

Report on anti-gender campaigns in Belgium

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List of abbreviations

ACLJ: American Center for Law and Justice
 ADF: Alliance Defending Freedom
 CARE: Christian Action, Research and Education
 CDH: Centre Démocrate Humaniste (Humanist Democratic Centre)
 CD&V: Christen-democratisch en Vlaams (Christian Democratic and Flemish)
 C-FAM: Center for Family and Human Rights
 ECtHR: European Court of Human Rights
 COMECE: Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union
 CPAC: Conservative Political Action Conference
 ECLJ: European Centre for Law and Justice
 ECPM: European Christian Political Movement
 ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists
 EDW: European Dignity Watch
 EVRAS: Éducation à la vie relationnelle, affective et sexuelle (Education about relationships, emotional and sexual life)
 FAFCE: Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe
 WBF: Wallonia-Brussels Federation
 GACEHPA: Groupe d'Action des Centres Extra hospitaliers Pratiquant l'Avortement (Action group for out-of-hospital abortion centres)
 GPA: French acronym for surrogacy
 ID: Identity and Democracy
 IOF: International Organization for the Family
 VTP: voluntary termination of pregnancy
 MCC: Mathias Corvinus Collegium
 MR: Mouvement réformateur (Reformist Movement)
 N-VA: Nieuw-Vlaamse alliantie (New Flemish Alliance)
 UN: United Nations
 PiS: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice)
 PMA: French acronym for assisted conception
 PMS: psycho-medical-social
 HPS: health promotion in school
 PNfV: Political Network for Values
 EPP: European People's Party
 SGP: Staatkundige gereformeerde partij (Reformed Political Party)
 TERF: Trans-exclusionary radical feminist
 TFP: Tradition, Family, Property
 UA: University of Antwerp
 UCL: Université catholique de Louvain (also UCLouvain)
 ULB: Université libre de Bruxelles
 EU: European Union
 VB: Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) (formerly Vlaams Blok)
 VUB: Vrije Universiteit Brussel
 WCF: World Congress of Families
 WTA: World Transhumanist Association

WYA: World Youth Alliance

Introduction

In September 2023, Belgium woke up to a state of terror. In Wallonia, several schools had been vandalised and some set on fire. Police discovered enigmatic "No EVRAS" graffiti: could sex education be putting schools at risk? At the same time, after being blocked for years, French-speaking Belgium was finally consolidating a system known by the acronym EVRAS (Éducation à la Vie relationnelle, affective et sexuelle – Education about relationships, emotional and sexual life). While the political world is almost unanimous, various forms of opposition are emerging in society: demonstrations, press interventions, lobbying, legal action and political vandalism. The shock waves spread throughout Flanders, attracting the interest of foreign media. Indignation and incomprehension dominated the political and media reactions. No one expected such acts, which seemed to put democracy itself at risk.

This recent example testifies to the transformation and acceleration of anti-gender campaigns in Belgium. While this country has long been an exception to the rest of Europe, developments in recent years have brought new players and new challenges to the fore. There's every reason to believe that the situation has changed, and that a growing number of players are now taking up these issues. This report aims to map the current status of these campaigns. It takes as its starting point the chapter published in 2017 by Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte in the book *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality*, which at the time highlighted the limited development of these mobilizations and the absence of short- or medium-term growth areas. However, as we will demonstrate in this report, the situation has changed radically. New areas of mobilisation have emerged, recent issues such as the rights of trans people or the right to euthanasia have been added, and new players, especially political ones, have seen the value of taking up these struggles. Furthermore, the focal point of these campaigns has shifted from the south to the north of the country, and the weight of interactions with the European and international spheres, although not very visible, weighs more heavily than it did a few years ago.

To gain a better understanding of this situation, this report is divided into three chapters. The first introduces and defines the phenomenon of anti-gender campaigns. It summarises the conceptual, historical and empirical elements needed to situate and understand the scenario in Belgium. The second chapter looks in detail at the evolution of these campaigns in Belgium. It examines the debates around seven issues: abortion rights, legal recognition of homosexuality, gender and sexuality education, the right to euthanasia, trans issues, transhumanism and wokism. Secondly, it describes a significant shift in the focal point of these mobilisations, from actors rooted in the conservative fringes of the Catholic Church to mobilisations that are more political than religious, and taking up the right- or extreme right-wing positions on the political spectrum. This is undoubtedly the main transformation that could lead to the development of larger-scale campaigns. Finally, a third chapter presents a European and international overview in relation to Belgium and highlights the presence of several of these players in Brussels as European capital. Based on the case of the right to euthanasia, it concludes by setting out the risks that these interactions pose for the rights recognised in Belgium.

To ensure this work was a success, over a period of eleven months from October 2022 to September 2023, this research brought together an interdisciplinary and inter-university team

comprising colleagues from the Université libre de Bruxelles (Alexandra Ana and David Paternotte), the University of Liège (Archibald Gustin) and the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights (Neil Datta). This report is based on the pooling of this expertise, with an unprecedented focus on the situation in Belgium. It was supplemented by exchanges with areas of civil society active in the defence of women's rights, LGBTQI+ people and secularism, in particular at several meetings held in Brussels and online.

Chapter 1: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe and around the world

The aim of this chapter is to present anti-gender campaigns and their main features. It begins by defining this phenomenon, specifying what it does not cover, and focusing on the discourse underlying these mobilisations, grouped together under the heading of "gender theory" or "gender ideology". It then presents the key features of these mobilisations. Finally, it details the targets of these campaigns, recalls their history, and describes the different categories of international players as well as their main modes of action.

1. Defining anti-gender campaigns

1.1. New conservative campaigns

Anti-gender campaigns, sometimes referred to as "movements" or "policies", are a specific set of initiatives against women's rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ rights (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Situated in time and space, these campaigns began in Europe in the mid-2000s, intensified over the course of the following decade and still continue to this day. While these campaigns were often initially driven by religious actors and/or those from civil society, they have been taken over by political and state actors in several countries, and are even directly orchestrated by the latter in certain authoritarian and/or illiberal contexts (Paternotte, 2023; Corrêa, House and Paternotte, 2023)¹. These campaigns have also spread to the four corners of the globe in a variety of forms. Most countries in Europe have been affected to date, with Latin America representing the second epicentre of these mobilisations. From these two regions, these mobilisations have spread through cultural, religious (especially Christian) and political (populist and authoritarian) links, and are now unfolding in countries as diverse as Australia, Canada, South Korea, the United States, Ghana, Israel, Kenya, Tunisia and Turkey.

The invention of the term "anti-gender" just over ten years ago had two objectives. On the one hand, in the face of state-centred analyses that often suffered from methodological nationalism (Paternotte, 2015), this term highlights similarities between seemingly disconnected cases that at first glance aim at distinct targets. It also emphasises the extent to which these campaigns are part of the same phenomenon, although they take different forms in different contexts (Norocel & Paternotte, 2023 ; Paternotte, 2023). On the other hand, the term emphasises the novelty of these assaults in terms of discourse and strategy. Indeed, although they involve certain conservative actors that have long been committed to the fight against gender and sexual equality (such as the Catholic Church or certain conservative lobbies), these campaigns should not be seen as a repetition of past mobilisations. While there has always been evidence of social, religious or cultural conservatism (albeit in different forms depending on the place and time), the term "anti-gender campaigns" seeks to make a new wave of opposition to gender and sexual equality more visible. Even though these attacks bring together long-standing players, they are based on new discursive frameworks and new forms of mobilisation, giving new life to struggles that have, in some cases, existed for a long time. In addition to discursive transformations, the literature highlights three major changes

¹ For this reason, the terms "campaigns" and "policies" are preferred over the word "movements", which tends to limit these mobilisations to civil society.

compared to previous mobilisations: generational renewal, greater professionalisation and growing integration into transnational networks.

Firstly, it would be a mistake to see anti-gender actors as the heirs of the conservative or religious anti-abortion or anti-homosexuality lobbies of the 1980s and 1990s. While there is some continuity on a personal and institutional level, there is also a diversification in terms of the players involved and the emergence of new generations of activists. Indeed, these struggles have succeeded in attracting new recruits, a phenomenon reinforced by the emergence of a specific training infrastructure. This takes the form of seminars and training sessions, "advocacy academies" and new higher education institutions (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021).

Secondly, these organisations have become increasingly professional, adopting NGO-style modes of action and organisation, and now boasting substantial resources. This transformation includes acquiring essential skills for political advocacy and judicial mobilisation, as well as developing medium- and long-term strategies. These organisations have also built up a significant presence online and in networks, notably through online petition platforms and the creation of alternative media. Lastly, they have developed skills in the search for financing, notably through crowdfunding (Datta, 2021).

Thirdly, these players are becoming increasingly involved in transnational networks, which have consistently grown stronger in recent years (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024 ; Datta & Paternotte, 2023). As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, it is important to distinguish between two types of transnationalisation, both of which have an influence on Belgium. On the one hand, new transnational organisations have been set up, and organisations originating from the US Christian Right are being deployed in Europe and worldwide. On the other hand, new forums and events have emerged to bring together national and transnational players. These include not only the creation of political and activist spaces, but also a growing number of events and meetings organised by states, including those in Europe.

1.2. A critique of gender

While at first glance these campaigns may appear disparate, a closer look reveals a common critique of the notion of gender, covered by the terms "gender ideology" or "gender theory". Following an emic approach (Avanza, 2018), these mobilisations have been gathered under the label of "anti-gender campaigns" (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Indeed, for these actors (who do not, however, define themselves as "anti-gender"), "gender" is the intellectual matrix behind the laws and policies they oppose: abortion, contraception, equal marriage, trans rights, divorce, gender and sexuality education, gender studies, gender mainstreaming, the Istanbul Convention, euthanasia, etc. The terms "gender ideology" or "gender theory" should therefore not be confused with recent developments in gender studies or gender politics, but refer to a set of arguments constructed by specific actors for both political and epistemic purposes.

According to many authors, this discourse originated in various Catholic circles in the late 1990s (Case, 2012; Bracke & Paternotte, 2016 ; Favier, 2014; Garbagnoli, 2014; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017 ; Morán Faúndes, 2019; Paternotte, 2015). In fact, the Holy See, under the

leadership of Pope John Paul II, was strongly committed to promoting Catholic Social Doctrine at the UN conferences on population and development in Cairo in 1994 and on women's rights in Beijing in 1995. However, despite these efforts, Vatican diplomacy was unable to prevent the introduction of the terms "sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights" and "gender"² into the official vocabulary of the United Nations (Corrêa, 2022a).

These developments were interpreted as a defeat by the Holy See (Buss, 1998, 2004; Corredor, 2019) and the discourse on "gender ideology" arose as an attempt by the Catholic Church to respond both epistemically and politically. On the one hand, this discourse provides an analytical framework for understanding what happened at the UN³. It was the American Catholic journalist Dale O'Leary, present in Beijing, who formulated the first attempts at explanation in terms of gender and passed them on to the Vatican authorities, foremost among whom was Cardinal Ratzinger (Case, 2019). Drawing on the concept of "gender feminism" proposed by the American conservative intellectual Christina Hoff Sommers (1994), O'Leary explains these failures by the rise of the concept of gender, which is said to have replaced that of sex in UN language. At first glance, the term may seem harmless, but in reality it acts as a submarine or Trojan horse filled with a host of demands unrelated to equality between men and women, such as abortion, lesbian rights or, more recently, the rights of trans people. It also masks an underhand attempt to impose an ideological agenda, the "gender agenda" (O'Leary, 1997).

On the other hand, the emergence of anti-gender discourse testifies to the development of a counter-strategy on the part of the Vatican. Gramscian in inspiration, it aims to transform the meaning of the concept of gender through its reappropriation, to blur its definition and reappropriate it in such a way as to deactivate it. By engaging in the battle of ideas, these Catholic thinkers and hierarchs hope to change the meaning of the concept of gender in public and political debate, and in the longer term achieve political and social reforms closer to the Church's social doctrine.

The elaboration of this discourse was the subject of various meetings and symposiums and, although precursory elements can be found in some of the writings of Cardinal Jozef Ratzinger (Ratzinger & Messori, 1985; Case, 2019), it is considered to have been finalised in the mid-2000s. This date is confirmed by the successive adoption of several fundamental documents by Vatican dicasteries. In 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, presided over by Cardinal Ratzinger, published its *Considerations Regarding Proposals to give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons* and, in 2004, its *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*. In the same year, the Pontifical Council for the Family, then headed by Colombian Cardinal Trujillo, published the original Italian version of the *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, a kind of bioethical dictionary that includes several seminal texts on these issues and aims to set out the Church's social doctrine.

Two Belgian Catholic intellectuals played a fundamental role in the development of this thinking: Mgr. Michel Schooyans, professor emeritus at the Université catholique de Louvain,

² Although, it should be noted that, as a result of this resistance, the Beijing Platform for Action does not include a clear definition of gender.

³ Which managed to block other things such as the introduction of the term "lesbian".

who spent a large part of his career at the Vatican, and Marguerite Peeters, a Belgian-American citizen who opened a development NGO, Dialogue dynamics on human identity and global governance⁴, after working with Schooyans⁵.

1.3. What anti-gender campaigns are not

As mentioned above, it would be a mistake to view anti-gender campaigns as the continuation of older struggles without grasping the novelty that characterises them. Likewise, it would be wrong to think that this is the last gasp of conservative players. Even if these campaigns are part of older genealogies, it seems more productive to us to see them as a new wave of conservative activism in the field of gender and sexuality, set up by activists and organisations that have acquired the capacity to train new generations of activists and the means to become a permanent player in the political landscape in Europe and elsewhere.

That said, the term "anti-gender campaigns" is increasingly used to denote any form of opposition to gender and sexual equality in both scientific and activist literature, a trend that runs counter to the original aims of the concept. It's true that this phenomenon has spread throughout the world, with the effect of designating increasingly diverse realities in increasingly varied contexts. However, for both analytical and political purposes, it seems advisable to avoid pooling different phenomena together under this term, and to distinguish them carefully in order to consider their possible expressions. We are thinking in particular of anti-feminism, masculinism, patriarchy, anti-trans/TERF mobilisations or fathers' rights mobilisations, phenomena that have distinct origins and histories. Such usage also risks dehistoricising the concept, using it to designate any form of resistance or opposition across time, space and areas of life. Finally, assuming necessary and constitutive links with other phenomena such as racism, nativism, nationalism or neoliberalism – for example, as part of a right-wing global agenda – risks falling into the same trap.

⁴ <https://dialoguedynamics.com/?lang=en>

⁵ Michel Schooyans, who died in 2022, was a Belgian priest and theologian, and professor emeritus at the Université catholique de Louvain. For a long time, Schooyans worked closely with the Vatican: he was a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family (now dissolved) and was a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. His book, *L'Évangile face au désordre mondial* (prefaced by Cardinal Ratzinger), published in 1997, was one of the first analyses of the UN's role in spreading "gender ideology". His concerns about gender stemmed from his work on what he called a "demographic winter". A Belgian-American citizen based in Brussels, Marguerite Peeters works in the field of international development, with a particular interest in Africa. A close friend of Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah, she was a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Culture, two dicasteries that have now been dissolved. She is the author of *Le Gender, une norme mondiale? Pour un discernement* (2013), which has been translated into many languages, including German, English, Spanish, Italian, Polish and Portuguese.

2. General overview

This section aims to provide an introduction to anti-gender campaigns, focusing on their targets, their history, the actors behind them and their modes of action and strategies.

2.1. Targets

Across Europe, anti-gender campaigns are aimed at a wide range of targets. These are not attacked everywhere, at the same time or separately, nor do the attacks follow a precise sequence in which one concrete target follows another in a predefined order. On the contrary, anti-gender actors pay attention to the social and political debate and consider the cultural specificities of the contexts in which they operate. Based on these observations, they choose the issues most likely to win support or divide their opponents (such as surrogacy or rights for trans people). For example, parliamentary discussions on opening up civil marriage to same-sex unions, or the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, offered opportunities for mobilisation in distinct contexts. Furthermore, these attacks are not limited to the national level, but also extend to the local, regional, European and/or international levels (the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States or the United Nations). A comparative look reveals five broad types of target. These are by no means exhaustive, with new types likely to appear in the future. These targets are presented in chronological order of their appearance in the overall history of anti-gender campaigns.

1. **Sexual and reproductive rights** such as the right to abortion, access to contraception (including emergency contraception), the right to divorce or access to reproductive technologies. The Catholic discourse putting in opposition the culture of life and the culture of death, which brings abortion and euthanasia together on the same conceptual continuum, means that the latter issue is one of the targets of anti-gender campaigns in countries such as Belgium (see Chapter 2).
2. **LGBTQI+ rights**⁶, including the right to civil marriage (but also the introduction of types of civil unions), the right to adoption and the protection of families with same-sex parents, trans rights (change of first name, civil status, access to certain places and services, etc.), non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. The weighting of these different elements has varied over time, and protests against the rights of trans people are on the rise.
3. **Children's rights/child protection**: opposition to compulsory schooling in favour of home schooling, resistance to gender and sexuality education programmes in favour of greater parental control over educational programmes. The aim is to challenge the role of the state in the private sphere of education and the family, in the name of parents' freedom of choice.
4. **"Gender"** as a concept underpinning various public action mechanisms – laws and policies against gender violence (starting with the Istanbul Convention), gender mainstreaming, gender equality policies – as well as areas of research and teaching, above all gender studies (but also the broader discussion of wokism).

⁶ Although for a long time, they weren't targeted by anti-gender attacks, the rights of intersex people have recently come under attack in Ghana and in several anti-trans laws recently passed in Russia and the USA. This theme is being increasingly addressed in anti-gender literature.

5. **Laws and public policies against hate crimes, hate speech and discrimination**, in the name of defending freedom of expression and religious freedom. This discourse is often underpinned by a position that challenges the active intervention of the state in promoting and protecting individual rights (human, social, environmental, etc.).

