

ZOiS Spotlight 13/2019

The European culture wars

by Kristina Stöckl | 03/04/2019



In protest against this year's World Congress of Families, many people have taken to the streets in Verona. © Ferdinando Piezzi / Alamy Stock Foto

From 29 to 31 March 2019, the World Congress of Families (WCF) convened in Verona, Italy. The WCF is a gathering of predominantly Christian, ultra-conservative groups and individuals who rally around the defense of a traditionalist understanding of the family (heterosexual, married, with biological offspring). The event was organised by the American NGO *International Organization for the Family* (IOF) and local conservative Catholic activists, who were supported by the Italian populist right party Lega. This was the thirteenth congress organised by this group, with the previous recent congresses having taken place in Moldova (2018), Budapest (2017), Tbilisi (2016), Salt Lake City (2015) and Moscow (2014).

The political and public support for the WCF's socially conservative pro-family agenda in Eastern Europe is, in part, a reaction to the "cultural revolution" of the 1990s and to the communist legacy (feminism, legalisation of abortion). It is also a symptom of EU accession "fatigue", with the European Union having come to be perceived as a liberalising and secularising actor in the region. The WCF has been instrumental in creating a common frame of reference across Eastern and even Western Europe that couches anti-liberalism and populism in a positive "pro-family" agenda.

After five years in the old and new heartlands of social conservatism – from "traditional values" Russia to Mormon Utah and Orbán's Hungary – in Verona the WCF, for the first time in its history, met fierce opposition in the media and on the streets. Italian secular and leftist political and civil society groups organised three days of counter-conferences and street protests. The coalition partner of Matteo Salvini's Lega in the government, Luigi di Maio, usually known for his appeasement of the populist right, criticised the event for its "medieval vision of the family", and even the Vatican made a cautious statement distancing itself from the organisers' strategies. While Salvini proclaimed himself ambassador of the Pope ("I will repeat the words of the Pope about the family"), the local Catholic organisations were divided over the event. As was to be expected, the media mainly covered the street protests by the feminist and LGBT rights NGO *Verona Città Transfemminista* and the gathering of the neo-fascist group *Forza Nuova*, which, to the embarrassment of the WCF organisers, tried to capture media attention by calling for a complete ban on abortion. The organisers depicted themselves as victims of intolerance ("We are like the blacks in the times of apartheid"), conjuring up a picture of polarisation and culture wars.

With "Christian values" against the EU

The WCF is a product of the American Christian Right. It is the American Christian Right going transnational and exporting the model of the American culture wars to other parts of the world. The fierce political struggle between social conservatism and social progressivism, part of the American political landscape since the 1970s, turned transnational in the mid-1990s, when the American Christian Right discovered the United Nations as a site of politics (see here and here). Since then, conservative family values have been embedded into a much larger struggle by the political right against international human rights law and rights progressivism.

The pro-family agenda is attractive to right-populist parties in Europe, because it gives them the opportunity to defend national legal sovereignty against supranational regulation. So the EU passes an anti-discrimination directive that protects against discrimination on grounds of race, religion or belief, disability, age, gender or sexual orientation? The European Court of Human Rights defends the rights of gay couples to have their partnerships recognised by the state? For Salvini and other populists in Europe who have recently turned into defenders of "Christian values", these legal instances are the opportunity to exploit the emotionally charged topic of the family for a campaign against the EU. Most commentators have seen the "Christian turn" of Salvini

& Co. as part of their strategy against Muslim immigration. This is certainly one side of the story. But another element is their struggle for legal sovereignty against international human rights law: against the European Union, the UN, the European Court of Human Rights. Salvini has made “sovereignty” the battle cry of his campaign leading up to the EU parliamentary elections in May 2019, and it is certainly no coincidence that the WCF in Verona took place just one and half months before the European parliamentary elections.

The Russian participation at the WCF has a long history and is in the hand of few individuals. Their contacts to Christian Right groups in Europe and the US have helped to create coalitions between the Kremlin and European far right parties and this has allowed Russia to define its anti-liberal profile in a Christian conservative key that differs from the traditional Orthodox Christian anti-westernism. There have been rumors (denied by the organisers) that the Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev sponsored the event in Verona. In any case, for Russia the globalised Christian Right is a useful ally. It provides the language and themes for preferring closeness to Russia over an EU association (at the WCF in Moldova 2018 and Tbilisi 2016) or for attacking EU policies on migration and antagonising liberal civil society and political opposition (at the WCF in Budapest 2017 and last week in Verona). And if this new European Christian Right is elected into government (like the Lega in Italy), the Kremlin can even hope that its pro-family buddies will become instrumental in changing the EU’s course vis-à-vis Russia. In Verona, speakers gathered from Hungary, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and, of course, the United States, among others. The vision of Europe they share was pictured in dramatic clarity by Ed Martin, president of a conservative US law firm: he went on stage with a red Donald Trump baseball cap that read “Make Europe great again”.

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