



**Mainstreaming, Gender and  
Communication in Slovenia**  
**Slovenia/D5.2 Country Report**  
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## About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalisation and polarisation in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and wider social contexts driving radicalisation, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualises this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarisation) with the goal of moving towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalisation programmes. Our intention is to identify the building blocks of radicalisation, which include a sense of being victimised; a sense of being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures; and coming under the influence of “us vs them” identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion and de-radicalisation.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation states adapt to new security challenges. The process of mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts will be crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that processes of radicalisation often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national frameworks of justice. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analysing and devising solutions to online radicalisation will be central to the project’s aims.

## Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to investigate anti-gender and pro-gender actors and discourses in Slovenia, in particular the opposition to the so-called *gender ideology* and celebrations of gender diversity. Drawing on research on sexuality, gender, and radicalization, the report employs existing local discursive analysis, as well as original discursive analysis, of governmental and non-governmental actors, including anti- and pro-LGBTQ+ NGOs, far-right groups, and grassroots activist collectives. In terms of theory, the report is based on Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counter hegemony. Since gender ideology is considered a (cultural) Marxist invention in Slovenia, the report focuses on the agents of radicalisation that propel this hegemonic conspiratorial discourse. However, to examine the power of counter-narratives it also analyses media presence and discourses of various non-heteronormative activist NGO's and initiatives, as well as ordinary citizen collectives engaging in innovative discursive criticism. In the concluding discussion, the report addresses the question of how established anti-gender patterns are also present in discourses of progressive civil society actors, not only outside the LGBTQ+ movement but also within it.

## 1) Introduction

This report can be placed in the body of research on sexuality, gender, and radicalization (Köttig et al. 2016; Lazaridis, Campani 2016; Dietze, Roth 2020). It employs existing discursive analysis, as well as original discursive analysis, of governmental and non-governmental actors, including anti- and pro-LGBTQ+ NGOs, far-right groups, and grassroots activist collectives. The report uses the I-GAP Coding method for detecting potential radicalisation threats. I-GAP is based on four types of motivational factors that are in a causal and chronological relation to each other: first, there is the potentially radicalised person's perception of *injustice*, which leads to their *grievance*, feelings of *alienation*, and finally perception of social *polarisation*, that might end up facilitating a radical act or behaviour.

Capturing both online and physical visual objects, the report explores anti-gender and pro-gender actors and discourses in Slovenia, in particular the hegemonic opposition to *gender ideology* and counter-hegemonic discourses celebrating gender diversity. As Paternotte and Kuhar (2017, 5-7) explain, gender ideology is a term initially created by religious and conservative groups in the West to oppose women's and LGBTQ+ rights activism, as well as Gender Studies. According to critics of gender ideology, Judith Butler, and academic supporters of her influential de-essentializing notions of bodies, sexes and sexualities (see Butler 2002 [1990]; (2011 [1993]) are the leading proponents of gender ideology. Understanding gender as biologically determined, inborn and immutable, these critics attack academic and essayist deconstructivist approaches to gender essentialism and naturalism since the latter argue that there exist no properties essential to a man, woman, etc. in a sense that any man, woman, etc. must necessarily possess those properties to be recognised as a man, a woman, etc. The term Gender Ideology implies that the notion of gender (as a social construct) is ideological and hence bogus, basing its power on supposedly unnatural and ethically abominable social changes such as marriage equality, reproductive rights equality, same-sex adoption rights, and LGBTQ+ education programmes in kindergartens and schools. Anti-gender activists present the latter as an immense problem, claiming that gender ideology in public schools indoctrinates children from an early age, propelling not only the sexualisation of children and sexual permissiveness, but also paedophilia.

According to Paternotte and Kuhar (2017: 2-3, 9-12, see also Kuhar, Zobec: 2017: 33-34), anti-gender idea started in Vatican intellectual circles in the 1990s, continuing with active dissemination of these ideas in 2000s by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Around 2013, it turned into a full-fledged protest movement, comprising the likes of *Manif pour Tous* in France and Italy, *In the Name of the Family* (U ime obitelji) in Croatia and *Children are at Stake* (Za otroke gre) in Slovenia. The movement has become connected transnationally, with national variants learning from and collaborating with each other in practicing various forms of protest, including silent book readings, family day celebrations, school boycotts, etc. They have stood up against sexual citizenship, marriage equality, sexual education, reproductive and adoption rights, abortion, etc. For them, there is no such thing as gender but rather two natural sexes, a biologically defined male and female, whose complementary union is the only family there is. The supposed danger from gender ideology is that its proponents threaten to shake the binary world of femininity/masculinity to its core and destroy the "normal family". Although in numerous cases, the movement is linked to

local religious institutions and directly influenced by religious teachings, the anti-gender groups increasingly use secularised, particularly nationalistic, discourse in order to reach their supporters and sympathisers. Kuhar (in Pető 2015: 129) describes this strategy as “the secularisation of the discourse in order to clericalize society”. In its most radical version, the anti-gender ideology movement is conspiratorial, accusing liberal and leftist elites as well as inter- and supranational institutions and companies of social engineering and corrupting the natural essence of (hu)man (species) (Kuhar, Zobec 2017: 34)

In many post-socialist countries, “gender ideology” is perceived as a Western neocolonial export, as EU’s, UN’s, or America’s imposition (Graff, Korolczuk 2021). Vladimir Putin, not unlike the RCC leader, Pope Francis, implies that gender ideology is a form of colonisation endangering traditional values (Paternotte, Kuhar 2017: 8). In Slovenia, however, gender ideology is mostly presented as a leftist, (cultural) Marxist, or Communist ideology. Anti-colonial criticism of gender ideology seldom appears, since mainstream discourse in Slovenia places Slovenians firmly among Western/Central Europeans. That does not mean, however, that the Slovenian anti-gender movement is any less nationalist. There are also attempts to present gender theory as both an (Eastern or International) Communist and (Western) imperialist phenomenon promoted allegedly by both the Slovenian “radical left” and the likes of Google and Facebook, jointly colonising the Slovenian national customs and rites. As Butler (2021) observes, it is not unusual for anti-gender movement to mix right and left discourses and engage primarily “in the business of nation-building (...), since it perceives “gender” [not only as] an unwanted migrant, an incoming stain, but also, at the same time, a colonizer or totalitarian who must be thrown off.”

There are many terms denoting gender as an ideological formation, including genderism, genderization and Gayropa. In Slovenia, the most popular term is *gender theory* (*teorija spola*), followed by *gender ideology* (*ideologija spola*) and *LGBT ideology* (*LGBT ideologija*).<sup>1</sup> These terms are used by anti-gender actors interchangeably and function as empty signifiers that remain open to different interpretations in different contexts (Kuhar, Zobec 2017: 31).