Despite the diversity of targets attacked, anti-gender campaigns are similar in terms of modes of mobilisation and action (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) and form a transnational kit that can be used by a significant number of quite different actors. By way of illustration, anti-gender campaigns began at the same time and in fairly similar forms in Bulgaria and Romania, but were based on very different issues: the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria and the constitutional definition of marriage in Romania. Furthermore, in some countries such as Croatia, these campaigns were launched as a preventive measure to prevent the emergence of certain demands among progressive players. Finally, in autocratising countries such as Hungary and Russia, anti-gender campaigns are used by the state power to divert attention from the regime's anti-democratic drift and mobilise greater popular support for its actions.

In light of these examples, it seems simplistic to analyse anti-gender campaigns in terms of "backlash", i.e. as conservative responses and refusals to progressive demands according to an action/reaction logic (Paternotte, 2021). This observation does not imply that these actors do not take action against certain rights or public policies, but that it is important to consider more complex causalities and study the mechanisms by which the notion of gender is also mobilised for its symbolic potential and its ability to unite actors who are, in principle, quite different (Franklin, 2022; Paternotte, 2023; Corrêa, House and Paternotte, 2023). This is one of the foundations of the concept of "symbolic glue", according to which coalitions of actors were able to emerge when these actors had nothing in common in principle, beyond contesting "gender ideology" (Kováts & Põim, 2015; Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017; Kováts, 2021).

2.2. Historical background

As explained above, the history of anti-gender campaigns began in Catholic circles close to the Vatican in the mid-1990s, although they are constructed over longer timeframes (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016 ; Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). The aim is to produce a framework for analysing and explaining the defeats suffered at the UN, and to propose a counter-strategy that is above all discursive. This first phase lasted around ten years, ending in the mid-2000s. A second phase then began, characterised by the spread of these ideas outside the intellectual circles that had produced them, and by the emergence of mobilisations that gradually took hold of this discourse, prefiguring the anti-gender movements that were to explode in the 2010s. In Europe, these mobilisations grew primarily in Spain (2004-2005), Croatia (2006), Italy (2007) and Slovenia (2009).

During this phase, the Catholic Church continued to play a central role as a space for reflection and mobilisation, as a transmission belt and as a mobilising agent. In many countries, Catholic communications networks were used to disseminate this discourse and mobilise audiences, whether via denominational media and publishing houses, public conferences in parish halls, debates within secular groups (notably via ecclesiastical communities) or directly by exhorting the faithful within and outside of church. Bishops' conferences also played a leading role,

before often being overtaken on the right within their own Church (Béraud & Portier, 2015; Prearo, 2023). In these early mobilisations, the term "gender ideology" was not yet used systematically, but there were discursive elements and forms of mobilisation that clearly heralded the campaigns to come. Several strategies and modes of action were inspired by those deployed by the American Christian Right.

A third phase began in the early 2010s, when mobilisations began to multiply and accelerate in many different locations, taking on the characteristic forms of what are now known as anti-gender campaigns. It was also during this period that the transnational anti-gender infrastructure, with its sometimes ancient history, became both visible and operational (see Chapter 3). The years 2012-2013 appeared to be a turning point in many parts of the world. In Europe, these two years coincide with the French *Manif pour Tous* summit and the conservative victory in the Croatian referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage, as well as the rejection of the Estrela report on sexual and reproductive rights in the European Parliament (Datta & Paternotte, 2023), the One of Us European citizens' initiative and the creation of the federation of the same name, the first meeting of the Agenda Europe lobbying network (Datta, 2018) and the birth of the CitizenGo organisation.

This brief period was followed by the phase we are still in today. This is characterised by an unprecedented geographical spread within and beyond the historical regions where anti-gender campaigns were known to develop. These campaigns have spread to most countries in Europe, America and Oceania, and we're seeing the emergence of mobilisations that resemble anti-gender campaigns in several African countries (Awondo, Bouilly and N'Diaye, 2022) and Asia. As a result, it is no longer possible to explain the emergence of these mobilisations in terms of specific national characteristics; they are instead a transnational phenomenon, based on a set of discourses, actors, tools and emblematic strategies that are embodied differently depending on the context (Norocel & Paternotte, 2023).

Furthermore, anti-gender campaigns began taking on increasingly diverse forms. At this stage, it's no longer just a religious or civil society project, but also a political and, increasingly, a state project. Over the years, a growing number of political parties have taken up these issues, to the extent that in countries such as Germany, Hungary and even Belgium, they have become the main players in these mobilisations. Often located on the right and extreme right of the political spectrum, these political parties not only aim to oppose women's rights or the rights of gender or sexual minorities, but also see anti-gender campaigns as a vehicle for reaching new audiences, consolidating their social foundations and their media and intellectual presence. Thanks to their intersection with the tools and discursive frameworks characteristic of populism, anti-gender campaigns also enable these actors to revive and modernise certain discourses, such as those on the "great replacement" and the demographic crisis (Datta, 2020), and to attack liberal democracy more generally.

In some countries, anti-gender campaigns have also become a state project and then appear as one of the pillars of illiberalism (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). In Russia and Hungary, these campaigns developed without any significant mobilisation of civil society, but as a political project to consolidate the power of leaders like Vladimir Putin or Viktor Orbán. Elsewhere, the qualitative leap from a discourse promoted by certain social and political actors to a state discourse has often occurred because anti-gender actors have managed to infiltrate the state

apparatus and parties adopting this discourse have come to power, whether at local, regional or national level. For example, this is case in Italy, run by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's rule, and in several Spanish autonomous communities, run with the parliamentary or governmental support of the far-right Vox party. This new phase has seen the development of anti-gender public policies in areas such as education, culture and birth rates, as well as the promotion of new diplomatic alliances whose results are beginning to be felt at the level of the European Union and United Nations.

Finally, the actors involved in the coalitions of actors are diversifying, propelling anti-gender struggles into new areas of contestation (Corrêa, House & Paternotte, 2023). In many countries, for example, the fight for trans people's rights is no longer being waged solely by the traditional players in anti-gender campaigns, but also by feminists and lesbian, gay and bisexual activists, with previously unseen forms of collaboration (Cabral, Eloit, Paternotte & Verloo, 2023). Similarly, struggles for "freedom of expression" on campuses, which often involve the fight against "cultural Marxism" (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021), gender studies or critical theories of race, build both discursive and strategic bridges with key players in anti-gender struggles, such as ADF International in the UK. We are also seeing the emergence of discourses articulating anti-gender mobilisations and environmental issues (Della Sudda, 2022). In conclusion, anti-gender campaigns are increasingly establishing themselves as a transnational kit, primarily characterised by their adaptability and plasticity. Elements of this kit can be used, assembled and amended differently by actors pursuing distinct and sometimes even contradictory objectives, a crucial feature in explaining the development and contemporary success of anti-gender initiatives around the world.

2.3. Parties involved

The historical background explored above makes it clear that anti-gender campaigns cannot be seen solely as the work of religious actors or civil society groups. The history of these campaigns results in a diversification of the actors involved, who find common ground around the struggles against "gender ideology". These actors can be grouped into six categories: religious actors, civil society organisations, intellectuals and strategists, financiers, political parties and states. It's important to note the active presence of women among them.

As mentioned above, anti-gender campaigns originated as a Catholic project. Over time, however, other **Churches** have taken up the cause. These include a number of Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe, starting with the Russian Orthodox Church (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024 ; Norocel & Baluta, 2023 ; Shevstova, 2023), numerous Evangelical Churches in Latin America, the USA and elsewhere, and a limited number of older Protestant Churches in Northern Europe and the USA (Datta, 2021). Conversely, despite alliances between the Vatican and certain Muslim states at the UN, or between certain Israeli politicians and leaders of illiberal regimes, the involvement of Muslim or Jewish religious players remains very limited to date. The racism of certain anti-gender actors, pronounced forms of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (Graff, 2022) and an ethnocentrism whereby the notion of "Christian" often becomes synonymous with European and white help to explain this situation.

The second key player in anti-gender campaigns is a fairly dense network of **civil society** groups and organisations. Although historically linked to the Catholic Church, today this

category includes players from a variety of denominations, and even non-religious actors. These groups are active both within states, at local or national level, and internationally. They may take the form of relatively informal organisations, such as parents' groups or concerned citizens' groups, but they can also be deployed through highly professionalised organisations such as those presented in Chapter 3. In some cases, these groups have a longer history and have been rejuvenated by the deployment of anti-gender campaigns (such as many anti-abortion groups). In others, they were created specifically to serve these new battles. These groups often present themselves as "pro-life" or "pro-family" and promote their message in a positive way, in particular by appropriating the language of human rights. At the discursive level, it's no longer a question of fighting against rights or categories of people, but of defending life or the family and, more broadly, fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, religious freedom or the right of parents to choose their children's education.

Thirdly, since the 1990s, a number of **intellectuals**, **scientists** and **strategists** have played a discreet but fundamental role. These people may be based in higher education establishments (particularly Catholic universities and academic institutions created by populist or illiberal actors), think tanks (such as those inspired by the US Christian Right) or civil society organisations. These people devised the "gender ideology" discourse, enriched it with new ideas over time and adapted it to various societies. They have also built up scientific research and produced data (often contested by recognised professional scientific organisations) in order to establish their ideological positions (for example, against "post-abortion syndrome", same-sex parenting or the rights of trans people). Finally, these players considered the best strategies for disseminating these ideas and enshrining them in legislation and public policy. To this end, they have developed an intense political and judicial lobbying and campaign engineering activity.

Fourthly, these campaigns bring together a number of **financial backers**. While information on the funding of anti-gender groups is hard to come by, a growing body of documentation suggests that, in Europe, it concerns mostly private players, in limited numbers, such as wealthy billionaires and oligarchs, aristocrats, foundations and large corporations from Europe⁷, the Americas⁸ and the Russian Federation. More recently, some anti-gender actors have managed to attract public funding (including from the European Union), for example by obtaining political party status and securing public funds, or by applying for funding from "illiberal" European governments. Finally, a subset of anti-gender actors have developed participatory funding tactics through online donations, direct mail operations and merchandising (Datta, 2021).

Fifth, individual **politicians** and political parties play an important role today. In several countries, anti-gender activists have succeeded in infiltrating political parties to advance their alternative vision of society, and sometimes hold important positions (including ministerial or

⁷ https://www.nacional.hr/groups-linked-to-pro-life-cause-catholic-church-in-eu-allocate-e2-1-to-e3-1m-annually-to-lobby-eu/?fbclid=IwAR1wrLBrWx8r-aeHhpN7Y72OCMeaQzSRh_i-jgCGG9x8LzAkH6j8WVL33G0

⁸ [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/;](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/)
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/interactive-explore-us-christian-right-dark-money-spending-globally/>

presidential posts, as in Hungary and Italy). Some parties have also taken a strategic hold of these issues. Today, these political allies range from the centre-right to the far-right, with some support from the centre and left. In most countries, far-right and right-wing populist groups are the most receptive, although some far-right parties are reluctant to adopt this programme or make it a priority. Within the parliamentary right, some national political parties have also made anti-gender mobilisation a central pillar, but this support is often more strategic and short-term, as shown by the example of parties backtracking when this strategy fails to achieve the expected electoral success. Some Christian Democrat parties (especially in France, Italy and Slovakia) and Social Democrat parties (especially in Bulgaria and Romania) have also supported these struggles, and sometimes in a long-term, structural way. Finally, the smaller group of right-wing Christian parties in the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) emerged as a key player in recent campaigns against the Istanbul Convention in some Member States (see Chapter 3).

Finally, **states** can participate in, or even orchestrate, anti-gender campaigns as actors in their own right, benefiting from the power, infrastructure and influence conferred by the state apparatus. This phenomenon may be the result of the state apparatus being infiltrated by anti-gender activists, for example through bioethics committees, and of parties that have adopted an anti-gender line of argument entering into government. Many leaders with authoritarian tendencies have also understood the strategic and political advantages to be gained from these campaigns. All this is reflected in the growing political impact of these struggles on the national and international stage, and in the transformation of these demands into public policy. On the world stage, states such as the Russian Federation, Hungary, Poland, the United States under Donald Trump's rule, or Brazil ruled by Jair Bolsonaro's government are now joining forces with players such as the Holy See to create new alliances in international forums. At the UN, for example, this led to the creation of the United Nations Group of the Friends of the Family in 2015⁹. Within the EU, division between Member States is increasingly preventing the Council from adopting a common position when unanimity is required (as in the coordination of the EU within the UN and elsewhere), or from adopting key policy documents dealing with gender equality. Finally, some states, including European ones, have hosted meetings of transnational anti-gender networks with financial support and the intervention of high-level institutional representatives, and have even developed their own international forums, such as international summits on population or the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Alternative international coalitions have also been promoted, such as the Geneva Consensus Declaration¹⁰ against abortion or the various diplomatic attempts to draw up an alternative text to the Istanbul Convention.

2.4. Action repertoire

Anti-gender actors have a diversified repertoire of actions, consisting of five modes of action, which can be found at both national and transnational levels: demonstrations, the use of participatory democracy tools, social media mobilisation, advocacy and legal and judicial mobilisation.

⁹ This group comprises the permanent missions to the UN of the following states: Bangladesh, Belarus, Comoros, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

¹⁰ The declaration was signed by 34 countries, but some, such as Brazil and the United States, withdrew.

Demonstrations are the most visible mode of action, and the one to which anti-gender campaigns are often reduced, whether they be rallies and marches, happenings, religious gatherings in public places, photographic or artistic exhibitions in public places, or a combination of these. Notable examples include the mass demonstrations against the opening of civil marriage to same-sex couples (La Manif Pour Tous) that peppered France in 2012 and 2013, poster campaigns featuring images of aborted fetuses, Marches for Life in dozens of cities across Europe and vigils outside clinics where abortions are performed or public buildings. Interestingly, there is a perceptible modernisation and professionalisation of these demonstrations, decisively transforming the public image of conservative activism. This can be seen, for example, in the adoption of colour codes featuring pink and blue, or the development of innovative forms of protest fusing the festive atmosphere of a family picnic with elements reminiscent of Pride parades and techno music gatherings.

Whenever possible, anti-gender actors also use participatory democracy tools, such as **petitions** and **citizens' initiatives** aimed at forcing the hand of states and their EU institutions (e.g., by imposing a formal parliamentary hearing or referendum). At national level, anti-gender actors have organised numerous citizens' initiatives to challenge laws on abortion, LGBTQI+ rights and sex education, as witnessed by debates on the definition of marriage in Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Romania, or on abortion in Finland and Portugal. At EU level, anti-gender actors have launched European citizens' initiatives such as "One of Us", which targeted abortion and gathered 1.7 million signatures but was ultimately rejected by the European Commission (see Chapter 3).

Anti-gender actors are also very active on **social media** and have developed alternative online information channels to channel public opinion and influence decision-making bodies. Often presenting themselves as initiatives "for the active citizen", they help build a sense of community, disseminate specific actions through calls to action and petitions, and regularly target decision-makers. The most influential channel is CitizenGO, based in Madrid, which claims to have a community of over 10 million people and works in more than 12 European languages. A number of anti-gender players have also created their own news channels to report and analyse current events.

Long regarded as the preserve of progressive groups, **political advocacy** is a fourth mode of action widely invested by anti-gender activists, who are increasingly present in political arenas such as parliaments, governments and international institutions in order to influence decision-making processes and have an impact on political outcomes. To this end, they have developed the necessary lobbying skills and, in several countries, they have established themselves as important political voices, invited to parliamentary hearings or sitting on various advisory committees (notably on health, the family and bioethics). These numerous attempts explain the plans to restrict access to abortion in Spain in 2014 and Poland in 2016.

Finally, as the Mortier case shows in Chapter 3, anti-gender actors have developed the legal skills needed for both **legal** and **judicial mobilisation**. Drawing on their decades of experience in the USA, US organisations have set up branches in Europe, particularly in the European decision-making centres of Brussels, Geneva, Strasbourg and Vienna. In addition, European groups specialising in litigation have emerged in a number of countries over recent years. These organisations have stepped up their efforts to bring cases before European and national

courts on issues of religious persecution and the beginning or end of life, making third-party interventions on ongoing cases and using national and international human rights and anti-discrimination conventions. Such groups often engage in judicial harassment of progressive actors (by sending them official letters from lawyers or even summoning them to court).

These organisations have also developed the ability to translate their demands into legal terms, and have followed a three-pronged approach to legal mobilisation. Firstly, they have secularised their language and arguments. They no longer invoke religion to justify their position, but present their arguments in a modern vocabulary that echoes the discourse of human rights. Secondly, they often adopt an "originalist" approach to the law, which involves invoking an interpretation of the law that purports to represent what the original drafters of a legal instrument intended at the time it was written, and denying other possible readings. This approach therefore rejects the possibility that legal tradition can be dynamic and evolve over time with societies. Thirdly, they adopt a mimetic approach to legal reasoning, referring only to those sections of case law that are useful in advancing a given argument, and often taking these arguments out of context in order to produce legal opinions and texts that are, at first glance, well-founded in law. Even if it often seems questionable in the eyes of the profession, this work can appear sufficiently convincing in a political and sometimes even legal context.

Chapter 2: The situation in Belgium

Compared to other European countries, the situation in Belgium appears to be both little-known and unique. Little-known because the literature available to date is scarce and hard to find. Unique because, until very recently, this country seemed relatively protected. For most observers, therefore, there was little to comment on, and the main challenge lay in explaining this astonishing uniqueness. This was all the more remarkable given that, as illustrated by the difficult decriminalisation of voluntary termination of pregnancy (Marques-Pereira, 1989), Belgium had long been regarded as a conservative bastion in Western Europe.

