The European Christian Right: An Overview

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A few weeks before the parliamentary elections in Hungary in 2018, Pastor Sándor Németh, leader of the 70,000-member Pentecostal Faith Church, ascended the stage of Europe's largest megachurch in Budapest for the Sunday service. As customary, the Sunday service was broadcast to tens of thousands of households on television and online through his family-run media empire.

In response to a question from his congregation about his endorsement of the far-right politician Viktor Orbán as the only suitable candidate for prime minister, Nèmeth explained what he had been saying repeatedly in recent months: voting for the opposition meant "allowing 10,000 Muslims a year into Hungary." He added that only Orbán could protect Hungary from same-sex marriages and gender ideology. He also expressed concerns that if *Islamization* and *cultural Marxism* were allowed in Hungary, "Hungarian Christianity would never be able to recover" (Adam 2018).

One year later and a few thousand kilometers to the south, the square in front of Milan Cathedral was packed as Matteo Salvini, the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and head of the populist radical-right party Lega, concluded his party's election campaign for the European Parliament. He had previously criticized Pope Francis's remarks on refugee admission, invoking some of the patron saints of Europe. "I personally entrust Italy, my life, and yours, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who I am sure will lead us to victory," he proclaimed, drawing a sacred rosary from his breast pocket amid roaring applause from his supporters waving Italian flags (Vista Agenzia 2019). Two years later, in 2022, Giorgia Meloni, Salvini's competitor and ally, would eventually become the first Italian prime minister with a past in a neofascist organization. During her campaign, she emphasized the importance of "God, fatherland, and family"—a modern reinterpretation of "God and fatherland," the fascist motto previously used by Benito Mussolini (Evolvi 2023).

In the same year, Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church and its approximately 100 million believers, delivered his weekly Sunday sermon, which once again made headlines worldwide on account of his homophobic and anti-Western rhetoric. During the months since the invasion of Ukraine, Kirill had been increasingly justifying the war theologically, advancing the idea of *Holy Russia* (*Russkii Mir*) as the last bastion of Christianity against what he perceived as the supposed moral corruption of the West. During the sermon, he responded to the recent announcement of his long-time ally Vladimir Putin regarding the mobilization of reserve forces to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating as follows: "The Church realizes that if someone, driven by a sense of duty and the need to honor his oath, remains loyal to his vocation and dies while carrying out his military duty this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed" (Radio Free Europe 2022).

Even though these episodes occurred thousands of kilometers apart, it is clear that they were neither isolated incidents nor mere coincidences. They disclose a development that has been gaining significant traction worldwide. This development is not exclusive to Europe, nor is it solely found within Christianity. It can also be found as Christian Nationalism in the USA and Brazil, as Hindu nationalism in India, and Religious Zionism in Israel. These episodes represent symptoms of a subtle yet momentous shift that is profoundly shaping European politics today. They reveal two major colliding phenomena, giving rise to a dangerous and far-reaching combination: the politicization of religion, often driven by religious actors, leaders, and institutions, and the sacralization of politics, driven by far-right parties and actors (Van der Tol and Gorski 2022). Signs of these shifting dynamics can be observed during the last 20 years in various stages and forms across the continent, from Portugal to Romania and from the United Kingdom to Greece. Adherents of this development aim to overturn both liberal democracy and the role of traditional religious authorities by challenging the established relationships and norms between politics and religion in Europe.

However, examining these dynamics only within their respective national borders merely scratches the surface. The origins, strategies, and influences of these narratives and actors are not confined to the corridors of power of any specific capital, as they intentionally cross borders, ideologies, and denominations, as well as institutional barriers, even though the overwhelming majority of Christian churches across Europe remain strongly committed to liberal democracy. A closer examination reveals highly sophisticated networks—across Europe and beyond—between think tanks, non-governmental

organizations, oil and gas companies, dubious financiers, state-funded charities and associations, extremist parties and groups, church leaders, and other initiatives. These networks have covertly intertwined, operating away from the public eye and forming formidable and ambitious lobby groups. For instance, many of the previously mentioned actors are connected in one way or another to the World Congress of Families, a powerful US-based organization that through intensive networking has made an imprint at the global level and that will be examined more closely across the country-specific case studies in this edited volume.