The structure of this report is as follows. The next chapter will discuss in more detail the methodology, which is based on previous and our original analysis of hegemonic (anti-gender) and counter-hegemonic (pro-gender) discourse in Slovenia. The third chapter presents in detail the local historical context and the ways in which the gender issue and discourses on gender relate to radicalization in the country. In the fourth chapter, the report analyses the media presence, production, and circulation of anti-gender discourse by three agents of radicalization: namely, the political party SDS and SDS-linked media; RCC-linked anti-gender groups; and far-right groups. The fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis of media presence and social media employment by stakeholders of de-radicalization in the form of both established and grassroots LGBTQ+ activist initiatives. The sixth chapter examines three examples of the ways

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<sup>1</sup> In Slovenian, both words gender and sex are translated as *spol*, resulting often in signifying confusion. Scientific texts distinguish between biological *spol* (sex) and social *spol* (gender). In 2016, a Slovenian version of Google search showed about 188,000 results for *teorija spola*, 84,000 for *ideologija spola* and only 63 for *genderizacija* (Kuhar 2017: 230 n11). In our Slovenian version of Google Search from June 2022, *teorija spola* had 775,000 results, *ideologija spola* had 208,000 results, *LGBT ideologija* had 167,000, and *genderizacija* had 290 results.

ordinary citizen collectives, linked not necessary to LGBTQ + organizations, problematize gender-related radicalization, engaging in innovative criticisms of anti-gender discourses through graffiti, online design and memes, respectively. In the concluding discussion, the report addresses the question of how established anti-gender patterns are also present in discourses of progressive civil society actors in Slovenia, not only outside the LGBTQ + movement, but also within it.

## 2) Methodology and Methods

The construction of sex/gender occurs through a phenomena that cultural studies (Hall 1997) refer to as “signifying practices”, of which media objects are a prime example. Media images and texts, like ideas, have different meanings for different people. When linguistic elements combine to form a complex system that both reflects and influences reality, they can be referred to as discourse(s) (Fairclough 2010, Gee 2014) or representation(s) (Hall 1997). Originating in semiology/semiotics (see Barthes 1967/1983) – the science of meaning-creation through signs, which defines a sign as anything that communicates (something) meaning(ful) to the person interpreting the sign – discourses and representations are powerful semiotic tools used for prioritising, naturalising and normalising a specific meaning (among many meanings) of a societal or cultural phenomenon. Every media discourse and every cultural representation implies specific power relations between social groups (Dijk 2008).

In order to examine anti- and pro-gender discourses in Slovenia, the report uses existing and original semiotic analyses of such discourses. On the one hand, by using the semiotic method, the report aims at explaining ideologically potent representations of sex/gender and LGBTQ+ persons by agents of radicalisation in order to justify, legitimise and promote their position. On the other hand, it uses the same method to analyse the pro-gender discursive reactions directed against anti-gender discourse in order to see how audiences interpret anti-gender discourse/representations on various interconnected levels.

First, there are levels of *denotation* (or basic, descriptive, literal meaning) and *connotation* (or complex, associative, ideological meaning) (Barthes 1967/1983: 89; Hall 1980/2005: 122). If the denotation level asks what was depicted, when, where and in what shape and colour, the connotation level wonders what ideas, values, virtues, traditions, and ideologies this depiction expresses. Second, there are levels of (un)intended interpretations – in the sense that the creation of anti-gender messages is one thing, while audience reaction to, perception of and identification with these messages is another. A decoder can decode the representation of sex/gender in the same way as the encoder intended, or not. Stuart Hall (1980/2005: 125-127) understood the first option as a dominant reading (dominant-hegemonic position of a decoder) while the latter as either negotiated or oppositional reading. The dominant reading presumes that, for example, anti-gender propaganda’s encoded meaning remains intact during decoding. The negotiated reading “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions (...) while it makes its own ground rules [and] operates with exceptions to the rule” (ibid.: 127). Finally, there is an oppositional reading that interprets an encoded message in a strictly contrarian way, “detotaliz[ing] the message



in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (ibid.).

These reading positions are important to this report, since the anti-gender discourse of agents of radicalisation can elicit rather aggressive reactions from media audiences, including hate speech and calls for radical action to address the issue of gender ideology. However, there are also alternative readings of these messages by actors of de-radicalisation. These counter-hegemonic discourses demonstrate what Brooker and Jermyn (2003b: 91) term “reading as resistance”, drawing on the work on audiences by cultural scholars like John Fiske, David Morley and Gregory Woods (in Brooker and Jermyn 2003a). These researchers argue that audiences possess agency and are active rather than passive in interpreting media representations, including obvious heteronormative and even homophobic representations. Woods (2003) argues for example that gay audiences are amazing in *queering*, i. e. interpreting from gay perspective, dominant heterosexual and even anti-gay visual representations of men (and women) in clothes catalogues. Following Woods, this report argues that some audiences in Slovenia engage in oppositional readings of and even in queering anti-gender messages. The report detects these alternative reactions either in the form of direct comments on anti-gender agents’ media objects (Facebook posts, tweets, graffiti) or in the form of original content pro-actively rather than reactively created in relation to anti-gender movement’s presence in society.

In terms of theory, this report is based on Foucault’s notions of power and resistance as well as Gramsci’s theorisation of hegemony and (the Gramscians’ conceptualisation of) counter-hegemony.<sup>2</sup> “Where there is power, there is resistance,” reminds us Foucault (1978: 95), adding that “points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.” In a similar sense, Gramsci (1971) understood the struggle for *hegemony* as a dynamic fight for gaining consent of the masses by intellectual and cultural persuasion rather than brute force. For Gramsci, capitalists (or powerful defenders of patriarchal order) gain the upper hand over the subordinate subjects by morally and intellectually persuading the masses that capitalism (or patriarchy or heterosexuality) is normative (i. e. is the only “normal” sexual identity and behaviour). The process that challenges this normative view and presents the people with alternatives, with “a new set of standards, a new psychology, new ways of feeling, thinking and living,” as Gramsci (1985: 41) would put it, is called *counter-hegemony*. In our case, one could argue that there exist powerful/hegemonic anti-gender discourses and resistant/counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourses. However, one needs to keep in mind that pro-gender discourses do not come only in the form of reaction to anti-gender discourses. As Foucault (1979: 96) argues, it is true that resistances can only exist in the strategic field of power relations, but “this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat”. Rather, these resistances are active and productive, as this report will show in the case studies below.

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<sup>2</sup> Gramscians regularly use the term counter-hegemony, although Gramsci did not employ it himself (Reed 2013: 585 n1)

### 3) Mediated hegemonic gender presentations and their relationship to radicalisation in Slovenia

Slovenia (as part of Yugoslavia) decriminalized homosexuality in 1976. Joining other Slovenian New Social Movements, the gay and lesbian (GL) movement appeared in the early 1980s as the first in Eastern Europe (Kuhar et al. 2012: 52). It was a movement that advocated for more rights for gays and lesbians within the socialist system rather than an oppositional movement (Kuhar and Švab 2013: 27-28). Although they did not possess the same system of values, the New Social Movements and conservative/nationalist civil society groups, including the RCC, gradually forced the Communist elite to allow the first “free elections” in the late 1980s (ibid.). At the time, new rightwing political elites emerged and their vision of representative democracy and free speech differed significantly from what the leftist-liberal elites and civil society understood under these terms. During Slovenia’s accession-to-EU process there was no serious opposition to anti-discrimination legislation since the EU membership was a primary goal of all major political options.