The chapter published by Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte in 2017 in the book *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe*, which is still one of the few publications on the Belgian situation¹¹, sought to better understand this very uniqueness. While several chapters of this book detailed the mobilisations that took place in various European countries, this text, entitled "No Prophet Is Accepted in His Own Country", endeavoured instead to report on the rare events that could be classified as anti-gender campaigns¹², and to clarify two paradoxes. Firstly, while two Belgian citizens, Michel Schooyans and Marguerite Peeters, played a fundamental role in the invention of the Vatican's anti-gender discourse, they are relatively unknown in their own country, where their influence is limited. Secondly, as the last chapter explores, while Brussels as the European capital is home to several anti-gender organisations, they have so far had limited impact on the national situation. In the rest of the chapter, four reasons are put forward to explain the relative absence of anti-gender campaigns in Belgium today.

Firstly, in an international context where the Catholic Church has often been a driving force behind anti-gender campaigns, the way in which Church-State relations and relations between philosophical and religious groups have historically been pacified leaves little room for conservative Catholic mobilisations. On the one hand, the affirmation of freedom of worship and religion, the adoption of a principle of neutrality that aims neither at the elimination of religion from the public space nor its substitution, but at equidistance on the part of the state, public funding of worship and pillarisation have prevented a conservative radicalisation of the Catholic Church in Belgium, while guaranteeing it a central social place despite the process of secularisation (Bruyère, Crosetti, Faniel & Sägerser, 2019). On the other hand, certain issues, foremost among them the right to abortion, have been constructed as secular advances, ardently defended by this section of society (Marques-Pereira, 2021).

Secondly, the strategies of the Belgian Catholic hierarchy have left little room for the development of conservative campaigns of this kind. Indeed, ecclesiastical authorities have preferred to maintain the privileged status of their institution and its roots in society through a dense network of schools, hospitals and universities. As early as the 1960s, in the tense context of the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Cardinal Suenens

¹¹ Several research projects have already begun and should produce results in the future. Of particular note are the ongoing doctoral theses of Romain Biesemans (ULB), Archibald Gustin (ULiège/VUB), Henry Maes (UCLouvain/VUB) and Rylan Verlooy (UA), and the post-doctoral work of Anne-Sophie Crosetti (ULB).

¹² In short, these elements of anti-gender campaigns included in particular the attempts of a few French-speaking actors to import the French 'La Manif pour Tous' mobilisations and the disparate mobilisations on the part of the Catholic fringes of the Flemish far right.

(1961-1979) attempted to make progress on issues such as contraception and conjugal ethics (Dupont, 2014; Crosetti, 2023). However, it was his successor, Cardinal Danneels, who really developed this policy during his long reign at the head of the Belgian Church (1980-2010), anxious to adapt the Church to a changing society in which Catholics remain influential but are now in the minority (Bréabant & Vanderpelen, 2015). This approach explains the prudence and discretion of the Bishops' Conference on most recent ethical reforms, which has also allowed for more open responses to issues that are sensitive in terms of Catholic doctrine, both in the Church and in the rest of society. In this respect, Mgr Léonard's brief term as Primate of Belgium (2010-2015) was more of a parenthesis, and this exception to the line promoted by the Belgian ecclesiastical authorities helped to reveal the divisions within the Belgian Church and the gap with the rest of society. Moreover, under Pope Francis, the Vatican chose to return to the previous line by appointing Mgr De Kesel (2015-2023), considered Cardinal Danneels' heir, and quickly elevating him to the rank of cardinal.

Thirdly, populist and far-right parties, particularly influential in the north of the country, have long shown little interest in gender and sexuality issues and do not have a privileged relationship with ecclesiastical authorities, unlike some of their counterparts in other countries. While defending a conservative vision of gender relations and sexuality, these parties have preferred to focus on immigration, Islam and national issues, while at the same time, for the most recent period, toying with femo- and homonationalism. In fact, the anti-gender discourse was first launched by free agents aware of international developments. This is the case, for example, of essayist Drieu Godefridi, who wrote on the subject as early as 2013 and very early on articulated a pioneering critique of the concept of gender violence and the Istanbul Convention (Godefridi, 2013, 2015, 2023)¹³. While this criticism has not caught on in Belgium, it does strongly resemble some remarks being made in other European countries.

Finally, the timing of the ethical reforms in Belgium proved crucial, as it preceded the roll-out of anti-gender campaigns on the international stage. These began to be deployed in the mid-2000s and really started to spread in the 2010s. Yet, the flagship laws on same-sex marriage (2003) and adoption by same-sex couples (2006), protection against discrimination (2003), the first trans law (2007) and euthanasia (2002) were all passed before this period (Meier, 2009). This time lag also explains the limited resistance put up by the Belgian Church, especially since Mgr Léonard, who is close to the line advocated by Pope Benedict XVI, only took office in 2010. This discrepancy ultimately helps to explain why, when Belgium appears on the international anti-gender agenda, it is primarily regarding the subject of extending the right to euthanasia (see Chapter 3).

However, the situation in Belgium appears to have undergone significant changes since 2017. New areas of mobilisation have emerged, recent issues such as trans rights have been added alongside historical targets such as abortion rights, and new players, mainly politicians and parties on the right and extreme right of the political spectrum, have seen the value of taking up these struggles. The focus of these campaigns has also shifted from the south to the north of the country. This chapter aims to grasp what has changed. It begins by examining the main targets attacked in the Belgian context, highlighting the ways in which they have multiplied and diversified. It then examines the main players involved in these campaigns, and the shift

¹³ In the Belgian press, see <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/ripostes/2014/09/13/la-theorie-du-genre-quand-papa-porte-une-robe-XZY7ZC4KBBAF7MXAWIV7UQCXIU/>

from an essentially Catholic mobilisation to a movement largely underpinned by the dynamics of collaboration and competition between the right and the far right. In the following chapter, this report looks at international anti-gender actors, focusing on those based or operating in Brussels, and examines their influence on the Belgian context.

1. More numerous and diversified targets

While historic issues such as abortion rights have never left the spotlight, new targets have been added in recent years, contributing to a diversification of anti-gender campaigns. Seven of these issues are examined in this report: abortion rights, legal recognition of homosexuality, gender and sexuality education, the right to euthanasia, trans issues, transhumanism and wokism. The multiplication and diversification of targets enable these campaigns to reach new audiences. They also connect denser and more complex networks of players, who are not necessarily the same for all issues.

1.1. Abortion rights

Despite the fact that this is not a recent debate, abortion remains a prominent topic for anti-gender actors, and the repeal of the Roe vs. Wade decision in the United States, the crowning achievement of decades of conservative mobilisation, shows that voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP) is not an acquired right. This decision prompted a number of countries, including Belgium, to consider constitutionalising the right to abortion, with the stated aim of making it impossible to reverse this right. In turn, the "pro-life" movements, which intend to defend life "from conception to natural death", viewed this desire as an attempt at "backlash" (Faludi, 1991), taking up a progressive concept to consider the consequences of what they deemed to be a historic victory in the United States.

The current visibility of the abortion issue and the work of anti-abortion activists should not, however, overlook their consistent presence since their emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, since its creation, the pro-life movement has never completely disappeared in Belgium. However, there are strategies and argumentative reconfigurations that are changing and producing discontinuities in the movement, as well as the involvement of a new type of activist. In today's context, all this gives a strong impression of novelty, and raises the following questions: who are the pro-life actors in Belgium, and what are the issues, demands and strategies of this movement today?

Civil society makes up the majority of those involved in the fight against abortion in Belgium. Historically, while political parties and the Catholic Church have long opposed the decriminalisation of VTP, civil society has over the long term established itself as an audible representative, critical of family planning, feminist and medical movements. The first groups appeared in the late 1960s (Crosetti, 2023), organising the first pro-life rallies. However, there has been a generational renewal since the 2010s, reflected in the emergence of new groups and the rise of the Marches for Life, which now punctuate the calendar of demonstrations in Brussels every year. Today, different groups exist in parallel, each taking up the defence of life in their own way. We can divide these groups into four clusters to better understand the role of each player: activist, intellectual, social and educational. We should also mention our close

links with two French players: Alliance Vita and the Fondation Lejeune¹⁴, which are sources of inspiration and expertise for Belgian organisations, certainly at the French-speaking level.

The activist cluster is undoubtedly the most visible, given its presence in the public arena and the repercussions of its actions in the media. The groups that make it up, often recently created, aim to take their demands to the streets and make the fight "for life" and the morality that underpins it more visible. However, while they are all part of the Catholic fold, some wish to project a pluralist image, while others, in a smaller minority, assert their religious heritage. These groups are at the heart of the generational renewal mentioned previously. While demonstrations (March for Life, etc.) are their preferred mode of action, they also organise other types of events and make use of other types of action such as "pro-life collages"¹⁵. They take their inspiration from feminist collages, which appeared as a way of denouncing femicide, to spread feminist messages in many cities. The aim is to reappropriate a feminist mode of action and no longer leave public space to feminists alone.

The intellectual cluster produces bioethical expertise and seeks to build an expert discourse that moves away from Catholic and religious reasoning towards a scientific posture, contributing to wider political and media dissemination. This stance is reinforced by its members' professional roles as legal practitioners, philosophers and doctors. Reproductive issues are approached from the angle of bioethics, which guides their actions more than Catholic morality, and this cluster's mission is not "activist" but reflective (Verdier, 2021). Its aim is to publish, educate and raise awareness, with a view to training pro-life managers and activists, as well as citizens interested in these issues. In this context, the cluster acts as an import belt for international discourse and initiatives, particularly within the French-speaking world. Within it, the role of certain Catholic doctors should be noted, who regularly mobilise against abortion legislation, basing their opposition on their medical expertise and the defence of "medical ethics"¹⁶.

The social cluster is undoubtedly the most discreet but also the oldest. It has no public presence and does not seek to reverse abortion legislation, but aims to support women in the face of "perinatal bereavement" (abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth) and to provide material and psychological assistance to pregnant women in precarious situations (economic, political) or who are reluctant to carry a pregnancy to term. This action is backed up by an online presence, via the jesuenceinte.be website. This website offers information on pregnancy and a listening ear – by email or telephone – for women in "distress". The site's aim is to help women make a decision in a moment of "distress", and its discourse quite clearly implies that abortion would be a solution that is considered too readily. These contacts enable women to find out

¹⁴ The Fondation Lejeune is working to keep the memory of Professor Jérôme Lejeune alive and is now run by his son-in-law, Jean-Marie Le Méné. A geneticist, Jérôme Lejeune contributed to a better understanding of Down's Syndrome, and his research, combined with strong Catholic convictions, also led him to embrace the pro-life cause. A close friend of John Paul II, Jérôme Lejeune was the first president of the Pontifical Academy for Life created by the Polish pontiff. His influence was also decisive in King Baudouin's stance on abortion. In 2021, he was declared venerable by the Catholic Church (Dugast, 2019).

¹⁵ <https://www.lalibre.be/etudiant/vie-etudiante/2023/05/11/des-tags-anti-ivg-scandalisent-les-etudiants-a-louvain-la-neuve-NSQNSJLVLND37KKAZPEDNH43IQ/#:~:text=Comme%20l%27explique%20la%20RTBF,voir%20des%20inscriptions%20profond%C3%A9ment%20sexistes;https://www.rtb.be/article/des-tags-anti-avortement-suscitent-incomprehension-et-indignation-a-louvain-la-neuve-11195923>

¹⁶ <https://www.cathobel.be/2019/11/loi-sur-lavortement-les-craintes-des-medecins-catholiques/>

about solutions and remedies enabling them to get out of precarious situations and keep their children (PCSW, ONE, etc.). It is difficult to judge how far-reaching and effective this action is.

Finally, the education cluster is committed to the development and promotion of alternative sex education. Rejecting EVRAS (Education about relationships, emotional and sexual life) and, more broadly, the sex and emotional education offered by family planning centres, this cluster goes into schools to talk about sexuality and emotional relationships and is part of anti-abortion activists' historic commitment to proposing "alternative" education, blurring the boundary between their action and that of the planning centres (Bréabant and Vanderpelen, 2015).

The partial decriminalisation of abortion, adopted in 1990, did not entirely satisfy feminist movements, movements for decriminalisation (particularly secular) and family planning centres in charge of abortion. While it has enabled criminal prosecutions to be halted, it has not established abortion as a right in the strict sense of the term, but has made the practice an exception to the rule of prohibiting it by penalising it. This partial decriminalisation led to dissatisfaction, and the mobilisation of groups calling for decriminalisation has never ceased. Family planning centres, feminist groups and secular organisations continued to call for a revision of the law.

However, it wasn't until 2018 that abortion was removed from the Penal Code, in forms contested by progressive circles. Firstly, because in substance, the law remains the same, and for this reason is widely regarded as "cosmetic" (Marques-Pereira, 2021, p. 103). While this text has abolished the "state of distress", it maintains the twelve-week deadline for abortion, the requirement for a six-day reflection period (except in the case of an "urgent reason", which is new) and the obligation to point out the medical risks and the various alternatives. Although abortion is no longer included in the Penal Code, criminal penalties for non-compliance remain the same as under the 1990 law, and have even been stepped up. In fact, abortion is still not a "right", insofar as anyone who has or carries out an abortion outside the conditions laid down by law may still be subject to criminal prosecution. Secondly, because this removal from the Penal Code coincided with another debate: that of "recognition of the stillborn foetus". The government wanted to lower registration of "stillborn foetuses" to 140 days (compared with 180 days previously) and allow registration of a first name and surname. Some observers have interpreted this as a "barter" to the detriment of women's rights, as the reform could have personified the foetus and thus had an impact on the desire to extend the abortion deadline. Moreover, the law on abortion could have been passed on condition that it recognised the right to register a stillborn child, and certain draft laws offered "the possibility, beyond 180 days, of giving not just a first name but also a surname to this child and, for certain proposals, the possible granting of advantages in principle reserved for living children" (Marques-Pereira, 2021, p. 125).

In 2020, abortion returned to the centre of discussions to form a federal government, and a progressive coalition (socialists, liberals, ecologists, communists) then seemed to emerge with the aim of improving the 2018 law. It proposed extending the deadline to eighteen weeks and reducing the reflection period to 48 hours. However, the CD&V was invited to join the discussions in order to consolidate the basis of its majority in Flanders, and this party intended "to make the blocking of this legislative procedure a bargaining chip for their possible

participation in a government coalition" (Marques-Pereira, 2021, p. 137). This strategy was denounced by progressive civil society, which saw in it a willingness to trade its governmental participation on the altar of women's rights¹⁷. Faced with the stalemate, a commission of experts was established to clarify the situation and the needs in terms of abortion before reopening the file.

In October 2021, the independent, multidisciplinary, inter-university committee in charge of studying and evaluating the practice and legislation on voluntary termination of pregnancy¹⁸ issued its report and recommendations on voluntary and medical terminations of pregnancy in Belgium. This text, the result of discussions with many sectors of society and voted for by a large majority, lists the issues that still surround the practice of abortion in Belgium: medical abortion and abortion at home, effective decriminalisation of abortion, the status of the foetus and embryo, foetal pain during voluntary and medical terminations, sex and emotional education, information on "alternatives" to abortion, parental authorisation for abortion in the case of minors, the extension of the time limit for granting an abortion, abolition of the reflection period, reimbursement for abortion, status of stillborn children, inclusion of abortion in the medical curriculum and constitutionalisation of abortion.

At this level, it is important to point out that the issues raised by pro-life activists don't always coincide with those raised by progressive groups. For example, the question of the status of stillborn children or that of foetal pain are not (yet?) issues raised by the anti-abortion movement, contrary to what is often assumed by organisations such as GACEPHA or the Centre d'action laïque (Secular centre for action). The debate surrounding stillborn children, led by a number of CD&V players including the then Minister of Justice, did not respond to any specific request from the anti-abortion movement, even though the latter approved of its existence.

The pro-life movement actually has its own agenda and concerns, based on the principle of human dignity and the desire to recognise the foetus as a "human person", a notion directly derived from the Catholic Church's social doctrine¹⁹. Pro-life activists take this principle to heart, and deduce from it a right to protection for those they consider to belong to "vulnerable groups": foetuses, people at the end of their life, embryos, doctors, people with disabilities, etc. For the same reason, they reject any manipulation of the "human person", and the foetus is considered a human being who should have rights. This relationship with the foetus gives rise to a different approach to abortion-related issues. If the foetus is a "person", then

¹⁷ <https://bx1.be/categories/news/quelque-300-manifestants-denoncent-le-marchandage-politique-du-droit-a-l'avortement/>

¹⁸ Comité interuniversitaire, multidisciplinaire et indépendant en charge de l'étude et de l'évaluation de la pratique et de la loi relatives à l'interruption de grossesse (Independent, multidisciplinary, inter-university committee in charge of studying and evaluating the practice and legislation on voluntary termination of pregnancy), *Étude et évaluation de la loi et de la pratique de l'avortement en Belgique (Study and evaluation of the legislation and practice of abortion in Belgium)*, Rapport académique à la demande de la majorité "Vivaldi" au niveau fédéral (Academic report at the request of the "Vivaldi" majority at the federal level), 2023. https://vlir.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Evaluatie-van-abortuswetge-ving-en-praktijk_EN-versie.pdf

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_200605_26_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Trinitarian%20love,%20the%20origin%20and%20goal%20of%20the%20human%20person

abortion is murder. Abortion is therefore traumatic for all parties involved: women, doctors, spouses or sexual partners²⁰.

In short, demands are made from this specific view of the foetus, demands that consequently do not always resonate with the demands of pro-choice actors, nor do they systematically respond to them in a logic of movement–counter-movement. What's more, these demands cannot be understood in isolation from the debates and developments in Belgian society as a whole. The pro-life movement has adapted to a changing society, and the activists of yesterday are no longer those of today. Their arguments have also evolved and adapted to issues such as the equality of women and men and their place in society, sexual liberation and ecology. Indeed, today's movement cannot articulate its positions by following the argumentative logic of its predecessors, which was based on recalling Catholic morality at a time when Catholicism was undergoing a period of change. Similarly, the position of political parties has profoundly evolved, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to be openly against abortion today.