These multifaceted developments unveil a global exchange of ideas, trends, and strategies in a transformation that is more commonly associated with the US–American context, with which it shares the most similarities, but that also operates according to its own inherent patterns: the emergence of a Christian Right in Europe.

What is the Christian Right in Europe?

The definition of *Christian Right*, which determines the case selection and analysis in this volume, is made of three building blocks: ideology, institutions, and strategies. We define the Christian Right by what its representatives think, how they operate, and the goals they pursue. We include in the Christian-Right phenomenon only those groups that meet the definitional criteria for all of the following three aspects.

a) The Christian-Right ideology includes the following ideas: rejection of abortion; preference for a patriarchal family model (according to which the socially desirable family is made up of a married heterosexual couple with biological offspring); rejection of rights pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., gay marriage or transgender rights); hostility vis-à-vis Islam and the conviction that Christianity is a superior religion; support for the idea that one's nation is Christian and that Christianity should play a special role in a country's everyday culture and politics (e.g., when it comes to the display of religious symbols in the public sphere or the celebration of public holidays); and belief in doomsday narratives such as the *Great Replacement*. In more abstract terms, the actors studied in this volume privilege nationalism over globalism, particularism over universalism, legal sovereignty over international law, patriarchy

over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties. While not all groups and individuals that we include in our analysis hold all of these ideas, each of them sustains at least one of them on a wide spectrum from mainstream conservative to extreme-right ideas.

b) The Christian-Right actors studied in this volume come in different institutional forms: political parties in government or in opposition; individual politicians; epistemic communities made up of public intellectuals, scholars, and journalists; and civil society organizations (e.g., NGOs or charities) and religious organizations and groups. One part of our definition of the Christian Right in Europe is that it is a *networked* phenomenon: the Christian-Right groups studied in this volume connect across denominations (they are interdenominational) and across countries (they are international) (Lo Mascolo 2021). Christian-Right organizations often emerge out of or refer back to churches and congregational constituencies. Christian-Right groups obtain support from priests or bishops, and they often use the church setting as a venue to propagate their ideas and political strategies. But the Christian-Right groups studied in this volume are usually *smaller* and more *sectarian* than mainstream churches; in fact, they often challenge the Christian mainstream and religious hierarchies for not being conservative enough. It is only in very isolated cases that entire congregational bodies become part of the Christian Right.

   A central point with regard to the institutional form of Christian-Right organizations is that the membership is active and primarily identitarian. People actively identify with the Christian Right, and this identification becomes the basis for their actions: they vote for Christian-Right candidates in elections; they take part in manifestations and events organized by these groups; they attend religious congregations with priests who support their ultra-conservative agendas or even convert to another religion that is less compromising with the modern world; they post and follow Christian-Right content on social media; and some of them even organize their private and professional lives in ways that allow them to maintain a distance from the rest of society (e.g., through the practice of homeschooling or self-employment).

c) The Christian Right pursues strategies that aim to influence and even radically change the liberal democratic consensus that has shaped European politics in the last decades. In particular, they contest the role of religion in society and politics as a matter of identity. Contrary to the doctrine of the