During this period the first Ljubljana Gay Pride happened (2001), followed by many on a yearly basis. The first few pride parades in Slovenia were not challenged by conservative demonstrators or violent attackers. There were however many instances of homophobic discourse by elite politicians, representatives of RCC, far-right groups, and columnists (see Velikonja and Greif 2012).<sup>3</sup> In 2004, with all the new legislation in place, Slovenia became a member of the EU. However, equality of LGBTQ+ residents of Slovenia in all spheres of life did not follow the fast-track adoption of anti-discrimination legislation. As sexual minorities gained greater visibility in the public space instances of violent homophobic attacks increased (see Kuhar and Švab 2013: 23; 31; Velikonja and Greif 2012: 201-302).<sup>4</sup> This type of “new homophobia” (Anna Marie Smith in Kuhar et al. 2012: 54) meant that tolerance towards LGBTQ+ was indeed legalised, but possible in real-life circumstances only as long as they do not breach the visibility norms of heteronormativity. When they do, the response is imminent.

Physical attacks against LGBTQ+ persons and their safe spaces still happen (there were at least four in 2019 and one in 2020, according to media reports). However, the one attack that significantly influenced the public’s perception both of the LGBTQ+ community and of homophobic radicalism was the 25th of June 2009 assault by a far-right group on Ljubljana’s gay-friendly bar Cafe Open, during a literary event. This premeditated attack was the most publicly exposed homophobic attack in Slovenia so

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Zmagaj Jelinčič, MP of the Slovenian National Party (SNP), has persistently called gay persons faggots and pederasts (Roglič 2008), while another MP of this party, Sašo Peče, said in an 2001 interview that he could never have a drink with a homosexual (or a person of dark complexion) (Velikonja and Greif 2012, 207). What also stood out was the online hate speech calling for killings of LGBTQ+ persons in the weeks after Sisters, a transvestite trio, won the 2002 Slovenian selection for the Eurovision Song Contest (Velikonja and Greif 2012: 219-220).

<sup>4</sup> Politicians continued expressing homophobic reactions. In 2005, MP Bogdan Barovič (SNP) claimed he would rather step down as the mayor than marry a gay couple (Velikonja and Greif 2012: 256), while in 2006, Janez Drnovšek, a left-liberal politician and president of Slovenia at the time, argued in an interview on the topic of gay rights that a public display of “different sexual orientation” can justifiably disturb people, as sexuality should be “kept in the private sphere” and “not be displayed unnecessarily” (ibid., 269).

far, since – unlike in majority of such cases<sup>5</sup> – the police managed to incarcerate some of the perpetrators, the prosecution accused them of a criminal offence, and the judge convicted them for “incitement to hatred, violence or intolerance” against LGBTQ+ persons under Article 297 of the Criminal Code.

Another impactful phenomenon occurred roughly in the time of the Cafe Open assault. Namely, the Slovenian anti-gender movement also came about. As observed by Kuhar (2017: 215; 222-223), it happened during the debates between 2009 and 2015 on marriage equality inscribed in the so-called New Family Code (NFC) proposed by the government and opposed by RCC and various rightwing agents. The NFC sought to replace the former one from 1976 and introduce an inclusive definition of the family as well as equality in access to marriage and adoption. The law was defeated in referenda on two occasions. Slovenia is the only European country that had not one but two referenda on marriage equality. These 2012 and 2015 referenda on the definition of family were key wins of the newly-formed anti-gender movement.<sup>6</sup> The expression *gender theory* also emerged at the time. Appearing in 2012 for the first time, it denoted not just marriage equality, but also supposed conspiratorial tendency of “radical feminists” and “homosexuals” to transform the two-complementary-sexes system permanently. These days, representations of gender as an ideology permeate the rightwing media, in particular the Demokracija and Nova24TV portals, where gender theory is regarded as a harmful fact. Several RCC-linked organisations with anti-gender agenda have also appeared.

Anti-gender discourse seems to be intertwined with nationalistic, xenophobic and racist discourses of Slovenian agents of radicalisation. Bilić (2019: 8) reminds us that confluence between discourses of transition (from socialism to capitalism), nationalism, militarism, religiosity, and sex/gender is common in the post-Yugoslav space. What’s more, building on the concept of *symbolic glue* by Kováts and Pöim (2015), Paternotte and Kuhar (2017: 14) as well as Kuhar and Zobec (2017: 35-36) argue that it is actually the anti-gender movement/discourse that is unifying rightwing players in Slovenia. Indeed, it seems it is connecting everyone from RCC and Catholic civil society to the SDS party, SDS-linked media, football hooligans and far-right groups, despite their ideological differences. Since gender is perceived as an attack on either nature (by religious groups), nation (by nationalists) or normality (by conservatives), anti-gender discourse feels right to all these agents (ibid.).

If there is a symptomatic representation that depicts this unity, Kuhar and Zobec (ibid.) contend, it is an image of a (white) “innocent” child, which embodies both the endangered “natural” family and endangered future of “our” nation. The following chapter will outline the discursive results of this homology between various Slovenian agents of radicalisation.

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<sup>5</sup> According to a 2008 research commissioned by the Human Rights Ombudsman, nearly 86% of hate crimes committed against GL persons in Slovenia were never reported to the police, while the police reacted constructively in just 30% of incidents reported (DIHR 2009, 5; Magić 2014: 5).

<sup>6</sup> The strategy of forcing and winning referenda on gender issues is characteristic also for other post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries, including Croatia, Slovakia, and Romania (Paternotte, Kuhar 2017: 15).

## 4) An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of collective agents of radicalisation

There is an openly homophobic/anti-gender public sphere in Slovenia, comprised of conservative and other rightwing agents, including (1) the three-time PM Janez Janša, his SDS party and the SDS-linked media, (2) anti-gender RCC-linked organisations, and (3) ultra-nationalist and far-right groups. The report analysed several gender-related media objects created by these agents. Analysing their discourse, the report is in agreement with Paternotte and Kuhar (2017: 14) who, drawing on Wodak, argue that anti-gender and populist rightwing campaigns utilize similar discursive strategies. Namely, (a) victim-perpetrator reversal and self-victimisation, (b) scapegoating, and (c) the construction of conspiracy theories. All of these are based on the politics of fear of non-heteronormative subjects, representing them consequently as the ultimate Other. In the three sections below, the homology between anti-gender discourses in various media objects created by the three agents of radicalisation from Slovenia are presented. Noting the use of all three of Wodak's discursive strategies, the sections also analyse (dominant, negotiated and oppositional) audience reactions to these discourses in order to assess roughly the impact of these strategies.