This being said, the essence of the current demands of the pro-life movement in Belgium differs little, if at all, from the demands of its historical counterparts, but takes on its own colouring specific to today's spatial and temporal context. This movement has thus abandoned any demand for a reversal of abortion legislation and, unlike the American movement, its main aim is to warn against and avoid the "slippery slope", i.e. an accumulation of political decisions perceived as leading to catastrophe and, more broadly, to a society "without moral limits". To avoid this slippery slope, it proposes not liberalising access to abortion any further, and is therefore against extending the time limit for granting an abortion, abolishing or reducing the six-day reflection period, questioning the freedom of conscience of doctors performing abortions, censorship (as in the case of the Université catholique de Louvain versus Stéphane Mercier²¹), medical abortion at home (a practice that has developed as a result of various lockdowns) or the creation of an offence of hindering abortion.

The issues outlined in the previous section help us to understand the evolution of the movement's repertoire of actions. Secularisation, individualisation, sexual liberation and the decriminalisation (or even partial decriminalisation) of abortion are changing the way the fight against abortion is led. While historical modes of action remain in force, their rhetorical justification is evolving and adapting to this new context. Today, these modes of action can be summed up in two elements: visibility and the creation of a positive image, and changing mentalities.

Visibility corresponds to these activists' historical mode of action. Indeed, "rallies for life" were organised in Brussels from 1978 onwards, with the aim of making the pro-life struggle visible

²⁰ For the moment, the Belgian movement has not yet taken up the issue of foetal "well-being", used elsewhere by pro-life groups to justify their actions.

²¹ As a reminder, Stéphane Mercier holds a doctorate in philosophy and taught this discipline at the Université catholique de Louvain until 2017. Following the allegations by students of statements made in class on subjects such as gender and abortion²¹, he was suspended, subjected to disciplinary proceedings and dismissed. Following this high-profile affair, he was the guest of honour at the 2017 March for Life and a few months later published the book, *La philosophie pour la vie* (2017), which reiterates his positioning.

in Belgian society. Although, before the 1990 law partially decriminalising abortion, activists sought to "shock" by using visuals of aborted fetuses, the new generation led by the March for Life marked a return to the public arena in 2010, after a long period of absence. These new recruits reject this strategy: now, it's all about showing that the pro-life movement still exists, without trying to shock people. Instead, the aim is to create a positive image by using a positive argument based on the defence of life (rather than opposition to abortion). To this end, signs and visuals are controlled in order to avoid negative messages, preferring to display photos of families or babies.

The activists themselves have also changed. Whereas they were often older men, today's gatherings primarily bring together younger men and women. They are at the head of the procession, and the movement uses this female presence to counter the argument that it is opposed to women's rights. Some even use feminist arguments to present abortion as a patriarchal practice. In a context of restructuring the boundaries of feminism, this rhetoric must be taken seriously. While the historic movement shamelessly reviled feminism, today's groups can't ignore the growing acceptance of feminist "values" and the importance of women's rights, including among their activists and potential audience. According to this new discourse, being against abortion would enable women to avoid what is perceived as a "tragedy" in the service of men, and the use of feminism also demonstrates an ability to secularise a discourse historically linked to Catholicism. It boosts the movement's visibility by creating controversy and, through the use of hashtags on social networks, reaches an audience not yet won over to the cause. Social media also allows for new strategies, which require a reasonable investment of time compared to the rewards they bring.

On the other hand, the movement is looking for concrete ways to change mentalities. To this end, grassroots activists have modified their arguments, turning to an approach that intends to appear more universalist and avoids recalling Catholic morality. This change of mentality involves defending alternative sex education that promotes a conjugal and reproductive vision of sexuality, according to which the couple is essentially open to life. These examples show that the movement has abandoned the purely legislative battle to focus on the moral battle. Through "appropriate" sex and emotional education, their ambition is to make abortion "unthinkable", resulting in the need to write laws on the issue drying up at the source. This desire to change mentalities also contributes to the change in image mentioned above. In a country where consensus is the norm for political management, the movement knows that it cannot adopt overly radical demands, as is the case in France. Using the rhetoric of morality tends to depoliticise the fight against abortion and position it from the point of view of well-being, according to which it would be logical to prefer not to have an abortion, just as it would be to not wish to take the contraceptive pill.

1.2. Homosexuality, "equal marriage" and same-sex parenting

The opening of civil marriage to same-sex couples was adopted in 2003 by a large parliamentary majority and with little opposition from society. Oddly enough, CD&V MPs in opposition largely supported this text in the name of a conservative defence of the benefits of marriage, which same-sex couples should also be able to enjoy (Paternotte, 2004, 2011). However, within the government majority, the MR²² opposition cut this "same-sex marriage"

²² Whose elected representatives largely opposed or abstained,

from its effects in terms of parentage and adoption. This unique situation at international level, shared with Portugal, led to an intense campaign by LGBTQI+ associations, whose demands regarding same-sex parenting have become a priority. In 2006, after three years of mobilisation, the law opening adoption to same-sex unions was passed (Herbrand, 2006).

Although still limited in comparison with what happened abroad, stronger opposition was voiced against the recognition of the right to adoption. Politically, the MR continued to resist within the majority, with a majority of its elected representatives opposing the text, along with the far-right and the two Christian Democrat parties. In civil society, while the bishops remained relatively reserved and confined themselves to a statement against the draft law, a number of academics expressed their doubts about it, and two demonstrations took place in September 2005, the first of which brought together conservative political players and associations, while the second was the work of the far right (Herbrand, 2006). Some of these actors have continued their activities for a decade, in particular against the legal recognition of surrogacy²³, but also against euthanasia, especially in the case of minors.

Finally, we should mention some more recent, more widespread attacks, which testify to a certain resistance to the increased visibility of homosexuality. The rainbow pedestrian crossings installed by several municipalities and the Brussels-Capital Region have aroused various forms of hostility, both social and political, and several crossings have been vandalised in Wallonia (Neupré, Seraing) and Brussels (Anderlecht). Finally, repeated acts of vandalism have been reported against the premises and posters of ULB's LGBTQIA+ Circle, including swastikas and Christian crosses. These actions echo those carried out on other campuses in recent years.

1.3. Gender and sexuality education

On 7 September 2023, around one hundred demonstrators gathered near the parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (WBF) to protest against the widespread teaching of EVRAS (Education about relationships, emotional and sexual life) courses²⁴. On that day, the Parliament of the French Community was preparing to vote on the draft decree validating the cooperation agreement between the governments of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the Wallonia Region and the French Community Commission on the widespread teaching of EVRAS in French-speaking Belgium. To the surprise of many, this demonstration brought together many veiled women, offering a very different image from anti-gender mobilisations generally dominated by Catholic actors. However, these protests did not achieve the desired result, and the decree was adopted unanimously, with the exception of three abstentions from the Engagés.

The previous day, the Flemish press had echoed the protests of Sensoa, the Flemish centre of expertise for sexual health, and the Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding (CLB). These organisations were concerned about the disappearance of the requirement for secondary

²³ That said, it's worth noting how few hostile reactions there were when, in June 2023, the Advisory Committee on Bioethics presented a favourable opinion on the legal framework for surrogacy.

²⁴ <https://www.dhnet.be/regions/bruxelles/2023/09/07/quelques-centaines-de-personnes-manifestent-a-bruxelles-contre-levras-AY5BLOAR5JGS5EX6BAN2TOXDFQ/?fbclid=IwAR2t4Z1D060v9Hgf-AU3khgr0AgAqqDZjImbUNoz3dpuYyFlrr6FPTOUR6w>

schools in the north of the country to offer sex education to their pupils²⁵. This decision by the Flemish Minister for Education was in response to a ruling by the Constitutional Court that teaching umbrellas did not have sufficient freedom to develop their educational projects, prompting the Flemish government to revise its educational objectives downwards and adopt only minimum objectives for the second and third levels of secondary education. Furthermore, the growing discomfort experienced by teachers in dealing with certain students and parents led these associations to fear that these training courses would disappear from the scene as soon as they were no longer compulsory, leading them to demand more support²⁶. The Flemish government's decision does not therefore appear to be the result of an anti-gender mobilisation, but it could ultimately facilitate access to certain schools for these actors, opening up a window of opportunity for them in the north of the country, particularly in the name of educational neutrality and parents' educational freedom.

These two examples demonstrate the importance of educational issues in anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017). The first mobilisations on these issues date back to before 2010 in countries such as Croatia and Slovenia, and almost everywhere, experts, citizen groups and parents have sprung up to express concern about the content of certain courses and modules, to question what is happening in schools, to reject the development of gender and sexuality education or even to actively promote occasional withdrawal from school or home schooling (Mourão Permoser & Stoeckl, 2021). In Brazil, for example, anti-gender mobilisations, decisive in the erosion of democracy, began with campaigns against sex education modules known under the slogan of "Escola sem partido" (Gomes da Costa, 2022) and Jair Bolsonaro is known to have displayed *Tootuff's 'Willies: A User's Guide'* on television in 2018. Mobilisations around the slogan "Con mis hijos no te metas", born in Peru in 2016, have also had a lasting effect on the region. In France, mobilisations against gender also began with the mobilisations that preceded the development of La Manif pour Tous and never left the spotlight (Gallot & Pasquier, 2018). In other Western European countries, far-right parties are promoting systems for monitoring and denouncing teachers, and in Spain, the HazteOír organisation behind CitizenGo and the far-right Vox party have made "parental pins" a priority. The idea is to allow parents to take their children out of school for certain activities, an idea that Vox has put on the table of various governments where its support is needed. Finally, in Russia and Hungary, the authorities are concerned about the effects of alleged "LGBT propaganda" and are striving to protect minors to the detriment of freedom of press, freedom of expression and freedom of association.

These different examples demonstrate the centrality of education in anti-gender campaigns, and the opposition, suggested by these activists, between gender and sexuality education programmes on the one hand, and the protection of minors and parents' educational freedom on the other. Above all, it's a question of defending education – particularly in matters of gender and sexuality – as the prerogative of parents, and refusing to let school become a place promoting the recognition and use of certain rights. Belgium is no exception to this trend, and certain groups have no hesitation in speaking of a "kidnapping of parental authority"²⁷. However, these debates do not arise in the same way in the country's two main linguistic communities²⁸ and, above all, do not have the same intensity. The institutional system has

²⁵ https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230906_95371992

²⁶ https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230905_96121362

²⁷ <https://etincelles.be/evras-un-rapt-de-l-autorite-parentale/>

²⁸ We have no information on the situation in the German-speaking Community.

long since separated the educational systems, which have followed different trajectories in the north and south of the country. As is often the case in Belgium (Faniel, Gobin and Paternotte, 2020), activists wishing to interact with these institutions have imitated this political division. While there have been sporadic debates in Flanders, such as those surrounding Çavaria's "genderkoek" in 2021 (Van Wichelen, Verhoeven & Hau, 2023)²⁹, it's in French-speaking Belgium that the debates surrounding EVRAS, an acronym for education about relationships, emotional and sexual life, have been the most hostile. For this reason, we are focusing mainly on the debates in the south of the country, which rebounded spectacularly in 2023, as cited in the introduction to this report.

EVRAS has long been a structural issue arousing political debate in French-speaking Belgium. It largely follows the evolution of the positioning of Christian players in politics and education, as well as the weight of various pressure groups, especially those linked to the conservative fringes of the Catholic Church. However, while debates on sex education have been ongoing for many years, EVRAS only officially came into being in 2012, following lengthy debates that led the WBF to make it one of the school's missions and to integrate it into the components of citizenship education via the Missions Decree. In 2013, a cooperation agreement was signed between the WBF, the Walloon Region and the COCOF, and ten support points were created in French-speaking Belgium (Marques-Pereira and Pereira, 2019; Lannoo, Duchêne, Godin and Tojerow, 2023). At the time, EVRAS was neither compulsory nor standardised, and was left to the discretion of the head of each institution, who could therefore refuse to include it. With no obligation, EVRAS has made little progress for many years and access to sex and emotional education has remained very uneven across the French-speaking region. In addition, the lack of a framework for EVRAS' missions and objectives, and the failure to establish a genuine EVRAS label guaranteeing the quality of the teaching, have been a source of concern in secular and feminist circles, as well as in family planning and LGBTQI+ organisations³⁰. Since 2012, EVRAS has never left the spotlight (Bloc and Piette, 2016).

Anti-gender players are not indifferent to the EVRAS debate, and most of them are trying to propose an "alternative" sex and emotional education that – by talking about love and respect – reinforces the ideal of the couple (by definition heterosexual), prevents abortions, modifies the use of contraception and combats the trivialisation of pornography³¹. These players do not wish to leave the monopoly of this education to centres perceived as activist, which defend what they see as a biased education that "de-dramatises" abortion, contraception and sexuality. On the contrary, they advocate a form of sex education in line with their vision of life and sexuality and, while they no longer try to prevent sexuality education in schools and reserve it for parents like the former conservative movements, they do try to go into schools to present their programmes and ideas, including as part of EVRAS events.

Faced with the limitations of the system adopted in 2012, and in particular the possibility for conservative players to present themselves as EVRAS coordinators, progressive players have not ceased to mobilise and propose, particularly via numerous reports, avenues for

²⁹ <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/nieuws/vlaams-belang-uit-kritiek-op-gebruik-leermiddel-de-genderkoek-vlaams-onderwijs>

³⁰ <https://www.alterechos.be/evras-un-label-dans-un-vortex/>

³¹ These various issues have, for example, been summarised by Paris-based Belgian sexologist Thérèse Hargot in her books (2010, 2016, 2020), and she herself is active in sex education in France. <https://theresehargot.com/> See Crosetti & De Ganck (2016).

improvement. Over the years, the EVRAS platform³², which has brought together many of these players since 2012, has called for a strong framework, standardisation and labelling, i.e. a structuring of EVRAS that prevents both a drift in teaching and inequalities between students³³. Despite opposition from the CDH within the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, a first step was taken in 2017 with the introduction of an EVRAS label for the youth sector. Created by Minister Isabelle Simonis (Socialist Party, PS), this label is awarded by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation to certify the quality of the educators. EVRAS is one of the priorities of the community's new government set up in 2019, in which the Christian Democrats are not represented.

The debate resurfaced in December 2022, when the Belgian section of the Observatoire de la Petite Sirène (Little Mermaid Observatory) published an "Open letter" addressed to parents and the Minister of Education of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Caroline Désir³⁴, in *La Libre Belgique*. This organisation's existence had become more well-known among the general public a few months earlier, on the occasion of the publication of open letters expressing concern about the increase in transitions among minors. While trans issues have so far been its main area of activity, this French and Belgian Observatory is more broadly concerned about "ideological discourse on children and adolescents", and wishes to "warn childcare professionals about the impact of social networks and activism"³⁵.

As explained in their open letter, this Observatory is troubled by the content of the EVRAS guide produced by the non-profit organisation O'Yes. For several years, this non-profit organisation had been working on a guide for EVRAS educators with the help of the Fédération laïque des centres de planning familial (Secular Federation of Family Planning Centres). The primary aim was to provide a common framework for education. This guide had already been criticised when its first version was published in May 2022, particularly because of the passages on "sexting" and "nudes". Despite a rewriting of the passages deemed problematic, this opposition persisted and intensified. In reality, what divides the different movements is the place occupied by sexuality in this guide and the very pragmatic approach adopted, insofar as this document aims to tackle all the subjects likely to be raised by students. However, for those who oppose EVRAS, sexuality education should above all guide minds and transmit a relational and sexual ideal, rather than legitimise minority situations, particularly in terms of gender.

More broadly, political agenda-setting of EVRAS by the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, under the leadership of Minister Caroline Désir (PS), had the more global objective of adopting substantial funding for sex education in schools, the obligation to set up an activity for pupils in 6th year of primary and 4th year of secondary education, and a standardisation and harmonisation of content through stricter control by the WBF. The Minister also proposed that family planning centres, PMS (psycho-medico-social) centres and HPS (health promotion in school) centres should automatically be accredited, and that all other organisations should be required to obtain the EVRAS label in order to work in schools. Implementation of this

³² <https://www.evras.be/generalisation/plateforme-evras/>

³³ <https://www.evras.be/generalisation/plateforme-evras/>

³⁴ <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/2022/12/13/non-a-lhypersexualisation-de-nos-enfants-653B6VFIFRFFVAPCK4OOWGOLOQ/>

³⁵ <https://www.observatoirepetitesirene.org/>

project was based on a cooperation agreement with the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission (COCOF).

As evidenced by the vote on 7 September, the draft decree did not face strong political opposition, and the final version of the text was the subject of a broad political and social consensus, rallied by many players in Catholic education. On the other hand, to widespread astonishment, this text met with previously unknown social opposition, renewing both the coalitions of actors and the repertoire of action of anti-gender mobilisations. It is interesting to note that the rhetoric underlying these mobilisations repeats fears of a decentralisation of heterosexuality and gender difference, founding elements of the anti-gender discourse, and mobilises arguments that are also circulating abroad, often without any precise link to the content of the texts under discussion, such as young children learning about masturbation or the promotion of paedophilia³⁶. These are the ingredients used almost everywhere to generate moral panics in the context of anti-gender campaigns (Gomes da Costa, 2022; Martínez, Duarte and Rojas, 2021), and increasingly focus on trans issues, especially when minors are involved (Hines, 2020; Mahoudeau, 2022; Thurlow, 2022). It's all about the rhetoric of child protection and a certain idea of childhood innocence, as reflected both in the names of the collectives mobilised and the preponderance of child psychiatrists and other child professionals within them.

These mobilisations brought together three types of players in an unprecedented alliance at international level, except in Canada, which faced the same type of mobilisation at the same time. Groups from conservative Christian circles were joined by people from anti-vax and Muslim backgrounds, who appear to have played an important role in organising and mobilising for the demonstrations on 7 and 17 September 2023. This debate is now being pursued in a legal battle involving Catholic, Muslim and right-wing actors. There are two important observations in helping us better understand this unexpected alliance. In many countries (Corrêa, 2022b), links have been established between certain anti-gender activists and movements opposing COVID-19 vaccines. Some international anti-gender platforms have also supported these struggles, notably with the aim of limiting global health governance³⁷.