separation of church and state in the United States, European states maintain a variety of church–state relationships. While many states have gone through processes of secularization, some states maintain forms of cooperation between church and state, and some have state churches (Madeley and Enyedi 2003). Whatever the arrangements are, all of the examples of the Christian Right in Europe contained in this volume take issue with the status quo of religion–state relations. Usually, they consider the existing arrangement as too lenient, view the relationship between religion and the state as too close, criticize the churches for being too liberal and for making too many compromises with the secular part of society, and work toward strengthening the status and visibility of their Christian identity in politics and the public sphere. For the most part, the groups analyzed by the contributors to this volume aim at altering the liberal democratic framework in their respective countries, as they consider it *too progressive, too liberal*, and *too secular*. Others seek to maintain the status quo and prevent future change in situations where conservative policies are in place. The following are examples of the strategies and goals of the Christian Right: preventing or dismantling legislation on sexual and reproductive rights; demanding and implementing restrictive migration policies, especially with regard to Muslim immigrants; creating or upholding constitutional and legal conditions that make it difficult for minorities to obtain equal rights; asserting national legal sovereignty against EU institutions or international human rights legislation; advocating policies that privilege the family unit over those that help individual family members (e.g., in taxation); and demanding a privileged and visible role for cultural Christianity in the public sphere, while at the same time calling for the dismantling of the privileged position of the mainstream churches.

In the context of highly secularized European societies, such demands are often categorized in public opinion as obsolete and minority opinions, especially since the Christian Right is often only one current in otherwise highly secular identitarian far-right parties. If analyzed from a national perspective alone, the emergence and potential of politically oriented religious networks with these kinds of demands are easily underestimated. These groups might be perceived as disjointed, minoritarian, and insignificant in their respective contexts. From a transnational perspective, however, they form a powerful network and an important—albeit minoritarian—subcurrent of the far right in Europe. Therefore, this volume brings together a wide range of country case studies to show the ideological con-

vergence between different religious denominations and networks and between actors that share the same ultra-conservative concepts and political agendas.

It is along these three dimensions—*ideas–institutions–strategies*—that the contributors to this volume have identified the Christian Right in Europe. As readers engage with the case studies, they will get a clearer sense of this definition, which is not static but circumscribes a shifting target.

One frequent definition of the Christian Right is that it is *fundamentalist*. This is often true in terms of ideas and institutions, but it is not always the case when it comes to strategies. Sociologists of religion concur that religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that can be found in all religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.), and the term itself actually derives from Protestant theology (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; Marty and Appleby 1991–1993). However, fundamentalist religions are not actually always political. In fact, fundamentalist sectarian groups have historically sought to retreat from *the world*, which they consider pagan or doomed. *Fundamentalist* is thus a term that catches a crucial ideological dimension of the Christian-Right phenomenon (*ideas*), but it leaves undetermined the practical (*institutions*) and political (*strategies*) consequences of these ideological choices. Unlike the fundamentalist groups that retreat from the world, Christian-Right fundamentalism actively enters into politics.

Another aspect regarding the definition is whether the Christian Right is made up of religious groups that become politicized or (conversely) political groups that incorporate religious ideas into their agendas for politically opportunistic reasons. In fact, both of these pathways explain the emergence of the Christian Right in Europe. In this volume, there are religious groups that mobilize politically. There are also examples of originally secular political groups that were already pursuing illiberal and right-wing strategies and subsequently adopted a religious language to gain new persuasiveness (e.g., the Italian right-wing party Lega, which has adopted conservative Christian ideas largely in response to immigration from Muslim countries). Lately, the latter phenomenon has been labeled *the hijacking of religion* (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2015; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmann 2021). Many far-right movements in Europe are explicitly secular and critical not just of Islam but also of Christian values, beliefs, and institutions, which they perceive as too lenient on issues such as immigration and religious freedom. Yet, this secular post-religious right often still seeks to use Christian symbols and language

as secularized identity markers of the nation in what Cremer (2023) calls "a godless Crusade," thus creating the basis for "a Faustian bargain" between the mainstream secular and identitarian right and the subcurrent of the Christian right.

What is *new* about the Christian Right in Europe?