### SDS and SDS-linked media

Janez Janša regularly retweets anti-gender content. For instance, on 5 December 2015, preceding the second referendum on marriage equality legislation, he promoted a ten-minute YouTube video titled *When the world has gone mad*, describing Europe as governed by gender theory (Janša 2015). Analysing audience responses to the tweet, one quickly notices a few *dominant readings* of the tweet, such as: "If this seems normal to Europe, then it has really gone insane" or "crazy, sick; obviously all of Europe is already decadent" or "Um, from now there will be sport disciplines for it [rather than male/female]," etc. These responses confirm and agree with the hegemonic anti-gender discourse promoted and co-created by Janša, and in terms of the I-GAP method, enhance alienation and polarisation among Janša's audiences. There are, however, also several *oppositional readings* of the tweet expressed in the reply section, for instance: "Such nonsense can be bought only by weak-minded patriots with an IQ below room temperature" or "The video is a typical ideological manipulation!!" or even "please learn the difference between gender and biological sex. gender = / = sex. and what does this have to do with same-sex marriage? #bs".

These examples show that straightforward political propaganda never functions straightforwardly. It is not simple to fool all the people all the time, to persuade audiences, in particular when the channel of communication, such as Twitter, is populated by diverse subjects eager to comment and debate. Would this also hold true in case of SDS-linked media like Demokracija and Nova24TV portals where audiences are predominantly SDS sympathizers? In recent years, Nova24TV portal published over 100 articles criticizing *gender ideology* and/or *LGBT ideology* as well as over 50 articles criticizing *Gender theory*. It has campaigned against marriage and adoption equality as well as against non-heteronormative content in school curricula. Since SDS's identity has been built on anti-Communism, it comes as no surprise that Nova24TV commonly connects gender theory/ideology to (Cultural) Marxism and the "radical left".

Branko Grims, a leading SDS politician frequently writes columns for the portal, also discussing gender issues. Last year, during the Covid pandemic, Grims (2021) wrote a piece on the need for active opposition to Cultural Marxism, explaining to his audiences that “the classic family is being destroyed by the propaganda of the LGBT Cultural Marxism, according to which the family is no longer a man, a woman and a child, instead a child can have two or more fathers, or two or more mothers or whatever”. Evoking the sense of injustice and grievance, he also quoted from his own recent speech in the parliament, claiming, “it will be necessary to expel all LGBT and other cultural-Marxist indoctrination from school and bring in the true Slovenian tradition and Slovenian culture”. In addition, he argued that, “when this madness is imposed on children in schools and kindergartens the ground is cut from under their feet,” and concluded that “children are at stake!” There are forty responses to his column in the comment section, predominantly praising Grims and strongly agreeing with his points on the ills of Communism, such as: “The real and dangerous pandemic is the LGBT ideology of cultural Marxism and not Covid” or “Bravo, Grims!” or “Let's bring back Christian culture to Slovenia!” The oppositional reading is absent, leading us to take seriously the hypothesis arguing that the Nova24TV portal's audience is rather homogeneous and in line with the anti-gender propaganda for Grims not to be inevitably preaching to the choir.

### **RCC-linked organisations**

Since 2002, Slovenian RCC actively promoted “new evangelisation,” proposing the creation of various lay organizations, which would help spread RCC's stance on heteronormativity, sex/gender and marriage (Kuhar 2017: 220). After the government announced the reform of the old Family Code in 2009, the first anti-gender RCC-linked organisation appeared. Namely, the Institute for Family and the Culture of Living (Zavod za družino in kulturo življenja, ZZDIKŽ) led by influential monk Tadej Strehovec (ibid. 219). It was followed by Civil Initiative for the Family and the Rights of Children (Civilna iniciativa za družino in pravice otrok, CIDPO); renamed in 2016 into Movement for Children and Families (Gibanje za otroke in družine, GZOID), and Children are at Stake (Za otroke gre, ZOG), the latter three (co-)led by experienced conservative activist Aleš Primc (ibid. 217).

In 2017, Primc also established a political party called FOR Slovenia - Voice for Children and Families (ZA Slovenijo - Glas za otroke in družine, ZSGZOID), basing it on anti-abortion and anti-gender agenda. For the last five years, the party's program has been informing potential voters that “there is a male and a female gender” and that “gender theory, radical sexual education, esoteric praxis, paedophile literature and NGO activities without parent's consent do not belong in kindergartens and schools” (ZSGZOID 2022; Kuhar 2017: 218). In both 2018 and 2022 elections, however, the party failed to enter the parliament.

These individuals and organisations have jointly run the 24kul.si website, which has been one of the leading anti-gender-community outlets in the country (at least between 2014 and 2019) with tabs titled Gender Theory and Christianophobia, respectively. In line with the strategy of victim-perpetrator reversal, the term Christianophobia is used as an answer to accusations of homophobia, and the way to present Catholics rather than gender minorities as true victims of human rights violations since their right to

disagree with gay marriage and adoption is allegedly threatened by (Cultural Marxist) elites (Kuhar 2017: 227). The website presents gender theory as a “cunning and hidden plan which (...) is carefully implemented through ideological penetrations of school curricula and (trans)national policy documents.” (ibid: 223) Although these organisations have built a widespread network of supporters, according to Kuhar (ibid: 224), the 24kul.si website is at the moment not beaming with activity, and 24kul.si Facebook and Twitter accounts feature the latest content as far back as January 2019. The only constant media presence of the 24kul.si-related anti-gender movement seem to be the ZSGZOID party’s Facebook (1,200 followers) and Twitter (800 followers) accounts, as well as Primc’s own Twitter account (4,000 followers). He gives an impression of an active Twitter user with several (re)tweets per day, linking to various rightwing media content much more often than to the 24kul.si website content.

On 9 June 2022, for instance, he shared a Nova24TV article criticising an art project that combined rainbow-coloured and religious visual elements. His tweet read, “Forcing your own at any cost beyond any measure. The pendulum lifted very much to one side. Mockery of Christianity – [Mother] Mary with LGBT symbols in the House of European History [in Brussels]”. Out of over forty audience responses, some were sympathetic to Primc or even more radical, like the one stating that, “making fun of Christianity is paedophilia”. However, a huge majority was criticising the author as hypocritical: “Haven’t you Catholics violently harassed women-patients in front of the gynaecology clinic [in Ljubljana] with your medieval propaganda in the same way for years? That is forcing your own.” Also, “Is this you describing yourself?” or “... Wasn’t Mary a surrogate mother? ...” or even “Mary was a lesbian”. Indeed, the oppositional readings of the tweet have been very much alive and kicking, leading one to consider (once more) the hypothesis that SDS-linked and RCC-linked media audiences are less likely to express opposition to anti-gender discourse. In contrast, the open platforms like Twitter seem to allow for more pluralism in the comment section, facilitating a greater number of alternative and oppositional readings.