This alliance is based on discursive similarities, which facilitate activist convergence. Indeed, a belief in conspiracy theories and an enchanted vision of nature undisturbed often coexist in discourses on COVID, extending to questions of gender and sexuality. As a reminder, these are two key elements of anti-gender rhetoric, according to which powerful elites manipulate the population and indoctrinate their children to serve less-than-honourable ends, and gender difference is based on a natural order deemed both binary and unchanging. Added to this is a populist discourse defending democracy, according to which the aim is to represent a people whose voice has been confiscated by the powerful and influential minorities, in this case the various governments, parliaments and associations that defend EVRAS.

³⁶ <https://www.dhnet.be/regions/bruxelles/2023/09/07/quelques-centaines-de-personnes-manifestent-a-bruxelles-contre-levras-AY5BLOAR5JGS5EX6BAN2TOXDFQ/?fbclid=IwAR2t4Z1D060v9Hgf-AU3khgr0AgAqqDZjImbUNoz3dpuYyFlrr6FPTOUR6w;>
<https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/enseignement/2023/09/07/bruxelles-quelques-centaines-de-personnes-manifestent-contre-levras-TRNE3CGPVNDVBL5THZO33O4LIA/>

³⁷ However, links with anti-vax movements are not a feature of anti-gender campaigns, and certain key players such as the Catholic hierarchy and the Polish and Hungarian governments of the time supported vaccination and recognised the seriousness of the pandemic.

Mobilisations within Muslim communities are more surprising and harder to understand. Indeed, despite a latent social conservatism that could justify mobilisations (Torrekens & Adam, 2015), these religious groups are rarely involved in anti-gender campaigns. To date, only few examples have been documented in Europe, mainly in France and the UK. For example, in 2013 in France, Farida Belghoul launched a day of withdrawal from school to protest against the ABCD de l'égalité, a gender education programme that the Minister for Women's Rights, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, wanted to introduce. This initiative called on parents to take their children out of school for one day a month to protest against the programme. The first day took place in January 2014 and was met with some success in Muslim communities, leading to an absenteeism rate of 30% in some schools, according to the press (Khemilat, 2018; Massei, 2017). Faced with this opposition, the contested government programme was not rolled out across the country. The other example refers to a mobilisation against inclusive LGBTQI+ school programmes by Muslim families in Birmingham in 2019. For more than eight weeks, these families protested outside the gates of the institution and withdrew their children from the school in question³⁸. These demonstrations were eventually banned by the British courts at the request of the City of Birmingham³⁹. While these demonstrations testify to the appearance of new actors, it is important to point out the links with more traditional anti-gender groups and their discreet involvement in these mobilisations. While Farida Belghoul was known as an anti-racist activist, she had gradually drawn closer to the far right, in particular Alain Soral and Civitas, and launched the day of withdrawal from school in the wake of La Manif pour Tous. In this respect, it was interesting to see Civitas leader Alain Escada reappear at the Brussels demonstration on 17 September 2023. Similarly, some British media have pointed out that conservative Christian actors were the main beneficiaries of the Birmingham mobilisations⁴⁰.

In Belgium, in addition to a better understanding of the massive circulation of anti-EVRAS content on social media, two elements merit further research. On the one hand, there are links between certain Muslim actors and anti-vaccine circles. However, these are poorly documented, even though they likely facilitated activist convergence against EVRAS. Similarly, little is known to date about the impact of anti-vaccine discourse in Belgium's conservative Catholic communities. On the other hand, foreign interference in Muslim mobilisations against EVRAS cannot be ruled out, particularly on the part of Turkey. Indeed, the press release issued by several Muslim organisations on 6 September 2023 is far from bringing together all the trends of this community⁴¹. Muslims of Moroccan origin are conspicuously absent, and those with links to Turkey predominate, starting with the Belgian representation of Diyanet,

³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/may/26/birmingham-anderton-park-primary-muslim-protests-lgbt-teaching-rights>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-48351401>

³⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/may/31/high-court-bans-birmingham-school-protests-against-lgbt-lessons>

⁴⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/uk-christian-conservatives-join-disastrous-global-backlash-against-sex-education/>

⁴¹ These include Diyanet of Belgium, the Islamic Federation of Belgium, the Federation of Albanian Mosques of Belgium, the Associations of African Mosques of Belgium, the Union of Mosques of Liège, the Bosnian Islamic Community of Belgium and the Turkish Islamic Cultural Associations Ehli-Beyt. <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/enseignement/2023/09/06/des-institutions-islamiques-de-belgique-sopposent-aux-cours-deducation-sexuelle-EKHJTJTDXVBQ3OL2ANQKR56KGY/>

the Turkish administration for religious affairs⁴². Without asserting that general instructions would have been given to Ankara to manage this kind of situation, the institutional links between these actors and the Turkish government are important (Torrekens, 2024) and it is clear that this stance is consistent with the positions of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, whether in relation to the Istanbul Convention or the increased fight against the visibility and recognition of LGBTQI+ people (Adak, 2021; Bodur Ün and Arikan, 2022; Büyükgöze, 2023).

Finally, we can't conclude this section without mentioning the acts of political violence perpetrated in Wallonia. A total of eight schools were targeted: six were set on fire in the Charleroi region and two were vandalised in Liège. In several cases, "No EVRAS" tags were found on the premises. Without presuming the conclusions of the investigation (which have not been made public)⁴³, it should be stressed that these events, widely reported in the international press, are new to anti-gender mobilisations, in that schools have never before been targeted in this way. If confirmed, the use of political violence would therefore constitute an international first, and would testify to a transformation in the repertoire of action of anti-gender mobilisations.

1.4. Euthanasia

In the international anti-gender panorama, Belgium stands out for the centrality of the euthanasia issue. This is all the more surprising given that, at first glance, it's not a question that is related to gender or sexuality, but there are two factors that help us to understand this specific characteristic.

On the one hand, as recalled several times in this report, the timing of ethical reforms in Belgium has had a direct impact on anti-gender mobilisations in the country, insofar as many of these reforms were adopted in the early 2000s, i.e. before the explosion of anti-gender campaigns. Furthermore, unlike in countries such as Spain, France or Italy, anti-gender operators have not been able to count on sufficiently influential representatives in the country, particularly within the Catholic Church. In addition, Mgr Léonard, whose appointment could have changed the balance, only became Archbishop of Malines-Brussels in 2010. This time lag deprived anti-gender activists of targets against which to launch their campaigns, and it's for this reason in particular that euthanasia has become a prime target. Although the decriminalisation of euthanasia was approved in 2002, the subject has never left the political agenda, and its conditions of application have been extended to minors, with no age limit. The debates surrounding a revision of the 2002 law have provided an opportunity for mobilisation.

On the other hand, for the Church's social doctrine, this issue is not entirely unrelated to the question of gender and sexuality. Indeed, abortion and euthanasia are inextricably linked through the opposition between the "culture of death", of which abortion and euthanasia are

⁴² A brief Google search on the key words "Diyanet EVRAS" shows that this press release has been widely echoed on Turkish-language sites.

⁴³ In view of the seriousness of these acts, the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior intervened in a case that did not a priori concern the federal level, and announced the involvement of the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) and the drafting of seven analysts trained by the Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium. The results of this research have not been made public.

two of the main incarnations, and the "culture of life" defended by the Catholic Church. This opposition, which traces an anthropological conflict in contemporary societies, was proposed by Pope John Paul II in the early 1990s and theorised in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). It came shortly before the invention of the "gender ideology" discourse (Vaggione, 2012, 2021). While the culture of life discourse has remained largely confined to the Catholic world, it has been actively promoted by the Church hierarchy and continues to leave its mark on organisations inspired by Catholic social doctrine. For these organisations, as for the Vatican, if you fight against abortion, it is therefore logical to also fight euthanasia, as these issues are two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, these questions both raise the issue of the naturalness of the human body and the limits that this implies.

Since the adoption of the 2002 law, the issue of euthanasia has never left the public eye, as shown by the number of articles and open letters published in the press as well as the number of legislative proposals submitted during each parliamentary term. As in the case of abortion, opponents are no longer aiming to abolish the 2002 law as such, but, following an argumentative logic characteristic of reactionary discourse (Hirschman, 1991), insist on lax control and failure to comply with the conditions laid down by law. They are particularly interested in two issues: incurable psychological disorders and access for minors. For these activists, it's a question of denouncing drifts and adverse effects, a "slippery slope", "a blurring of the norm" or "trivialisation", i.e. developments that don't respect the spirit of the 2002 law (Hamarat & Lebeer, 2019). There has also been a transformation in the repertoire of action. In addition to the usual advocacy techniques and mobilisation in the public and political arena, we are now producing expert assessments, via shadow reports and data on the limits and alleged drifts of current legislation, as well as developing legal strategies before national courts (Court of Assizes, Constitutional Court) and international courts (European Court of Human Rights).

Opponents of euthanasia legislation today include several types of actors. On the one hand, there are those regularly seen in anti-gender mobilisations, who appear as such in other parts of this report. These opponents include some of the fringes of Catholic civil society and right-wing intellectuals. On the other hand, philosophers, ethicists and health professionals (doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, etc.), especially in Flanders, are specifically involved in a targeted questioning of the dangers of Belgian legislation. Faithful to the practices of their profession, they contribute to the production of expert assessments, sometimes published in prestigious publishing houses, and speak out in the name of their scientific competence. Many stress the realities on the ground and the distress of caregivers faced with pressure from society, families and patients. They also highlight the importance of the right to conscientious objection.

1.5. Trans questions

Belgium has advanced trans rights in two stages (Meier & Motmans, 2020; Tomsej & Paternotte, 2021). The first law on transsexuality was passed in 2007. It makes it easier to change a person's first name and sex designation in the civil status register, but these changes are subject to medical treatment (hormonal treatment for first name changes and surgery for sex designation changes) and the production of a medical opinion. It also requires that a person is no longer "able to conceive children in the previous sex". These conditions were

challenged as soon as they were adopted, and the idea that psychiatrisation and sterilisation are contrary to human rights eventually took hold. In 2017, the legislature abolished these conditions through the adoption of a new law, which recognises the principle of self-determination for transgender people. Changes of first name and sex designation are now only subject to a declaration by the person concerned. These conditions are also extended to minors aged 16 and over, subject to certification by a paediatric psychiatrist and parental consent, and first names can be changed from the age of 12. Lastly, this law improves recognition of parentage. On the other hand, it imposes the finality of a change in civil status, which can therefore only occur once. This requirement has been challenged by several associations as it is deemed discriminatory against gender-fluid people. These organisations also called for alternatives to the civil registration system to meet the needs of non-binary people. In a 2019 ruling, the Constitutional Court ruled in their favour, calling on the legislature to change the law to recognise gender-fluid people (by abolishing the principle of finality) and those who define themselves as non-binary (by introducing alternatives to male-female binarity). In 2020, the De Croo government committed to bringing the law into line with the Constitutional Court ruling, and a draft law ending the finality requirement was passed in 2023. On the other hand, progress on the changes to the civil registration system (or the abolition of the sex designation) has been slower, partly due to blockages within the federal majority.

The 2007 and 2017 laws were adopted by a very large majority, and the 2017 text received greater parliamentary support than the 2007 text, despite being carried by a centre-right government (N-VA/MR/CD&V/Open VLD) (117 votes in favour instead of 91). All the evidence suggests that recognition of trans people's rights is now the subject of a significant and growing political consensus. However, recent debates at political level and in society suggest that this impression needs to be qualified. Indeed, while debates about the 2017 law were accompanied by some criticism, this was contained and had no impact at the political level. Since the announcement of the De Croo government in 2020, however, there has been an increasing number of attitudes that are critical of trans demands. These statements, designed to raise doubts in public opinion and put pressure on political players, have prevented some of the legislative reforms announced.

However, taking a backlash mentality (Paternotte, 2021; 2023), it would be a mistake to analyse these attacks as direct responses to the proposals under debate in Belgium, and it is important to place them in a new international context, in which, while they had long escaped the radar of anti-gender actors, trans issues are increasingly being targeted (Tudor, 2021; Bassi & Lafleur, 2022; Franklin 2022; Cabral Grinspan, Eloit, Paternotte & Verloo, 2023). Launched in the United States and Great Britain, this offensive is now very quickly spreading throughout Europe and the Americas, resulting in an increasingly hostile context for trans people and unprecedented legislative retreats. Whereas many of these issues had not previously given rise to much conflict, they are now suddenly becoming insurmountable obstacles, and taking centre stage in the political debate. Trans issues thus act as a catalyst. They are the perfect embodiment of the "gender ideology" discourse, while at the same time providing bridges to other struggles, first and foremost the fight against wokism. They are also reviving some old but unresolved debates within feminism, which partly intersect with those on surrogacy, Islam or prostitution, and can thus divide progressive players. Finally, they make it possible to launch

or relaunch anti-gender campaigns where necessary, while broadening the discursive register and coalitions of actors (Corrêa, House and Paternotte, 2023).

In this case, the timing of legislative reforms in Belgium is not out of step with the international agenda, and the "repair" of the 2017 trans law offers an issue around which groups can mobilise. To this end, a varied group of players drew inspiration from what was being done elsewhere, importing and translating these ideas, with a clear international contagion effect, particularly in the United States, Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Many of these players are also involved in transnational dynamics and exchanges. For this reason, the arguments put forward are often not constructed in direct response to legislative debates, but correspond to what is circulating on the international stage. The aim is less to challenge the terms of the proposed reforms than to undermine more broadly the legitimacy of trans demands. While some of the interventions quoted the risks of a potential disappearance of the difference between the sexes in the civil status register, and recalled the importance of symbolic markers, the majority of them focused on two main themes: the transition of minors, with the underlying idea of an explosion in requests, and detransitions, a theme that highlighted the dangers of interventions that are carried out too quickly and the regrets expressed later by those who had begun a hasty transition. In addition to these two issues, there is also the question of women's rights, insofar as, according to these discourses, trans claims would help certain men to seize rights hard won by women, deny the truths of biology and ultimately contribute to diluting feminine specificities, or even the concept of woman itself. Risks for women are posed at different levels, whether in politics (parity), sport or the existence of single-sex spaces as diverse as toilets and prisons.

As in other countries, these anti-trans campaigns are driven by a more varied pattern of players, which can be categorised into five groups. These groups share many arguments and are not mutually exclusive, even if they don't necessarily collaborate with each other. Firstly, Catholic and conservative actors who are also mobilised on other issues see trans questions as a way of enriching and updating their list of targets for attacking "gender theory". Their role, however, is limited. Secondly, following modalities of action common in anti-gender activism in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), we can observe the creation of groups of concerned parents or citizens. We're also seeing the emergence of websites aimed at helping "parents in distress", offering alternatives to medical transition for minors and challenging the discourse deemed hegemonic by gender clinics. These sites help disseminate information from abroad, translating it into English, French and Dutch. Thirdly, a number of healthcare professionals have become key players in the anti-trans debate. They take part in transnational exchanges and networks, and can be divided into two groups: doctors claiming to practice evidence-based medicine who are concerned about the use of puberty blockers among trans minors, and psychologists who are more broadly opposed to "trans ideology". This is particularly true of the Observatoire de la petite sirène, most of whose work has focused on gender dysphoria. This organisation has a Belgian section that brings together a number of players who have become well known among the general public since the debates on paedophilia and same-sex parenting. Fourthly, a number of feminists have joined the ranks of the opposition, a phenomenon directly linked to what is happening abroad (Cabral, Grinspan, Eloit, Paternotte & Verloo, 2023). These tensions, which rarely appear in the public arena, were notably expressed during the march against violence against women organised in Brussels on 28 November 2021, during which the two allied blocs "Bloc VNR" and "Bloc

lesbien" – the anarchy-feminists, choosing a mix of people without cis men but open to trans women and non-binary people – were attacked by small groups of feminists and/or lesbians who disagreed with this openness and otherwise opposing the defence of sex workers⁴⁴. On both sides of the language border, this feminist anti-trans discourse is also carried by certain leading figures who often enjoy privileged access to the media. Finally, on both sides of the linguistic divide, we can observe the involvement of actors claiming to be committed to secularism, which they present as threatened by certain trans demands. The last three types of actor often share a positivist conception of science, which can be connected to a vision presented as "universalist". More broadly, these players often converge in a shared opposition to "wokism" (Deleixhe and Paternotte, 2024).

Unlike in 2017, these mobilisations are increasingly reflected at the political level. While for a long time the Flemish far right was the main political representative for anti-trans demands (Van Grieken, 2017, p. 151-152), these are now also being carried by certain right-wing parties (Jacobs, 2021), as well as the new Chez Nous party.

1.6. Transhumanism

Transhumanism appears to be an emerging and therefore relatively undefined topic within the anti-gender movements, which, while it constitutes a subject for reflection, has not yet translated into concrete mobilisations. This is a thought movement that took root in the 20th century among groups of intellectuals from a wide range of disciplines (biologists, engineers, philosophers, political scientists). At the end of the 1980s, this movement took shape under the leadership of philosopher Max More, and was enshrined by the creation of the World Transhumanist Association (WTA) in 1998. The transhumanist movement is defined as follows:

The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate ageing and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities⁴⁵.

To sum up, the transhumanist movement is concerned with the effects of technology on bodies, ecosystems, identities and the representation of humanity more generally. It addresses subjects as vast as space colonisation, genetic manipulation, gender identities and speciesism. However, despite the structured existence of this movement, it is difficult to summarise its philosophy, so much so that "the transhumanist movement is a composite galaxy, criss-crossed by sometimes irreconcilable sensibilities, an uncoordinated nebula whose players have very diverse backgrounds and aims" (Damour, Deprez and Romele, 2020, p. 12). For this reason, transhumanism interests feminists, Catholics and secularists alike (Susanne, 2016).

