies positive support, rather than anti-gender ideologies, which suggests a negative antagonism. This implied a specific discursive

construction: For instance, the term "pro-choice" was re-appropriated to no longer indicate women who can choose to have an abortion but rather women who decide to become mothers.

As a result, the bodies of nonheterosexual and non-Christian people, feminists, women who choose abortion and, in some cases, non-White individuals, become "sticky objects" that attract negative emotions (Ahmed, 2014). This reinforces the populist division between "us" and "them," where the majority of the people are considered "victims" of elites and pro-family movements. At the same time, pro-family movements are described as subversive and antiestablishment. The WCF Verona, indeed tended to discursively construct "them" as negative and hegemonic social forces, which do not represent the numerical majority but hold power to control dominant ideologies. The notion of "Christianophobia" and "silent majority" for instance, implies that Christians might be the majority in places such as Italy, but they still face direct and indirect threats, exactly as allegedly occurs to the "natural" family. Similarly, the WCF organizers' identification with "Blacks during segregation" suggests a very strong image of victimization. This represents an interesting overturn of the concepts of marginalization and hegemony because those usually considered marginalized (such as non-male, non-White, nonheterosexual people) are framed as representing elites and holding social power. Therefore, the analysis of the speeches suggests that the WCF Verona enabled a variety of actors to talk about political topics from an innovative, religion-based perspective, also through emotional actions and discourses.

Conclusion: A New Communication For a New Populism?

This article analyzed the WCF event in Verona as an example of anti-gender groups' alliances with both Christian and far-right movements. Through a qualitative analysis of videos, tweets, and press releases connected to the event, the article discussed how the notion of "family" was used as a unifying term to bring together different actors. By creating affective digital narratives, the WCF Verona discursively divided people between supporters of family values ("us") and those supposedly against family ("them"). Further studies can include different examples of anti-gender groups' events and include other online platforms, focusing on the circulation of narratives and users' engagement. With its international and mediated character, the WCF Verona showed how religion and politics can be used in online populist communication. The analysis leads to two main conclusions.

First, the WCF Verona speeches tried to describe "family" as a common framework that goes beyond political divisions. The connectivity among political and religious actors under the umbrella term of "pro-family" identity may exemplify a pattern of political engagement that can become increasingly prominent in contemporary society. The concept of family served as a rhetorical device to describe the "people" versus "elites" antagonism, but it also embedded nationalist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic claims. By supporting heteronormative structures and praising families with many children, the speakers suggested that families are fundamental social units whose proliferation could ensure an ethnically and religiously homogeneous population, as it allegedly has happened in the past. This shows how the WCF Verona used the notion of family to articulate populist, nationalist, and nostalgic claims that, according to Mudde (2007), are typical characteristics of the far-right. At the same time, it also exemplifies how far-right engagements that seek to erase political divisions can thrive thanks to the alliance with a type of militant and lay Christianity that supports conservative values.

Second, the Christian-influenced far-right heavily relies on online communications. While the Internet may be used to spread messages rather than invite conversations, speakers at the WCF Verona often reflected on the use of digital media to bypass the alleged hostility of media elites. Moreover, the Internet allowed for individualized messages to various actors, emotional communication, and enhanced visibility of the event. This resulted in news coverages that were often negative but, at the same time, legitimized the WCF Verona and anti-gender movements in general as socially relevant and able to influence political decisions. The Internet helped the WCF Verona frame itself as holding a prominent social role and represent a "silent majority" through the use of multiple platforms and the circulation of hybrid discourses. This can also be described as "hypermediation," as actions that occurred in physical spaces acquired media attention and were remediated on different online venues rapidly and emotionally (Evolvi, 2018). As a result, the constant mediation of discourses created a new communicative dimension for the event that would not have been achieved without the hypermediated potential of the Internet. Therefore, the analysis of the discourses produced at the WCF Verona suggests that a focus on religion, and conservative Christianity in particular, will help the understanding of contemporary right-wing politics, and that the Internet will be regarded as a fundamental element of the hypermediated and transnational diffusion of far-right populism.

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