## Far-right Groups

For the third case of discourse created by Slovenian agents of radicalisation the report turns to the medium of graffiti and street art used by the far-right groups. On the one hand, this medium was chosen due to the fact that most far-right groups have in recent years been banned from mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter, while their street-level presence and graffiti production remains significant. On the other hand, it was chosen because homophobia on walls is often uncensored and hence much harsher than homophobia on news portals and social media. For example, in Slovenian streets, the LGBTQ+ identity is often linked to other (political, geographical or sports) identities for the sole purpose of insulting and/or compromising the (political, geographical, or sports) rival, such as “Lefties (Croats; Maribor Viole FC fans) are faggots” (Velikonja 2022: 231-232).

Mitja Velikonja (2022: 236-241) identified three types of Slovenian extreme rightwing street artists, or “stormtroopers with sprays,” as he call them. Namely, (1) unorganised individuals who create far-right street art content, (2) football fan groups infiltrated by far-right individuals, and (3) organised far-right sub-political groups. Velikonja then subcategorised the latter in: (a) *extreme nationalists* (like Here is Slovenia (TJS),

Hervards, Slovenian Radicals, Gorica Panthers, etc. who use fictional national symbols such as Mount Triglav, Carantanian panther, red carnation and linden leaf); (b) *neo-Nazis* (like Blood and Honour, Headhunters, and various skinhead groups, who use Nazi symbols like swastika, gothic script, celtic cross, number 88, etc.); and finally (c) *new extreme rightists* (like Autonomous Nationalists of Slovenia, Generation Identity, Yellow Jackets, Radical Ljubljana, etc. who use symbols like Kolovrat a.k.a Slavic Swastika denoting Slavic (and European) unification on the basis of white race).

These far-right groups have promoted their homophobic views in various ways throughout the thirty-year history of independent Slovenia. They regularly addressed “homosexuality” on their web portals, participated in discussions on this topic on mainstream media portals, and communicated directly and provocatively with LGBTQ+ organizations (see Velikonja and Greif 2012). Through interviews with TJS members and discourse analysis of the TJS website, Bajt (2015) and Šabić (2012) find that their discourse shows homophobic prejudices, which they try to justify by using demographic arguments. Namely, blaming gays and lesbians for being non-patriotic when deciding to enjoy a lifestyle that prevents them to have children, and hence endanger the growth of Slovenian nation. The same sentiments have been voiced by these groups in the streets of Slovenia. It is hence not surprising that in recent years these groups have also expressed critical attitudes towards gender theory (Velikonja 2022: 227). Ahead of the 2015 referendum on marriage equality, for example, Ljubljana was covered in dozens of graffiti employing a simple yet efficient slogan: “Against Gender Theory!” dated 20 December, the day of the referendum.

However, as with Twitter, Facebook, and mainstream news portals, the streets are also a public forum with numerous subjects and stakeholders eager to join the debate. The anti-gender graffiti campaign was immediately met with opposition, using not only common crossing techniques and feminist and LGBTQ+ slogans (“Feminist as fuck”), but also some innovative resistance tactics of reversing the meanings of far-right political street art. In order to address them in more detail, and present other alternative discourses, the report now turns to a discussion of counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourses of Slovenian stakeholders of de-radicalisation.

## 5) An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of stakeholders of de-radicalisation

This chapter focuses on professional LGBTQ+ NGOs, their relationship with grassroots LGBTQ+ collectives and initiatives, and the ways in which they are either different or similar with regard to utilising online presence. The history of the non-governmental LG(BTQ+) movement in Slovenia differs significantly from such histories in other post-socialist countries, where it commonly started at the time of the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s.

Before 1989, Slovenia had not only [non-heterosexual] personal ads in newspapers, gay and lesbian magazines (VIKS in 1984; Gayzine since 1985; Lesbazine since 1988; articles in [political magazine] Mladina and [daily newspaper] Delo; publication on AIDS in 1985), underground club scene [which has hosted GL nights since 1984], but also strong activism, and a public gay festival. Furthermore, the first Slovenian gay and lesbian organisations [Magnus and SKUC LL], as well as the Ljubljana [gay] festival, were formed as “sections” of

the existent youth organisations, and thus obtained use of space as well as institutional protection within youth organisational structures. (Kajinić 2016: 63)

At the epicentre of all these activities was ŠKUC, Student Cultural and Artistic Centre, which was unofficially created in the late 1960s, as a direct legacy of '68 student protests, and officially established in 1972 as part of the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia. Since the early 1980s, ŠKUC became the pioneering gay and lesbian advocacy organisation in socialist Europe. Following the independence and return of the capitalist system in 1991, ŠKUC was turned into one of the largest private NGOs in the country, with ŠKUC-Magnus and ŠKUC-LL sections remaining at the forefront of professional struggles for gender equality. Recently, two ŠKUC-LL lesbian activists became MPs, one of them even serving her second four-year term.

In addition to ŠKUC, whose traditional focus have been gays and lesbians, there are currently at least four other influential professional LGBTQ+ NGOs in the country. Three of them focus on equal rights of, and advocacy for, all non-heteronormative persons. Namely, Legebitra (est. 1998), Association DIH (est. 2003), and Association Ljubljana Pride (est. 2009). However, the fourth one, the transfeminist initiative TransAkcija (est. 2015), focuses on transgender and transsexual persons and is the first professional trans-specific NGO in Slovenia.

There have also been other LGBTQ+ organisations in the country, however, whose professionalisation has been less pronounced, lacking even a legal status in some cases. These DIY, self-organised, grassroots LGBTQ+ initiatives critically engage with the patriarchy, some argue, much more hands-on than their professional counterparts. The differentiation between professional and grassroots non-heteronormative activism in post-Yugoslav space is the result of a broader process of the EU accession negotiations, argues Bilić (2016b: 14-15). According to Oblak and Pan (2019), enthusiastic non-professional LGBTQ+ activist circles in Slovenia have included at least the following initiatives: (1) the separatist lesbian-feminist non-queer group Kasandra/Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC) (active 1991-2001) who ran Lola, the sole women-only club in the country; (2) the Red Dawns (Rdeče zore) collective (est. 2000) who have run a self-organised, low-key "women's" (or rather since 2007) "queer and feminist" cultural festival; (3) the Lesbian Feminist University (LFU) group (est. 2010) who have followed in Kasandra's lesbian yet non-queer footsteps and produced a body of feminist texts; (4) the Revolt Social Workers (Vstajniške socialne delavke) (active 2012-2015), pro-queer feminist and social activists who advocated for, and engaged in, direct social work; and finally the Autonomous Feminists a.k.a Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at the Autonomous Rog Factory (Avtonomne feministke a.k.a Anarhistično-kvirovsko-feministični kolektiv v Avtonomni tovarni Rog) (est. 2016) who ran the Afkors space (2018-2021) and promoted "sister\*hood" not only among the predominantly male Rog Factory squatting community, but beyond its borders.