Despite the diversity of approaches, this movement can be synthesised into two main currents that reflect a unique relationship with the world "between bioconservative discourses that sanctify human nature and technoliberal positions that want to regulate an inevitable

⁴⁴ <https://www.rtb.be/article/altercations-lors-dune-marche-feministe-pour-la-premiere-fois-je-n-ai-pas-pu-finir-une-manifestation-10891554>

⁴⁵ <https://www.humanityplus.org/transhumanism>

technological revolution" (Le Dévédec and Guis, 2013, p. 23). On the one hand, "technoliberals" would advocate a form of liberalism with regard to technologies; on the other, "bioconservatives" would reject any use other than one that is therapeutic or "restoring an individual's health or repairing a disability". Faced with the idea of an "augmented human", philosophers and political specialists are calling for the "principle of preservation that ecology applies to the environment" (Le Dévédec, 2021).

This debate between "bioconservatives" and "technoliberals" reveals the interest of these issues for anti-gender movements, particularly for groups dealing with bioethics. The issue of technology and its use on the human body raises questions of identity, the limits of the body and the definition of the "human person". By bringing transhumanism to the fore as an issue to be addressed and questioned, anti-gender actors can also call into question several supposed consequences of the advent of a transhumanist society that echo the positions they defend on issues such as abortion, assisted conception, surrogacy or trans issues.

In other words, the idea of an "augmented human", modified through technical and scientific progress, leads to intervention in the course of life itself, insofar as "for these thinkers, human enhancement technologies would offer the opportunity to transcend our current biological limits and move from submissive to freely chosen evolution" (Le Dévédec and Guis, 2013, p. 4). Yet the question of limits is a key issue for many anti-gender actors, whether these limits are anthropological or biological. Moreover, the transhumanist project seeks to overcome dichotomous boundaries, particularly those between nature and culture. But the anti-gender movement does not agree with the reshaping of these borders, basing its rhetoric on the naturalness of bodies and the naturalisation of social relations (mainly gender relations).

The work of philosopher and feminist Donna Haraway is often mobilised to construct this critique. Indeed, in her now classic *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the 80s* (Haraway, 1985), the cyborg, a hybrid body both organic and mechanical, personifies the desire to modify the boundaries between human and machine. This figure is used to rethink binarity and the boundaries of gender and, more generally, dualisms beyond gender: nature/culture, human/animal, human/machine, etc. She suggests forming groups according to affinities rather than biological or social characteristics. As a consequence of this questioning of "natural" boundaries, transhumanism would see technological change as "an opportunity for human beings to become the architects of their own evolution" (Le Dévédec and Guis, 2013, p. 2), which constitutes an "attack on 'human nature'" for "bioconservatives" (Le Dévédec and Guis, 2013, p. 2). Yet anti-gender actors have long criticised the idea of self-determination, focusing above all on trans-identified people.

Through these examples, we can see the bridges between a rejection of transhumanism and a certain Catholic thinking (Damour, 2017, p. 53). As researcher Carmen Gordon Nogales analyses, "bioconservatives" of "Catholic tradition, opposed to transhumanism" see this philosophical movement as an ideology, like feminism, "in the service of one and the same anthropological project: the end of humanism" (2018). These considerations allow us to envisage the way in which this philosophical and political concept could be mobilised. Could, because this subject is not yet an object of mobilisation in the same way as abortion or euthanasia, but a subject of discussion and reflection within certain anti-gender groups, i.e. above all a category to be mobilised. As a reminder, anti-gender actors are not opposed in

principle to all technological progress, and believe that technology can also serve their positions. For example, increasingly powerful medical imaging is helping to support their arguments on the status of the foetus. In this context, the mobilisation of transhumanism actually depends on how it is used, according to the values associated with it. Behind these calls for caution in technological matters lie anthropological concerns, and transhumanism offers an opportunity to consider humanity, its limits and those of its environment.

1.7. Anti-woke movement

In 2023, several leading political players expressed concern about the risks of wokism for democracy, our values, our culture and our heritage. This topic has been the subject of a number of high-profile publications and, from the right to the far right, opinions seem to agree in describing the woke movement as dominant, dangerous and oppressive (Deleixhe and Paternotte, 2024). Relevant to this report, these discourses often put forward links between wokism, feminism, LGBTQI+ activism, gender studies or trans issues, and as such are part of anti-gender mobilisations. Historically, however, the latter predates the anti-woke movement, and does not share the same historical and ideological roots. Beyond the similarities, these are two distinct phenomena, and it is important to understand the links between them, and how they mutually reinforce each other.

Firstly, the anti-woke movement can be seen as a discourse whose aim is to denounce both the politicisation of certain issues, described as not previously receiving public and political attention, and the expansion of certain progressive mobilisations and policies linked to themes such as gender, racism or ecology. Furthermore, wokist discourse – of which cancel culture is said to be one of the foundations – is often portrayed as an attack on human rights and their universalism. In particular, wokism undermines freedom of expression and poses a direct threat to the liberal and democratic character of contemporary democratic societies.

Beyond a purely political controversy, the anti-woke movement takes on a range of institutions in which "the left" is described as hegemonic, such as the media, schools, multinational corporations or universities, which echoes both populist and anti-gender discourses (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Universities are a particular target: criticised for their elitist, homogeneous social groups, they are said to be under the yoke of wokists, who, by virtue of their totalitarian tendencies, would undermine academic freedom and freedom of expression. This danger is of concern to these political players, and a number of teachers' platforms have also been set up to avert this threat within Flemish academic institutions. Finally, the anti-woke movement has an epistemological component (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021), which must be viewed in light of culture warfare. It does not simply criticise existing knowledge structures, but seeks to promote new knowledge and return to certain scientific postures, particularly positivist ones.

As several works have shown (Dupuis-Déri, 2022; Mahoudeau, 2022; Deleixhe and Paternotte, 2024), the anti-woke movement reflects an internationalisation of discursive frameworks originating from the US right, which are taken up and propagated by national actors, in particular European ones. However, this importation of foreign discourses is not a case of simply copying and pasting, but must be read as a reappropriation of these discourses, giving them a local slant. In addition, the equivalence of wokism with the older expressions of "cultural Marxism", "political correctness" or "Islam-Leftism" illustrates the multiplicity of

geographical sources and symbolises the interconnections between Belgian, French, Dutch, British and US discourses. It also recalls the political and ideological heritage of which the anti-woke movement is a part. Indeed, this discourse is part of a longer history of "cultural warfare", which is in part different from that of anti-gender discourses. The anti-woke movement is therefore not a totally new phenomenon, but the way it is presented has changed and, certainly in Belgium, its success exceeds that of earlier rhetorical strategies. For this reason, it contributes to transforming the balance of power and reconfiguring the terms of the debate, two developments that are fundamental to understanding the recent evolution of anti-gender campaigns in our country.

Because of its holistic dimension and insofar as it concerns women's rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI+ people, among others, the anti-woke movement strongly resembles contemporary anti-gender discourses (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). However, the anti-woke movement is unique in that it extends beyond gender and sexuality. Indeed, a wider range of issues are grouped under this term and anti-wokism is therefore not limited to anti-gender discourses, but, by echoing them, helps to reinforce them. Moreover, the anti-woke movement has the effect of conferring an appearance of uniformity on a series of progressive claims that are not in reality so coherent or articulated. From a discursive point of view, wokism can therefore be seen as an empty signifier that establishes a previously non-existent link between a series of heterogeneous social phenomena. This enables the actors who mobilise it to give the impression that wokism is a concerted political action, even though the so-called wokist actors do not necessarily share the same political profiles or objectives.

While this type of mechanism had already been described to understand the role of gender in anti-gender discourses (Corrêa, House & Paternotte, 2023), the operation is taking place here on a different scale. By reconfiguring the public debate, the anti-woke movement not only revives an anti-gender activism that had met with particularly limited success in our country, but also enables actors not previously subscribing to an anti-gender mindset to embrace this rhetoric. The anti-woke movement has thus enabled anti-gender discourse in Belgium, long confined to an inconspicuous minority, to spread, and allowed actors with no a priori affinity with the anti-gender register to mobilise it. This discourse has thus left the confines of certain intellectual and associative circles, and reached the centre of the political arena. This dynamic has accelerated all the more since, while the anti-woke discourse was once the preserve of minority right-wing and far-right political players, it is now the subject of statements by leading political figures, and is at the heart of political programmes and strategies.

However, the anti-woke movement does not have the same political significance for these different players. Indeed, while the different variants of this discourse share common features (such as the comparison of wokism to totalitarianism, or the criticism of a dichotomous reading of society between persecutors and victims), the players in the political game arrange them differently and in ways that make them a structuring element of their discourse or make sporadic allusions to it. This helps us to understand certain connections between anti-wokist discourse and the defence of secularism, the Enlightenment and liberal values, particularly in the context of opposition to Islam. That said, there is sometimes a fine line between defending secularism or denouncing religious fundamentalism and racist and Islamophobic comments, as shown by the appropriation of such arguments by extreme right-wing actors. Moreover, the anti-woke movement can be part of different political strategies. For some, it is a way of

politicising issues that were previously the subject of political consensus, or of repackaging old controversies, including on gender issues, while for others, it is above all a weapon used to compete with a far-right political offering that is increasingly attractive to voters, while at the same time setting themselves apart from more progressive rivals. Lastly, the adoption and (re)production of anti-wokist discourses can result from a desire to profile oneself within a political party in order to gain visibility or propose an alternative political line.

2. Changing players: from Catholic activism to competing right-wing parties

Historically, anti-gender campaigns originated in the Catholic Church, which constructed the anti-gender discourse as an interpretive framework and a strategy of opposition to the achievements of the UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing. Our country is no exception to this history, and the first anti-gender mobilisations developed within the conservative fringes of Belgian Catholicism. However, these were met with limited success and have only recently taken off in Belgium, following the massive investment in these issues by right-wing and far-right players. As a result, the focus of these campaigns has shifted from a religious commitment to that of a more political nature

2.1. Catholic hierarchy and civil society

Unlike in many European and Latin American countries, the Belgian Catholic Church has not embraced anti-gender campaigns. This is one of the reasons for the late development of these mobilisations. While some of the fringes of Belgian Catholic civil society became involved in this struggle very early on, the ecclesiastical hierarchy deliberately kept to the sidelines, with the exception of the publication of rare statements and press releases on certain ethical issues. This position stems from the stance adopted by Cardinal Danneels (Mettepenningen & Schelkens, 2015), which has been maintained by his successors, except for Mgr Léonard. At this stage, it's still too early to know what line the new Primate of Belgium, Mgr Terlinden, will take, but it is important to remember that he was appointed Vicar General of the Diocese of Malines-Brussels from 2021 to 2023 before being chosen by the Pope to take over the reins of the Belgian Church.

Mgr Léonard's tenure as head of the Belgian Church (2010-2015) could have led to a change in approach. The clergyman was in fact known for his conservative stances (Arcq & Sägeser, 2011) and his appointment was the result of a strategic choice aimed at bringing the Belgian Church closer to the Vatican positions. In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, a strategic body for the conservative reconquest then envisaged in Rome. During his tenure, André-Joseph Léonard unsurprisingly took part in the 2011 March for Life, a year after the marches resumed in Belgium. He has also taken many stances, from the pulpit, in the media and in his writings, whether on the subject of homosexuality, abortion or euthanasia.

However, this attempt at a conservative recovery for the Belgian Church did not work. The timing was not right, since most of the ethical reforms had already been adopted before Mgr Léonard took office, and his time as Archbishop of Malines-Brussels leaves behind the memory of a time lag between the evolution of society and a primate whose positions are incomprehensible to the majority of public opinion. That said, this mandate has also strengthened the presence and space of certain conservative fringes, particularly among new

communities, which are key players in anti-gender mobilisations in many countries. Retired in the south of France, Mgr Léonard remains critical of the ethical reforms adopted in Belgium and is still an inspiration to these groups, as he is to the conservative fringes of French Catholicism.

Today, the situation within the Belgian Catholic Church is extremely mixed. The limited involvement of Belgium's bishops in a reactionary approach to ethical issues has led to openings at the highest level, particularly on the subject of homosexuality. The Bishop of Antwerp, Mgr Bonny, has increased his number of progressive stances in relation to the Church's own positions. Just before the 2015 Synod on the Family, this bishop sent a letter to the Vatican in which he advocated a different approach to euthanasia, in vitro fertilisation or divorce (Bonny, 2014). In 2016, Mgr Bonny called for the blessing of homosexual unions in the book *Please? Thank you! Sorry...* (Bonny, Burggraeve & Van Alst, 2016) and, in 2021, publicly criticised a decision by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, according to which representatives of the Catholic Church may not bless homosexual unions. In addition, in 2022, Flemish bishops announced a pastoral programme intended for homosexual people, with the creation of a "Homosexuality and Faith" meeting point and the introduction of a blessing framework for same-sex unions⁴⁶. This decision was decried by anti-gender Catholic circles in many countries, who viewed Mgr Bonny and the Flemish bishops as the thorn in their side, as they did with the German Church, with which the Antwerp prelate maintains close links. Despite conservative pressure, the bishops in the north of the country have not been condemned by the Vatican and even enjoy relative support from their hierarchy⁴⁷.

In Wallonia, the Bishopric of Liège has also made gestures of openness. In 2015, the *Evangile et Vie* vicariate organised a morning entitled "Homosexualité. Osez en parler..." (Homosexuality. Dare to talk about it...) with the collaboration of several associations (Fondation Ihsane Jarfi, Communauté du Christ Libérateur, Sida Sol). In 2021, the diocese produced a brochure on welcoming homosexual people⁴⁸, which Mgr Delville presented to Pope Francis in July of that year. In 2022, a photography exhibition on families in the cathedral cloister included portraits of families with same-sex parents. When these were vandalised, the diocesan services intervened to publicly condemn such acts, call for tolerance and apologise to the two families in question⁴⁹.

However, it is important to note that many anti-gender activists in Belgium claim to be of Catholic heritage and/or are committed to the Church. In addition, some parishes and communities are known for their commitment to conservative causes. Finally, it is striking to observe, without prejudging the policies and positions of their institutions, that the majority of the academics supporting anti-gender campaigns are attached to Catholic universities. So, the Catholic world is still a breeding ground for anti-gender mobilisation, even if these players generally have a complex, even strained relationship with their authorities.

⁴⁶ <https://www.cathobel.be/2022/09/leglise-flamande-cree-des-points-de-rencontre-homosexualite-et-foi/>

⁴⁷ The doctrinal declaration permitting the blessing of same-sex unions, published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in December 2023, thus appeared to be Rome's confirmation of the line taken by the Flemish bishops.

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2023/12/18/0901/01963.html#en>

⁴⁸ <https://www.cathobel.be/2021/12/accueil-des-demandes-de-personnes-homosexuelles-le-diocese-de-liege-edite-une-brochure/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.cathobel.be/2022/10/homophobie-a-liege-la-vive-condamnation-de-lepiscopat/>

Among religious orders, the case of Flemish priest and psychiatrist René Stockman, former Superior General of the congregation of the Brothers of Charity, should also be mentioned. Indeed, he is one of the few Belgian clergymen with a certain visibility, along with Mgr Léonard, to have written a notable text on the subject, entitled "Le genre, une aberration (dwaling) dangereuse" (Gender, a dangerous aberration) (Stockman, 2020)⁵⁰. This article, reminiscent of Vatican doxies, provoked an outcry in Flanders. It follows a much-publicised conflict in 2017 between the order's Belgian branch and its Roman hierarchy (and thus Superior Stockman). The former had in fact decided to authorise the use of euthanasia under certain conditions in psychiatric institutions under its responsibility, which goes against the official positions of the Catholic Church recalled at the same time in a book co-authored by the Superior General (Stockman, Calmeyn, Eneman, De Dijn, 2017). The Belgian branch was quickly called to order by the Vatican authorities, and in 2020 the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to prohibit psychiatric institutions run by the Belgian branch of the Brothers of Charity from presenting themselves as Catholic. Interestingly, although he remained Superior General until 2024, René Stockman was relieved of all his duties by Pope Francis in 2023.

Finally, we must not forget the presence, on the fringes of the Catholic Church, of the Priestly Society of Saint Pius X, from which the Civitas Institute emerged. Highly visible during the mobilisation against marriage for all in France, this group is known for its extremely conservative positions. While this group, which became a political party in 2016, carried out most of its action in France, its leader, Alain Escada, is Belgian and took part in the anti-EVRAS mobilisations of 2023. In the same year, the French government decided to dissolve the organisation's French branch following anti-Semitic remarks made at its summer school⁵¹.

2.2. The space of the right-wing parties

In their 2017 chapter, Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte (2017) tracked down the seeds of what could ultimately lead to the development of anti-gender campaigns in Belgium. At the time, these were mainly associated with conservative Catholicism, but the authors also explored their possible translation into the political sphere. Anti-gender discourse was at that point only marginally echoed by political parties, which were largely absent from anti-gender campaigns. Thus, in Flanders⁵², a bastion of political Catholicism, they identified, on the one hand, a Christian Democrat party reluctant to mobilise a decimated conservative electorate and having evolved on several ethical issues and, on the other, a far-right largely focused on pro-independence themes that preferred to approach questions of gender and sexuality from a homo- and femonationalist reading (Puar, 2007; Farris, 2017). The Flemish far right was also faced with a population that largely associates the Belgian Church with a form of Belgian paternalism, making it difficult to adopt a rhetoric with religious overtones.

It is undoubtedly at the political level that the situation has evolved the most in recent years. Indeed, while political parties have become major players in anti-gender mobilisations across Europe (Paternotte, 2023), this trend is particularly marked in Belgium, reflected in the

⁵⁰ See also Bonnewyn (2012), Timmermans (2012), Dijn (2015).