As if split into two ideal-type camps, activists of both types of collectives have mounted criticism against the other type. Either, in the first case, professional NGOs forget about the everyday struggle and engage primarily in legislative change, lobbying and reforming traditional institutions, while enthusiasts primarily keep their finger on the pulse of the actual local LGBTQ+ communities. Or the professionals are doing the important work on structural changes, while the grassroots activists are concerned with mundane and petty issues, not seeing the big picture. Despite differences, activist collaboration and solidarity across different levels of LGBTQ+ world in the post-



Yugoslav space has been present (Bilić *ibid.*). However, the concern remains of professional organisations' alienation from the "base", which is "particularly relevant in the context of the increasingly visible right-wing mobilisation that has appeared as an immediate reaction to legal changes" (Bilić *ibid.*). Professional LGBTQ+ NGOs working "within the system" have arguably not found an efficient solution or at least a counter-narrative to this right-wing mobilisation. In Slovenia, the distinction between professional and grassroots activists, as argued by Oblak and Pan (2019: 46-50), can be found in an active "refusal of the victim position" by the latter, dismissing any type of collaboration with patriarchal power centres and hence remaining "outside the system". A prime example of this distinction was the Revolt Social Workers' in-your-face activism of throwing blood-painted sanitary pads at the (neo)liberal and Pride-supporting Mayor of Ljubljana (with whose administration professional NGOs collaborate) during his Pride 2013 welcome address, eliciting strong and vocal disapprovals by less radical LGBTQ+ activists (*ibid.* 43-44).

The Slovenian NGOs differ not only in terms of professionalisation, experience, and track record, but also in terms of their online presence. Celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022, ŠKUC is a veteran NGO both in terms of historic presence and its media use. While the ŠKUC-Magnus gay section's only social media is a FB profile (440 friends), the ŠKUC-LL lesbian section's sole social media tool is a FB page (730 followers). These two collectives do not use Twitter (TW) nor Instagram (IG). What about the other professional organisations? Legebitra uses FB (4,200 followers) and IG (2,100 followers), but has no TW presence. The DIH association uses IG (2,000 followers) and FB (2,500 followers) regularly, while TW (200 followers) only seldomly as a newsletter reminder. The Ljubljana Pride association employs FB (6,700 followers) and IG (4,000 followers) on a regular basis, and TW (680 followers) only a few times annually, mostly during the year's Pride month. Finally, TransAkcija is very engaged on FB (3,000 followers) and IG (2,600 followers), but has been practically silent on TW (330 followers).

And what can this report say about the grassroots LGBTQ+ initiatives' online presence? The majority of these organisations seem to have become inactive rather quickly, including Kasandra, the Revolt Social Workers and Autonomous Feminists. The LFU has used FB (1,270 followers) but stopped in 2021, while ignoring TW and IG. The Revolt Social Workers stopped using their FB page (550 followers) in 2015, and did not seem to possess IG or TW. The Autonomous Feminists' last post on Facebook (150 followers) is from 2021, while their IG and TW are non-existent. A tiny exception to the rule is the Red Dawn collective, which has cultivated its online presence continually, in particular on FB (2,750 followers), and to a smaller extent on IG (1,000 followers) and TW (140 followers).

There are obvious differences between professional LGBTQ+ NGOs in social media use, but what sticks out more than differences is one particular similarity. Namely, all of the professional and grassroots activist entities, except Red Dawns, seem to avoid TW. Infamous for abuse, harassment, bullying, trolling, and useless debates between the polarised left and right, Slovenian Twittersphere can be an annoyingly sad and dangerous space for members of minorities. Most of the analysed collectives seem to think so, avoiding unnecessary confrontation with anti-gender and other prejudiced agents. Nevertheless, to gain an in-depth understanding of the reasons why this is happening, additional research, including interviews with these collectives, would be

welcome. At present, this report can only speculate, however, as to whether engaging in a debate is the only way to tackle anti-gender discourse. Could it be that action, rather than mere reaction works better? Petó (2015: 129), for one, argues that the “first step for formulating counter strategies is to create an independent strategy, not only one that reacts to the attack.” And it is such unique counter-hegemonic pro-gender discursive practices that this report addresses in the following chapter.

## 6) An analysis of media presence, production, and circulation of ordinary users against radicalisation

In this chapter, the report will examine three case studies of the ways ordinary citizen collectives from Slovenia, linked not necessary to LGBTQ+ organizations, problematise gender-related radicalization by creating innovative pro-gender discourses through the medium of graffiti, online design and memes, respectively. The report will place these three case studies in a relationship with the three mentioned anti-gender movement’s discursive strategies – (a) victim-perpetrator reversal, (b) scapegoating, and (c) the construction of conspiracy theories – in order to show how counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourse can be efficiently employed in fighting the hegemonic anti-gender propaganda.

### Decontamination v. Victim-Perpetrator Reversal

As we have noted above, gender-related discourses have frequently appeared on street walls. Local scholars and essayists (Velikonja N. 2004; Hvala 2008a/b; Vičar 2021; Perger, Mencin Čeplak 2019, Velikonja M. 2022) have detected numerous examples of non-heteronormative and pro-gender graffiti and street art, including slogans such as *where are the lesbian books?*; *queer witches*; *trans = beauty*; *asex.cat*; *gender identity is no joke*; *Mojca<sup>7</sup> is a boy\**; *my son is gay*; *equality for gays*, etc. In March and November 2007, groups of anonymous feminist and lesbian activists renamed dozens of streets of two of the largest Slovenia cities, Ljubljana and Maribor. Over the existing denominations, they pasted new names, such as *Lesbian Movement Street*; *Square of Lesbian Revolution no. 69*; *Lesbian Path*, and *Road to the Lesbian*. Even football fans in Slovenia (otherwise known for their patriarchal attitudes) created pro-gender street art stickers, featuring two players kissing in front of a rainbow flag or the slogan *celebrate football – fight homophobia*, as detected by Velikonja (2022: 233). Naturally, at the time of the marriage equality referenda, the counter-hegemonic pro-gender graffiti, like *Bible ≠ Constitution* and *Jesus had two fathers*, also proliferated.

Arguably, the most impressive pro-gender graffiti creators in the country have been the anonymous activists of the Decontamination (Dekontraminacija) project, run originally by sociologist Nina Perger (2019) from the Appareo association and since 2019 by the Ljubljana Pride association. A combination of words *decontamination* and *contra*, decontamination is a process by which hateful graffiti (gay bashing, anti-gender slogans, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech etc.) are visually modified by spray-paint interventions in various, often humorous, ways in order to reverse their original

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<sup>7</sup> Mojca is a common female name in Slovenia and unlike some names of Slavic origin like Vanja, Saša or Petja, it cannot be used uncontestedly for naming both girls and boys.

meaning, and hence decontaminate the location. As a result, not only have dozens of anti-gender graffiti been counter-balanced, but a mobile app and a Google map with photos of 250 such spots have been created, not to mention the educational workshops where attendees are taught how to practise “decontamination”.



Image 1: An intervention by a Decontamination activist: KILL LESBIANS becomes KNEEL BEFORE LESBIANS.

As noted above, one of the three key discursive strategies of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia is victim-perpetrator reversal. A responding strategy of Decontamination is a simple, yet creative pro-gender re-reversification of the original anti-gender reversal. This manoeuvre is possible due to a feature of anti-gender discourse, termed “non-total character of hate speech” by Perger (2019), which invites audiences to confront it in an oppositional way. In practice, this means adding letters, words and symbols (in pink or red colour) to, and/or using word-play modifications of, the original graffiti in order to (at least neutralise it, if not) turn it into a pro-gender slogan. If done in a witty way, the effect is fascinating. For example, slogan *against the LGBT revolution* was turned into *we’re not against the LGBT revolution; stop the LGBT revolution* became *don’t stop the LGBT revolution; stop LGBT* was reversed into *stop the LGBT phobia; death to faggots* was changed to *marriage, not death, to faggots; kill lesbians (lezbijke na kole)* was turned into *kneel before lesbians (pred lezbijke na kolena)* (Image 1), etc. (see Perger, Mencin Čeplak 2019).

Although these interventions are at first glance reactive, it can be argued that they are actually a proactive strategy planned well ahead rather than a mere reaction. They employ innovative yet standardised know-how that is being subjected to continuous updates via what could be termed learning-in-progress, and hence updated on regular basis, enabling Decontaminators to apply it to various conceptually similar instances of anti-gender graffiti propaganda and hate speech.

### **DJND v. Scapegoating**

As pointed out in the fourth chapter, the anti-gender agents frequently employ the discursive strategy of scapegoating, which can however be also used in an innovatively oppositional ways by citizen collectives. A case in point is Today is a New Day (Danes je nov dan, DJND), a multi-cause activist and online-design collective, working in fields of information design as well as social, economic and cultural policies.

According to one of their many founding members, Jasmina Ploštajner (2017), DJND creates original online campaigns that shed light on various political issues in a user-friendly way, hoping these would encourage audiences to start questioning hegemonic narratives. They are exploring the low-budget ways in which audiences' attention and reaction to non-spectacular political issues, such as a Greenpeace petition signing or a parliamentary vote-count categorisation, can be provoked. What they are basically solving is the problem of finding innovative ways through which Slovenian civil society can engage with a particular political topic in a progressive way. They strive to achieve this through effective online design, combined with videos, gamification, and humour, often translating dry data into meaningful information (Plosteiner 2017: 64).

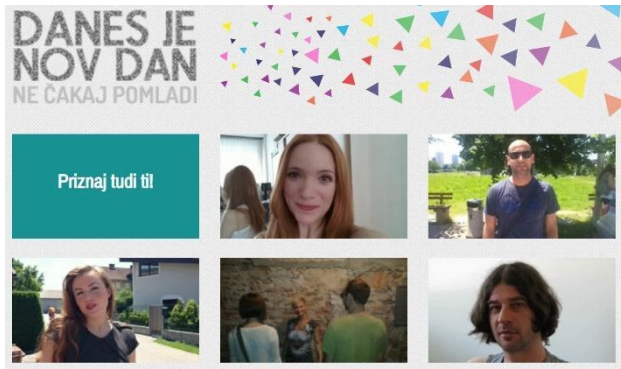


Image 2. A part of Homygod project web page: TODAY IS A NEW DAY: DON'T WAIT FOR THE SPRING; You should admit it, too! (source: DJND 2013a)

In their project Homygod (Homojbog) (DJND 2013a), they created a website packed with twenty-three embedded short YouTube videos, all set in a neatly separated web of squares (Image 2). The videos feature local celebrities self-identifying as non-heterosexual persons, even though they are “straight”. The title of the project is a word play which combines expressions *homo* and *oh my god* resulting in the intriguing *homo my god* or *my homo god* meaning creation. On the denotative level, the website is very colourful and lively as the videos play in a loop. The square on the top reads, “You should admit it, too!” while another invites us to send the link to our YouTube confession to the website. The videos, however, do not feature laypersons, but rather actors, musicians, and TV personalities. The celebrities are (self-)filmed in private (indoor or outdoor) settings, talking directly into the camera as if addressing the viewer. What is rather unusual is that most men in the videos identify as non-heterosexual persons through the word *faggot* (*peder*), a possibly very offensive and rude word in Slovenian language, rather than the word gay (*gej*), which is considered neutral. They say, for instance, “I’m a faggot”, “today I’m an ordinary faggot,” or “today, I also am a faggot”.

The purpose of the campaign, according to the DJND (2013b), was to show solidarity with everyone marked by such or similar insults. With the project, they wished to distance themselves on purpose from the counterproductive patronizing attitude of the liberal public. They believe that vulgar insults are the opposite side of the coin of politically correct discourse, which argues that “they are just like us” and “we are all human,” tolerating gays hence only by the broadest common denominator of the biological species, but not really accepting them as gays. This is the reason, DJND claim, the saying “we are all faggots,” still sounds like an insult. DJND wants audiences

to be stunned by the celebrities' rude statements, since they firmly believe the audience's initial astonishment will be followed by what DJND call a "performative effect" (DJND 2013b), leading the audience presumably not only to reflect on their position but also to act in accordance with emancipatory reading of gender fluidity.

On the connotative level, the local celebrity gods (and goddesses who say "Today I'm a lesbian") intriguingly embrace the supposedly ungodly identity, the identity of the Devil, the persona of the Other, turning themselves into immoral role models for children (who might also be watching these statements on YouTube, for instance, where they were all provocatively titled as "John/Joan Smith [celebrity's name] is a faggot/lesbian"). If according to the Bible, a scapegoat is a goat that was selected out of a herd as the one that symbolically embodies the sins of the inhabitants and hence needs to be expelled out into the wilderness; according to DJND, one should not only show love to one's inner non-heteronormative self but volunteer as a scapegoat and "own" this scapegoat identity publicly, despite the risk of social expulsion. In other words, DJND is creating an informed, counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourse, which utilises as scapegoats the *strong* celebrity role models whose vocal presence deconstructs and compromises the anti-gender movement's discursive strategy of scapegoating the *weak* "heterosexuals". This move instead empowers gays and lesbians, and allows the audiences to solidarise with them in a liberating fashion.

### **Smetnjak v. Conspiracy Theory Construction**

The final case study of Slovenian citizen collectives' counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourses discusses an anonymous media and art collective, Smetnjak (The Trash Can) whose main output are political memes. A combination of humour, visual culture, fictitious references, and political theory, their memes subvert, deconstruct and re-contextualise everyday messages from Slovenian mainstream political parties and cultural elites. In short, Smetnjak is a meme factory, manufacturing on daily basis original content in the form of reflective yet fun textual-visual memes full of lucid wittiness and polysemy. Their preferred dissemination tools are FB (3,400 followers), TW (2,200 followers), and IG (3,600 followers), where they share their memes in a rather synchronised fashion.