⁵¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/10/04/le-gouvernement-a-acte-la-dissolution-de-l-organisation-catholique-integrisme-civitas_6192387_3224.html

⁵² This chapter makes no mention of French-speaking political parties.

consequent changes within several right-wing parties in both parts of the country. While to a large extent Christian Democrat parties seem to be less affected by the anti-gender phenomenon, despite resistance to the extension of abortion rights and doubts about EVRAS (which tend to reflect traditional forms of moral conservatism), other right-wing parties have become increasingly interested in these issues. As a result, anti-gender ideas have become widespread in the discourse of far-right parties, as they have on the Flemish nationalist right and the French-speaking liberal right.

A brief search of political party platforms for the 2019 elections confirms this impression, indicating that anti-gender rhetoric was not then the subject of much programmatic investment. Vlaams Belang only mentioned the term "gender" once⁵³ to prioritise the value of an engineering degree over that in gender studies, and to promote a rationalisation of study funding based on the "social utility" and "quality" of the studies on offer. For their part, the N-VA and MR used the term in a positive way, to support their desire to combat sexual and domestic violence, genital mutilation and the rights of intersex people⁵⁴.

The political dissemination of anti-gender discourse is therefore an extremely recent phenomenon, and the year 2022-2023 can be seen as a turning point, which came about thanks to the debates on wokism. These opened up an unprecedented sequence of media and political events, which made a major contribution to the spread of anti-gender ideas in Belgium. It is possible to pose two hypotheses regarding the emergence and acceleration of these political initiatives. Firstly, there is a clear contagion effect between the far right and fringes of the traditional right (Brown, Mondon & Winter, 2021 ; Moffitt, 2022). Secondly, we are also witnessing the growing effects of the spread and import of discourses, strategies and controversies that often originate in France, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States (Maly, 2018).

Firstly, a contagion effect between different segments of the right, and particularly between the right and the far right (Cammaerts, 2018), seems to play a key role in the spread of anti-gender discourse in Belgium. These forms of contagion can be explained first and foremost by a system of communicating vessels, insofar as several right-wing parties share spaces for dialogue and socialisation. Flemish-speaking political elites often come from the same circles of students, frequent the same organisations, meet up at political debates and are often in contact with each other (this also applies to the political elites of the French-speaking right). In addition, there are a number of defectors between right-wing and far-right parties on both sides of the linguistic divide. These meeting points and movements contribute to an understanding of why the different anti-gender stances of right-wing parties are less and less explained by clear ideological distinctions, but rather by varying degrees of adoption of the same discourse, particularly in Flanders. So, rather than seeing the nationalist right and the far right as two closed spaces, it would be empirically more correct to see them as actors sharing the same political space (Mudde, 2010), with divergences, disputes, a certain hostility and even rejection, but also affinities and links, both ideological and personal.

Secondly, this phenomenon can also be explained by the increasing importation of discourses, controversies and strategies from abroad (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Nissen, 2022). Unsurprisingly, the influence of the Netherlands and France is clear, as much for reasons of

⁵³ Vlaams Belang (2019) *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁵⁴ N-VA (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 50.

cultural proximity (French discourse, for example, can be appropriated by French-speaking Belgians) as for the interweaving of international networks (several players on the Flemish far right are very close to their Dutch and French partners). There are, however, more distant influences, for example from Great Britain, the United States and, increasingly, Hungary. The debate on wokism, for example, is heavily influenced by discourse forged in the USA, while some transphobic discourse originates in the UK, and Hungary is increasingly establishing itself as a hub and source of financial provisions for these issues. On the other hand, while there are direct influences, French and Dutch players may themselves be influenced by what is happening in other countries, which would constitute a more indirect form of influence. Finally, it should be noted that Flemish players are regularly involved in international initiatives on these issues, as well as in the activities of their respective parliamentary groups in the European Parliament.

Clearly, the **far right** plays an important role in the spread of anti-gender discourse in Belgium. However, this influence is not felt equally on the two sides of the language border. Indeed, while Vlaams Belang has become one of the main Flemish political players, the Chez Nous party (Biard, 2023), founded in October 2021 following an internal Parti populaire revolt, remains electorally weak. Although supported by Vlaams Belang, Rassemblement National and Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid, and despite its growing presence on French-speaking campuses, the party's mobilisation capacity is currently limited, and it operates mainly via social media. In this context, it regularly denounces issues linked to gender and sexuality, such as the funding of this research⁵⁵. On the other hand, Vlaams Belang appears to be a central player in the dissemination of anti-gender discourse in Belgium. In 2017, Tom Van Grieken devoted a chapter to this subject in one of his books, entitled "Le genre : aucun problème, mais pourtant problématisé". There are three essential elements to discuss in order to understand the party's positioning.

Firstly, we need to examine the evolution of Vlaams Belang's discourse on gender and sexuality over the last twenty years, referring to the generational renewal within the party and the adoption of a femonationalist (Rabhari, 2020; Gustin, 2023) and homonationalist (Freud & Bosch, 2020) discourse. Indeed, Vlaams Belang has long been the political party most opposed to legislative initiatives aimed at extending the scope of rights for women (such as abortion) and LGBTQI+ people (such as opening up marriage to same-sex couples, or the adoption of children by members of these communities). However, Tom Van Grieken's arrival at the head of the party marked a significant generational renewal, whose influence is particularly felt in relation to these issues. The party is no longer calling for the repeal of same-sex marriage, and no longer explicitly questions the right to abortion, although it does oppose any extension of the legal twelve-week deadline⁵⁶. At the same time, Vlaams Belang has reoriented its discourse towards a femonationalist, and even more so, a homonationalist line, enabling it to serve its objectives in terms of immigration and the fight against Islam⁵⁷. This discourse aims to confine the problems of sexism and homophobia to Muslim populations in order to stigmatise them, for example by asserting that sexual violence is one of the consequences of migration policies. This shift enables Vlaams Belang to present itself as a

⁵⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=432684429030452&set=a.231863165779247>

⁵⁶ <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/nieuws/vlaams-belang-wil-belangenconflict-inroepen-rond-abortuskwestie>

⁵⁷ Some members of Vlaams Belang even went so far as to denounce [attacks on transgender people](#) on Twitter, pointing out the foreign origins of the attackers. https://twitter.com/FDW_VB/status/1525758673754243073

party championing the causes of women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights, while combining these new discursive emphases with its anti-migrant and anti-Muslim policies (Dhoest, 2021).

Secondly, as a result of the competitive dynamic within the Flemish right, Vlaams Belang has played a key role in spreading anti-gender rhetoric to other right-wing parties. This dynamic is particularly noticeable on gender issues, and more recently around wokism.

Thirdly, the far-right party has encouraged the importation of anti-gender rhetoric from the Netherlands, the UK and the USA. This occurred in part following the recruitment of Dries Van Langenhove and his election as parliamentarian in 2019 (Biard and Govaerts, 2023; Maly, 2019). Since at least 2020, Dries Van Langenhove has been regularly posting anti-gender and anti-trans videos on his personal YouTube channel⁵⁸, and his departure from the Federal Parliament at the start of 2023 has allowed him even more freedom over his speech and actions. As evidenced by his use of the term "gender ideology", Van Langenhove clearly mobilises an international anti-gender discourse and imports a number of foreign controversies, such as protests against the reading of stories by drag queens in the USA, France or Canada, and the fight against the LGBTQI+ flag in Spain. The style (documentaries, podcasts) and intellectual references reveal international inspirations, marked by a desire to leave politics behind and get involved in metapolitics, and illustrate the internationalisation of far-right discourse in Belgium.

Finally, far-right parties are not the only ones to produce and disseminate anti-gender rhetoric, and other **right-wing** parties are playing an increasing role in the development of these controversies, particularly since 2022. While electoral platforms do little or nothing to translate these controversies into concrete promises⁵⁹, the public discourse of several political leaders, even those at the highest level, contributes to the trivialisation of certain ideas in Belgium. By adopting this type of discourse, the French-speaking liberals are probably seeking to avoid an overtake on the right of the spectrum and the emergence of a far-right party in French-speaking Belgium. Its leaders also aim to bring a right-wing slant a public debate that is markedly centre-left, while consolidating its hegemony within the right. The landscape is very different in Flanders, where public discourse is clearly to the right, and left-wing voices often struggle to make themselves heard. For the nationalist right, the adoption of this type of discourse is part of an attempt to focus debate on questions of identity, sometimes deemed beneficial in an electoral context, and to compete with the far right. While this approach has so far struggled to gain ground on the French-speaking right, it is now being embraced by a wide range of political players in the north of the country.

⁵⁹ Particularly for the MR, which avoided using polemical expressions on these issues in its platforms for the 2024 elections.

Chapter 3: Brussels, a global capital for anti-gender organisations⁶⁰

It will come as no surprise to anyone that Brussels is the main capital of the European institutions. As such, the city has become a priority target for transnational anti-gender organisations, which have been active in the European institutions for approximately the past fifteen years, some of which have opened headquarters in Brussels or Strasbourg. However, as Joke Wiercx and Alison Woodward have already shown with regard to equality organisations (2004), there is little interaction between these international NGOs and Belgian associations, and their impact on the situation in Belgium is limited. This situation of mutual disconnection should be monitored, however, as these European developments are occasionally reflected on the Belgian scene, as these organisations have seen rapid growth in our country and involve Belgian players. This chapter starts by presenting the anti-gender landscape at European level, the ways in which these organisations operate and their influence at European level. It then goes on to examine the risks for Belgium, based on the example of the right to euthanasia and the role of ADF International and other anti-gender actors in the Tom Mortier case.

1. Overview of anti-gender organisations at European level

As previously indicated, anti-gender campaigns are characterised by an increased transnationalisation of conservative advocacy, and 2013 represents a turning point in the history of these mobilisations. This observation also applies to the European scene, where two events – the rejection of the Estrela Report and the One of Us European citizens' initiative – were a turning point that marked the development of a transnational infrastructure and the establishment of anti-gender NGOs in Brussels.

On the one hand, in 2013, the European Parliament rejected the so-called Estrela Report (named after the Portuguese MEP who advanced the case) on sexual and reproductive rights⁶¹. This text was intended to encourage Member States to improve their public policies in areas such as contraception, maternal health, abortion, sex education, youth autonomy and women's health, with the hope that the European Union would become a leader on these issues⁶². This negative vote dealt a crushing blow to progressive players and largely invalidated the teleological view that progress in European constructions inevitably entails advances in terms of sexual and reproductive rights (Mondo & Close, 2019; Peiro Trapero, 2021). It also offered signs of encouragement to anti-gender actors, who saw it as the first crowning achievement of their efforts.

On the other hand, around the same time, a European citizens' initiative launched in 2012, One of Us, obtained an impressive number of signatures. This initiative called for a ban on EU funding of activities involving the destruction of human embryos, particularly in the fields of

⁶⁰ This section is based on part of the analysis developed in Datta & Paternotte (2023).

⁶¹ In place of the Estrela report, the European Parliament adopted a 235-word resolution proposed by the European People's Party, which reiterated that sexual and reproductive rights fall within the competence of States.

⁶² Named after Croatian MEP Fred Matic, the Matic report on sexual and reproductive rights embodies an image opposite to that of the Estrela Report. Adopted by a large majority by the European Parliament in June 2021, it testifies to the anti-gender actors' lesser influence when compared to 2013, one that is increasingly confined to the far right.

research, development aid and health, and in the longer term aimed for better protection of human embryos. Supported by numerous national pro-life organisations, this initiative has evolved into the federation of the same name, and three other organisations were created in the space of a few months: the Agenda Europe network, CitizenGo and Ordo Iuris.

Today's European scene is characterised by a complex pattern of players who maintain close collaborative relationships, but can also find themselves, like progressive players, in a competitive situation within a limited field. There are several similarities in the way these groups operate and organise themselves (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024) and they are often based in Brussels and/or Strasbourg, although some prefer to act from the national level and only travel to Brussels or Strasbourg when circumstances require (Zacharenko, 2016, 2020). These actors can be grouped into four categories: European branches of US Christian Right organisations, European organisations created in the last fifteen years, organisations directly linked to religious institutions or movements, and initiatives of a political nature. To coordinate their actions, these groups have created various forums and meeting places, enabling them to interact with other types of actors (religious, political) as well as with actors from other regions of the world.

Table 1: The main anti-gender organisations at European level

European branches of US organisations	New European organisations	Organisations linked to religious institutions or movements	Political initiatives	International platforms
European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)	CitizenGo	Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)	Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)	Agenda Europe
Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADFI)	One of Us Federation	Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE)	<i>The European Conservative</i>	Political Network for Values (PNV)
World Youth Alliance (WYA)	Ordo Iuris/Tradition, Family, Property (TFP)/Federation Pro Europa Christiana	European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	New Direction - The Foundation for European Reform	World Congress of Families (WCF)
	Europe for the Family/La Manif Pour Tous		<i>The Brussels Signal</i>	Conservative Political Action Conference
	European Dignity Watch (EDW)			
	Christian Action Research Education (CARE)			

As part of the internationalisation of their activities (Datta, 2021; Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024), several US Christian Right organisations have opened branches in Europe. Three of them play

an important role at European level: the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)⁶³, Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADFI)⁶⁴ and the World Youth Alliance (WYA)⁶⁵. ECLJ and ADFI specialise in legal activism and strategic litigation. ECLJ is an offshoot of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), an organisation led by Jay Sekulow (also one of Donald Trump's lawyers) which has also opened branches in Moscow with the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice and in Nairobi with the East African Centre for Law and Justice. Led by legal expert Gregor Puppink, ECLJ is based in Strasbourg and active at the Council of Europe, the European Union and the United Nations in Geneva. At the forefront of abortion issues, it mobilised against the Estrela Report and served as legal referent for the One of Us European citizens' initiative (Mondo, 2018). In recent years, it has published several reports aimed at undermining the credibility of the European Court of Human Rights. Alliance Defending Freedom brings together legal experts and lawyers, and has served as the judicial arm of conservative activism for decades in the United States. Over the years, it has opened offices around the world under the name ADF International (ADFI). It has been active in Europe since 2014, with offices in Brussels, Geneva, London, Vienna and Strasbourg. Finally, the World Youth Alliance (WYA) presents itself as a youth organisation, with a strong interest in the issue of human dignity. Its positions are close to those of Catholic social doctrine, and the composition of its governing bodies also testifies to these ideological similarities. As such, the alliance has also been involved in anti-gender mobilisations. WYA has an office on every continent, and the European office is based in Brussels.

Alongside these organisations with their roots in the USA, numerous anti-gender organisations have appeared in Europe over the last fifteen years, many of them concentrating their activities at European level. Created in 2013, the CitizenGo association⁶⁶ is perhaps the best known. Founded in Madrid as a conservative online petitions platform, it has gradually evolved into a full-fledged advocacy organisation with fifteen branches in many European countries (Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, UK, etc.), as well as the USA, Latin America and Kenya. The composition of its governing bodies testifies to its central position in the anti-gender world and its close links with the World Congress of Families.

One of Us⁶⁷, the European Federation for Life and Human Dignity, was born out of the European citizens' initiative of the same name, spearheaded by conservative politicians such as Spain's Jaime Mayor Oreja (Partido Popular) and Italy's Carlo Casini (Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro). The Federation brings together anti-abortion associations across the continent. In 2019, it launched a cultural platform and observatory that units well-known individuals and organisations in anti-gender circles. It used the Saint-Pères church in Ixelles, located behind the European Parliament, as its headquarters to coordinate the initiative on a European scale, and is now based in Saint-Ghislain (Belgium).

Created in 2013, the Polish organisation Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (Ordo Iuris-OI)⁶⁸ is part of the transnational network of Brazilian origin Tradition, Family, Property (TFP) (Datta, 2020). In Poland, thanks to close ties with the former PiS-led government, this organisation

⁶³ <https://eclj.org/>

⁶⁴ <https://adfinternational.org/>

⁶⁵ <https://wya.net/>

⁶⁶ <https://www.citizenngo.org/en-gb>

⁶⁷ <https://oneofus.eu/>

⁶⁸ <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/>

inspired measures such as the 2016 draft law against abortion and anti-LGBT zones, and also opened a higher education institution, the Collegium Intermarium⁶⁹. After several frustrated attempts at local mobilisation, particularly by members of the Polish diaspora in the Solidarity Action Brussels collective, Ordo Iuris finally managed to open an office in the European capital and, via the TFP network, is now present in a dozen European countries. TFP also has a permanent representation in Brussels, run by the German Duke Paul von Oldenburg, under the name of Federation Pro Europa Christiana⁷⁰.

Finally, we should mention three organisations that appear to be less active today, or have left the European institutions. Europe for Family is an offshoot of La Manif pour Tous, whose main aim was to monitor the vote of French MEPs. For several years, European Dignity Watch operated as a European lobby in Brussels, organising an annual European Advocacy Academy to train a new generation of anti-gender activists. The organisation has long been led by Sofia Kuby, daughter of Gabriele Kuby, one of the authors who helped develop and spread the anti-gender discourse. Sofia Kuby has joined ADFI as director of Strategic Relations & Training. The British NGO CARE (Christian Action Research Education)⁷¹ has long had an office in Brussels, and has taken part in several anti-gender campaigns at EU and Council of Europe level. This Anglican-inspired organisation had links with other Protestant NGOs (notably in the USA), as well as with representatives of the Anglican Church in Brussels. It would appear that CARE has not been active in Brussels since Brexit.

The third category comprises organisations that are officially affiliated to a religious institution or movement, first and foremost the Roman Catholic Church. The key player at this level is the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)⁷². Under the regulations, this includes the Bishops' Conference of Belgium. By virtue of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which provides for "open, transparent and regular dialogue" with churches and religious, philosophical and non-denominational organisations, COMECE enjoys privileged relationships with the European institutions, and has at times been able to contribute to the advancement of anti-gender positions within the European Union. The organisation also houses the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE)⁷³, which brings together family associations inspired by the Church's social doctrine, and aims to promote family-friendly policies at European level. This organisation includes several figures and organisations known for their anti-gender activism in their own countries. These two Catholic organisations are joined by the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)⁷⁴, created in the early 2000s. Formed as a European political party, this organisation has historically been very close to the Dutch Reformed Church and the ChristenUnie and Staatkundige Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) parties. Over time, the ECPM has opened up to other Christian denominations, and is home to various minority movements of political Christianity.

Finally, it's worth noting the presence in Brussels of organisations of a more political nature, whose activities include anti-gender initiatives. The development of this phenomenon will

⁶⁹ <https://collegiumintermarium.org/en/home-english>

⁷⁰ <https://www.auxilium-christianorum.org/>

⁷¹ <https://care.org.uk/>

⁷² <https://www.comece.eu/>

⁷³ <https://www.fafce.org/>

⁷⁴ <https://www.ecpm.info/>

need to be monitored, but it is concurrent with the increased role of political players in these mobilisations, as presented in the previous chapter. At this stage, it would be pertinent to mention five initiatives and organisations, the first two of which are closely linked to the Hungarian government's policy of international visibility. In November 2022, the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)⁷⁵, a Hungarian higher education institution with close ties to the government in Budapest, opened an office in Brussels. The organisation not only welcomes students and researchers interested in European issues, but also functions as a think tank, organising numerous events on topical issues (including the family, LGBTQI rights and wokism) with the aim of influencing the European political process. Secondly, *The European Conservative*⁷⁶ publication, founded in the Netherlands in 2008 by the Center for European Renewal and now registered in Budapest, opened a Brussels-based office in February 2023. This media outlet is said to have received a total of 4.2 million euros in funding from the Hungarian government⁷⁷. In the same ideological sphere, the US project National Conservatism, linked to the Edmund Burke Foundation, organised a conference on the future of the nation-state in Europe in March 2022 in Brussels⁷⁸, as well as the high-profile April 2024 conference "Preserving the Nation-State in Europe"⁷⁹. In addition, the Brussels think tank New Direction - The Foundation for European Reform⁸⁰, a political foundation linked to the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR), regularly reflects anti-gender initiatives. Finally, in 2023, a new publication was born in Brussels to compete with titles such as *Politico* or *EU Observer: The Brussels Signal*⁸¹, whose editorial line is clearly right-wing.

2. International forums

These groups coordinate their action through various forums, which also enable them to meet other types of players, as well as players from other parts of the world. The three main international forums of the anti-gender movement are the World Congress of Families (WCF), Agenda Europe and the Political Network for Values (PNfV). These forums are in addition to the informal ties that result from shared membership of certain political or religious organisations, as well as family and personal ties. Indeed, it's not unusual for certain players to sit on several organisations, or for these organisations to bring together several members of the same family (spouse, children, etc.).

The most well-known forum is the World Congress of Families (WCF), created in 1997 by Russian and American civil society players (Stoeckl, 2020; Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024) and now run from the USA by the International Organization for the Family (IOF)⁸². In recent years, the WCF has focused on Europe, organising meetings in Georgia (2016), Hungary (2017), Moldova

⁷⁵ <https://brussels.mcc.hu/>

⁷⁶ <https://europeanconservative.com/>

⁷⁷ <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/tobb-mint-1-6-milliardba-kerult-a-magyar-adofizetoknek-egy-brusszeli-angol-nyelvu-jobboldali-hirportal/32507210.html?nocache=1&fbclid=IwAR10nv97JzAWE1SgurgXtBggnysnp5kV4UkEUCEjykbqRq0ddoMTd6z6QU>

⁷⁸ <https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-brussels-2022/> Conferences have also been held in Glen Cove (2016), London (2019), Washington (2019), Rome (2020), Orlando (2021), Miami (2022), London (2023) and Washington (2024).

⁷⁹ <https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-brussels-2/about/>

⁸⁰ <https://newdirection.online/>

⁸¹ <https://brusselssignal.eu/>

⁸² <https://www.profam.org/>

(2018) and Italy (2019), largely supported and financed by the public authorities of the countries in question. At the 2019 gathering in Verona (Italy), the WCF succeeded in bringing together the main European movements of the alternative and far right, as well as Russian figures, leaders of the US Christian Right and Catholic actors openly critical of the Vatican. However, the event received considerable negative media coverage, and mass demonstrations were organised against it (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In addition, geopolitical developments in 2022, with the Russian attack on Ukraine and subsequent international condemnation, forced WCF organisers to abandon their Russian partners and reorient themselves towards new horizons. For these reasons, the last event was held in Mexico in October 2022, bringing together dignitaries from the Christian Right in the USA, Mexico and other Latin American countries, with a notable absence of Russians as well as fewer Europeans.

The Agenda Europe network is organised in diametrically opposed ways. This is a vague, highly discreet network of over 300 organisations and individuals from more than 30 European countries closely linked to the Catholic hierarchy, which has been holding closed annual meetings since 2013. Agenda Europe involves transnational and national anti-gender NGOs, conservative academics and officials from European and national administrations, as well as a significant number of players from the US Christian Right. These actors are inspired by a shared manifesto entitled *Restoring the Natural Order: an Agenda for Europe*, and meetings reserved for Agenda Europe members only have developed and coordinated transnational strategies and launched over fifteen policy initiatives across Europe (Datta, 2018). This network appears to be much less active today.

The Political Network for Values (PNfV)⁸³ works to bring political players, such as parliamentarians and ministers, closer to pro-life and pro-family civil society. Focusing on Europe and the Americas (with increasing openness to Africa), this organisation holds regular strategy sessions, notably to restrict, prevent and ultimately ban abortion, and to curb the spread of same-sex marriage. As with One of Us, this association was founded by former Spanish minister Jaime Mayor Oreja and is currently led by Chilean far-right politician José Antonio Kast. The former president of the Republic of Hungary, Katalin Novák, headed the network from 2019 to 2022, while also serving as a minister in Viktor Orbán's government. The PNfV's various councils testify to the density of its networks and its links with key anti-gender organisations. Following meetings at the United Nations headquarters in New York (2014), the United States Congress in Washington (2018), the European Parliament in Brussels (2017, with the support of the European People's Party parliamentary group), the Congress of the Republic of Colombia in Bogotá (2019), the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest (2022), the network's latest meeting was held at the UN headquarters in New York in November 2023.

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)⁸⁴ is the biggest convention of the US conservative right since 1974. It has recently established itself as a new meeting place for anti-gender players, and is now carrying out part of its activities in Europe, more specifically in Hungary. The conference was held in Budapest in 2022, 2023 and 2024, under the patronage of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. CPAC-Budapest brought together leading figures from the US

⁸³ <https://politicalnetworkforvalues.org/en/>

⁸⁴ <https://www.cpachungary.com/en/>

right, both from the Christian Right and the pro-Trump Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, as well as key players from European far-right and anti-gender organisations. In 2023, several panels focused on wokism and demographics, entitled "Make Babies not War".

3. Modes of action

Over time, anti-gender actors have deployed four specific modes of action at European level: seeking formal recognition, advocacy and traditional lobbying campaigns, discrediting supranational institutions and infiltration.

Firstly, as new players on the European scene, these organisations have tried to establish their credibility, which entails official recognition by European institutions. To this end, the *Restoring the Natural Order* manifesto calls on Agenda Europe members to seek accreditation from international institutions (Datta, 2018), a call that has led several of these NGOs to join the European Parliament's Transparency register and seek official recognition from the UN or the Council of Europe. This approach has had mixed results: while some organizations have succeeded in establishing themselves as respectable representatives, others have been rejected or have been the subject of controversy in the media (Datta, 2021).

These players then became involved in the European decision-making process through traditional forms of advocacy and lobbying. They employ the same legal, advocacy and campaigning techniques as progressive actors and, apart from their values and political demands, they resemble the other organisations present on the European scene. Among these players, there is a sub-group specialising in judicial strategies: ADFI, ECLJ and Ordo Iuris (Yamin, Andion & Datta, 2018 ; Relano Pastor, 2021; Datta, 2020). Finally, some have succeeded in obtaining European funding (Datta, 2021).

However, these players are playing a double game with the European institutions (Mos, 2018). Indeed, while they deploy forms of advocacy within them, they also strive to discredit them, echoing the allegations of European elites that pepper their discourse (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Thus, after making pioneering use of a mechanism provided for under European law, the organisers of the One of Us European Citizens' Initiative explained the Commission's rejection of their application on the basis of the EU institutions' hostility to Christian interests and values. Similarly, the ECLJ has published several reports in recent years aimed at casting doubt on the legitimacy and impartiality of international institutions such as the UN (2021) and the European Court of Human Rights (2020 and 2023). This double game with regard to European institutions has led several researchers to question the nature of their involvement, and to wonder whether these actors should not rather be considered as *inimici curiae* when they engage in litigation (Relano Pastor, 2021), or as links in a "conservative non-civil society" (Ruzza, 2021).

Finally, these players have tried to infiltrate the European institutions and place allies within them in order to steer them towards positions closer to their objectives. They also supported the creation of new functions such as the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU (Datta, 2018). However, while the first person to hold this office and their brief successor are known for their proximity to anti-gender circles, its current occupant has no known links with these organisations.

4. A real institutional presence but limited impact to date

As indicated in the first chapter, anti-gender campaigns are no longer the sole preserve of religious or civil society actors, but are now being driven by mixed networks comprising a number of players from the political and administrative worlds. This phenomenon can also be seen at European level, where officials from European institutions and MEPs have played a leading role in certain mobilisations. While they haven't yet led to any major victories for anti-gender actors at European level, these links guarantee a solid presence for these campaigns on the European stage, within the three main institutions.

This ensures certain players in the European Parliament are listening attentively to these anti-gender mobilisations. Within this institution, the political influence of these actors has followed two different channels: firstly, that offered by a number of Catholic politicians within the European People's Party, and secondly, that offered by the right-wing populist and far-right groups: Identity and Democracy and the European Conservatives and Reformists Group. However, the path taken by the parliamentary right has proved to be of limited use, as these players now constitute a minority within the EPP and have therefore been unable to oppose progressive advances or initiate new policies. Yet at the same time, populist and far-right political forces have been raising their profile on anti-gender issues, opening up a new avenue for advancing these demands. At European level, several of these parties, grouped into European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Identity and Democracy (ID) and perhaps Patriots for Europe groups within the European Parliament, have become allies of anti-gender organisations and regularly host events and initiatives on these issues.

These developments have considerably transformed debates in the European Parliament. In some cases, these political parties have also come to power at national level, either as heads of government or as internal or external partners in government coalitions. These political transformations are also having a growing impact on the functioning of the European Council, which has become a new platform for influencing EU policies. Poland and Hungary have tried to block political documents between the EU and certain developing countries⁸⁵, or the EU strategy on children's rights, on the pretext of reference to the term "gender".

Last but not least, although it may seem less exposed, the European Commission has not been forgotten by anti-gender players, who have also tried to increase their influence and place allies within the Commission, as witnessed by the attempt to appoint Rocco Buttiglione, a politician from the Italian Catholic right, to the post of European Commissioner for Justice in 2004. While this appointment attempt was unsuccessful, several other commissioners have in the past maintained close ties with anti-gender actors and their ideas. Moreover, the influence of anti-gender actors is not limited to the College of Commissioners, and they are also trying to create relays within the Commission's administrative structure. In addition to a number of close individual links, these players achieved partial success in creating the position of Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU. This idea, conceived at an event organised by ADFI at the European Parliament, was endorsed by the Commission,

⁸⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/eu-and-acp-finalise-post-cotonou-treaty-after-two-year-delay/>

which announced the creation of this new post during a visit by the Presidents of the three Institutions to the Vatican in 2016 (EPF, 2017).

5. Euthanasia, an issue that positions Belgium as an outsider

The pioneering nature of euthanasia legislation, both in terms of general decriminalisation and access for minors, sets Belgium apart from the rest of the world, when it comes to either providing information on the situation in this country and or trying to curb a reform that could spread like wildfire. Belgium is thus both a place of study and a strategic battleground for the global players opposing the decriminalisation of euthanasia.

Belgium's international experience is attracting considerable interest in the foreign press. It aims above all to provide information, but can also be critical, as can be seen, for example, in the articles by journalist Rachel Aviv in *The New Yorker*⁸⁶. Similarly, it's often in connection with euthanasia that Belgium is mentioned in the international anti-gender media. This interest creates additional space for critics of Belgian euthanasia legislation, whose publications are read and translated abroad and who are regularly invited to speak on the subject beyond our borders. If Belgian speakers are invited to speak at anti-gender forums abroad, again it is often on the subject of euthanasia.

Transnational anti-gender NGOs are also active in Belgium on the issue of euthanasia. This involvement is first and foremost the work of Alliance Defending Freedom International. In addition to a video about a hospital in Tournai, in 2022 this organisation produced the white paper *The legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide: An inevitable slippery slope*⁸⁷. This document examines Belgian legislation in particular, and most of the occurrences relating to Belgium on the ADFI site concern this issue⁸⁸. Above all, in collaboration with other organisations such as the European Centre for Law and Justice and Ordo Iuris, ADFI supported Tom Mortier in his case against the doctor Wim Distelmans, co-chairman of the Federal Commission for the Control and Evaluation of Euthanasia and a campaigner for the right to euthanasia. As a reminder, Tom Mortier, a chemistry teacher at KU Leuven (Limburg campus), lodged a complaint against Wim Distelmans with the Order of Physicians and the Brussels Court after learning that the doctor had euthanised his mother for incurable mental suffering. This complaint was dismissed by the Public Prosecution Service. In 2018, however, the European Court of Human Rights agreed to examine the case and put additional questions to Belgium. The Court handed down its decision in October 2022, ruling that the Belgian law was not contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights, except in terms of a posteriori control of euthanasia decisions, due to the lack of independence of the control body and the slow progress of the judicial procedure. Both national and international anti-gender organisations welcomed the decision as a victory for the right to life.

⁸⁶ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/22/the-death-treatment>

⁸⁷ <https://adfinternational.org/the-legalization-of-euthanasia-and-assisted-suicide/>

⁸⁸ <https://adfinternational.org/?s=belgium&lang=e>

Conclusion

Based on the chapter on the Belgian case published in 2017 by Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte, this report has endeavoured to capture the evolution of anti-gender campaigns in Belgium and the main turning points over the past five years. It testifies to a transformation of the situation, marked by the increased appeal of these mobilisations on the part of a fairly disparate range of players, and the diversification of issues and targets.

First of all, a growing number of players are taking up these questions, raising the profile of these topics in society. These players are tackling these issues for different reasons and with different objectives, and at this stage it is challenging to detect the emergence of a core or organising principle. On the contrary, everything seems to point to the development of a nebula of players whose links are not easy to identify. That said, it is important to note that the focal point of these mobilisations has shifted from the religious to the political. These mobilisations have historically come from the conservative fringes of the Catholic Church in Belgium and, with the exception of Mgr Léonard's term as Primate of Belgium, have enjoyed limited support from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which helps to explain their limited impact. In recent years, however, other players have taken the lead in these mobilisations. While there are bridges with conservative fringes of the Catholic church, these are politically assertive and to the right of the political spectrum. In both the north and south of the country, these issues are increasingly coming to the fore as a result of a dual phenomenon of international influence and contagion between the right and far right within a shared ideological space. In Flanders, this dynamic, reflected in the competition between the nationalist right and the far right, is helping to politicise gender issues and place them at the heart of the debate, with the risk of making them prime targets. This transformation, which reflects a growing international trend, breathes new life into Belgian campaigns.

We then see a diversification of targets, with distinct effects on the evolution of these mobilisations. Long confined to issues of abortion, legal recognition of homosexuality and sex education, Belgian anti-gender campaigns now include a wider range of issues, enabling them to reach more diverse audiences. It should be stressed, however, that at this stage, frontal attacks are rare, and that these actors more often mobilise the register of the slippery slope and adverse effects, emblematic of reactionary discourse (Hirschman, 1991). Three of these issues merit particular attention here. Firstly, trans issues, and particularly the revision of the 2017 law, offer a space conducive to mobilisation, insofar as, unlike previous reforms, Belgium's timing is no longer out of step with the international development of anti-gender campaigns, which are moreover increasingly targeting the rights of trans people. Secondly, the pioneering nature of euthanasia legislation has attracted a number of foreign players eager to better understand these developments in order to combat them, and ready to invest time and resources in containing or even restricting Belgian legislation to prevent it spreading internationally. Finally, recent debates on wokism, which deepen gender debates while extending them to other issues such as racism or protecting the environment, create a momentum that could favour the deployment and implantation of these campaigns, and moreover, do so in an electoral context.

In the light of these observations, the nature of Belgium's exception needs to be put into perspective. While Belgium has long been immune to anti-gender initiatives, this is no longer

the case, and the reasons behind the limited development of these campaigns may not be as strong as they once seemed. The context has changed radically in just a few years, which means that these debates have accelerated and the country is catching up with the developments happening abroad. At the same time, the north-south divide remains, and within the country, few initiatives cross the language border. While the targets are often the same and the arguments similar, the networks of actors in Flanders and French-speaking Belgium diverge and seem more influenced by what's happening outside our borders, with a clear effect of international diffusion in the circulation of these discourses and mobilisations. What's more, while Belgium remains a place of intellectual production on anti-gender issues, this production is still largely unrecognised within the country, and most of these authors are pursuing international careers or have even chosen to move abroad.

Finally, in addition to the active involvement of women in these struggles, it's worth noting the generational renewal that can be observed in these mobilisations. Far from being confined to older generations who find it hard to keep up with the evolution of society, as some socio-demographic studies sometimes suggest, anti-gender campaigns are largely – and increasingly – driven by very young activists. This phenomenon goes a long way to explaining the development of the Marches for Life in Brussels, which were the brainchild of a few people in their twenties at the time. Similarly, as shown by the examples of Schild en Vrienden and the Chez Nous party, conservative and far-right student associations seem to be enjoying a period of renewal. Aimed at combating a supposed progressive dominance over the academic world, these groups can give anti-gender positions a lasting foothold in Belgium. While Belgium has long resisted anti-gender campaigns, all the elements are in place for a new scenario to unfold, and given the youth of some of the activists, there's every reason to believe that this new chapter is here to stay.

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