Abandoning either-or reductions and dwelling effortlessly in the land beyond left/right, urban/rural and mainstream/alternative dichotomies, Smetnjak thrives on ideological ambiguity (Krašovec 2021: 12). Their memes show the possibility of being "political without taking sides, [although] it is impossible to say whether Smetnjak's views are right or wrong," argues Krašovec (2021: 13). It is exactly in this sense that the Smetnjak crew approaches gender issues. While, on the one hand, they for example crossdress and feminise images of openly homophobic and misogynist rightwing agents, such as Janez Janša, they avoid any type of conservative queering of images that would imply a regressive ridicule of queer bodies, lifestyles and identities (see Smetnjak 2020). It seems that they apply equally strict procedures to leftwing politicians, liberal feminist activists, Marxist thinkers, etc. In that sense, what they are doing goes beyond the mockery of hypocrisy of the classic tale of homophobes caught with their hand in the gay cookie jar. What they practise is a form of equidistant "sur-realising," a way of turning dominant discourses into a surrealist visual work of (political) art, completely fragmenting the subjects' aura of importance in the process. Krašovec (2021) contends that

Smetnjak use memes of homoerotic tenderness between rightwing politicians or their androgyny to [challenge] the established division between the good, tolerant left-wing on one side and the evil, intolerant right-wing on the other. They problematise these simple dichotomies to reveal the stubbornly concealed theme of the importance of homosexual bonds for the genesis of historical and present-day fascisms and the historically ambivalent attitude of the left-wing towards male homosexuality. (Krašovec 2021: 11)

Indeed, both the left and right conceal their gender skeletons in their closets, and Smetnjak does everything to make them uncomfortable about them. Not unlike DJND's Homygod project, Smetnjak's whole "gender opus" reminds us of hypocrisy of the liberal proponents of "gay liberation" when it comes to merely tolerating but not really accepting the Other. However, Smetnjak goes even further. They familiarise the gender issue and LGBTQ+ persons to the extent that many would find distasteful. Their gender re-workings, such as digitally generated female versions of male politicians, and male versions of female politicians, remind us that gender is not necessarily the primary trait of one's identity.



Image 2. Smetnjak visually modifies liberal politician Rober Golob's International Women's Day address: FREEDOM! [the name of the party] Happy holiday to all women and persons who identify as women. (source: Smetnjak Facebook page)

In Smetnjak's discourse, ignoring the often "problematic" political choices of (both lower and upper class) gays in relation to issues such as gentrification, cultural consumption, migration, religion, and race, is not an option. Forgetting about the possibility of an openly lesbian PM whose policies are predominantly heteronormative and result in boosting the power of anti-gender movement (like in the case of Serbia), is definitely not an option. In the times of post-truth media narratives and anti-gender conspiracy theories, Smetnjak arguably provides us with a radical counter-hegemonic pro-gender conspiracy discourse full of impossible connections, half-truths, insane hints, and crazy juxtapositions. However, no matter how wild their imagination runs, Smetnjak remains anchored in an emancipatory universe and is at the same time extremely funny without succumbing to simplifications. On the contrary, despite their

content's conspiratorial character, they provide us with valuable insights. For example, about leftwingers possibly being as homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic as they are patriarchal. Or about LGBTQ+ people possibly being as autocratic, fascist, or Stalinist as the next (wo)man\*.

## 7) Discussion and conclusion

Employing existing discursive analysis, as well as some original discursive analysis, of governmental and non-governmental actors, including anti- and pro-gender organisations, far-right groups, and grassroots activist collectives, this report tried to show that counter-hegemonic pro-gender discourses are present in Slovenian society in a myriad of ways. They have been used by pro-gender actors as a direct reactive response to anti-gender attacks or as a unique pro-active narrative in a complex debate on gender issues. When analysing social media comment sections, one gets reminded that political communication is rarely an effective one-way propaganda but rather an uphill battle of persuasion and endless deliberation.

The power of counter-hegemonic communication, however, is debatable and highly contested. Following the idea, that audience is active in interpreting hegemonic representations of sex/gender in oppositional rather than dominant ways, like Fisk, Morley and Woods (in Brooker and Jermyn 2003a) propose, one must ask to what extent does this phenomenon impact broader social and cultural relations of power. Are these not merely minor acts of (pro-gender) rebellion and small-scale (non-binary) resistance within an imposed structure (of heteronormativity), as Brooker and Jermyn (2003b: 93) wonder. "These practices of negotiating and even opposing are laudable, but [do] they [not] remain limited in their cultural power[?]" (ibid.)

Anti-gender prejudices have been part of the predominant structural and systemic reality of Slovenian everyday life to the extent that they have been practised not only by the obvious opponents of LGBTQ+ equality, but also by what would seem progressive actors of counter- and de-radicalisation. Should one go back to the 1980s Slovenia, one could discover that also the New Social Movements (let alone society as a whole) behaved less than ideally towards feminist, gay and lesbian activist groups. "Feminist initiatives were separated from this movement, partially by their own choice, partially because they were, along with other homosexual initiatives, the least welcome in the circles of 'civil society'," wrote Jalušić (cited in Oblak, Pan 2019: 30) in her take on Slovenian/Yugoslav feminist history. Mojca Dobnikar, an influential feminist-lesbian activist, remembers that there was "machismo" and "vulgar sexist discourse" commonly present in the 1980s Ljubljana "alternative scene" (cited in Lesničar Pučko 2015).

In the squatted Rog Factory of the 2010s, the history of patriarchal dismissal by predominantly male subcultural and sub-political subjects, too, returns. This time in the form of male squatters unwilling and unable to give respect to anarchist-feminist-queer activists (see Avtonomne feministke 2017). Consequently, the women were criticised for pasting feminist posters and painting feminist slogans over sexist graffiti on Rog's walls. They were also unable to secure an accessible working space for themselves within the realm of the "autonomous factory". Despite their due sacrifice

of putting their bodies on the line in defence of the squat just like their male peers, they were forced to use a space on the rundown building's third floor that was barely accessible. In their account of those times, they also report that while democratic rules allowed their activists to speak at Rog assemblies, their speech was not perceived as "a result of rational reflection, but rather as a bother, souring of the community, a destructive, banal, disgusting, noisy stuttering" (Autonomous Feminists 2017: 142).

The question therefore remains, how to reign in not only the patriarchy in our society but also the patriarchy within ourselves, the supposed progressives, as Bilić (2019: 8-9) asks in his Introduction to the (post-)Yugoslav lesbian activism reader. Patriarchal hegemony "travels from the heterosexual/sexist sphere to pervade non-heterosexual activist enterprises" (ibid). It seems this is the first challenge the counter-hegemonic pro-gender scholarship and activism should tackle before addressing gender-related radicalisation in broader society. How can we expect from the established popular media and their audience more sensitivity for the Other, when even the allegedly most accepting groups have trouble opening their arms to the different, the marginalised, and the excluded?



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