This book is the first to popularize the term *Christian Right in Europe* in its title. What is special about this expression and why is it *new*? Could it be an exaggeration to speak of a European Christian Right, given the existing denominational discord and liturgical and doctrinal differences characteristic of Europe's religious landscape (Lo Mascolo 2021)? Europe, while historically and culturally shaped by Christianity, as well as by Judaism and Islam, is today a highly secularized continent that is characterized by a plurality of religions, ethnicities, and worldviews. Notwithstanding the sustained trend toward ever greater secularization and pluralization across all European societies (Inglehart 2008; Casanova 2006), Christian churches continue to play a role in European politics. With some variations, many churches hold conservative social ideas along the parameters outlined above (patriarchy over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties), while others espouse highly progressive values (especially regarding the protection of the environment or immigration). Until a few decades ago, most of the churches' conservative ideas on social issues were actually societally mainstream or even on the progressive end of the divide. It suffices to point out that discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin was outlawed in the United States only in 1964 at the behest of the religiously inspired civil rights movement; divorce became legal in Italy only in 1970; homosexual conduct was a penal offence in Austria until 1971; and physical violence as a legitimate aspect of parental care was outlawed in West Germany only in 1980. A whole range of what we consider part of the liberal democratic consensus today, such as women's equality and respect for gender diversity, are in fact rather recent achievements.

In this context, *regular* Christian positions have come to stick out as conservative or right wing in the overall context of liberalization and secularization that has characterized Europe (and the United States) for decades (Inglehart and Norris 2004). Could it therefore be that, at least in terms of *ideas*, there is actually nothing new about the Christian Right in Europe—that it has al-

ways been around and is only becoming visible now as societies turn increasingly post-Christian? For the contributors to this volume, the Christian Right is not a residual phenomenon but something that needs to be distinguished from the (diminishing) Christian mainstream along the three dimensions outlined above: ideas–institutions–strategies. The terminological choice is indebted to the analogous *American Christian Right*, and we thus discuss the question of what is *new* about this phenomenon in Europe with reference to the Christian Right in the United States.

The rise of the American Christian Right as a political movement began in the 1970s (Schulman and Zelizer 2008; Dowland 2015; Lassiter 2008). American society in the 1960s and 1970s was changing rapidly. The Civil Rights Movement ended racial segregation; feminist struggles achieved, among other things, the legalization of abortion; and the counter-cultural movement associated with sexual liberation and new lifestyles profoundly changed youth culture. One effect of racial desegregation was a conflict between religious colleges and the government of the United States, which threatened to withdraw the tax-exempt status from colleges that refused admission to black students. The religious colleges framed the topic as an attack against their religious freedom (Balmer 2021). In short, by the middle of the 1970s, what had hitherto been the ideal of American social politics—the white Christian middle-class family with a breadwinning father, a stay-home mother, and their biological offspring—appeared to be in crisis.

Conservative politicians and Christian actors blamed a culture of permissiveness and the consequences of the sexual revolution on the influence of leftist ideas, as well as on secularization and the erosion of the Christian foundations of American society. In the 1980s, the United States experienced the rise of the Moral Majority, the earliest Christian-Right movement, which successfully supported Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign. Founded by the televangelist Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority quickly grew into a Baptist-dominated non-denominational Christian movement against gay rights, abortion, contraception, sexual education, etc. Their emphasis on values and morality helped conceal the racist origins of the Christian Right, which preferred to focus on morality politics rather than race questions in order to garner a popular consensus and the support of the Republican political mainstream (Balmer 2021; Flowers 2019). Racism and white superiority remained, nonetheless, important ideological components of the movement that contemporary scholars also describe as *White Christian Nationalism* (Gorski and Perry 2022).

In Europe, meanwhile, the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s unfolded against a very different historical background. Europe was still recovering from the experience of Nazism, fascism, and the destruction of World War II, and it was weighed down by the confrontation with the USSR and the East–West division of the Iron Curtain. In particular, the Protestant churches had discredited themselves by first supporting and later only half-heartedly opposing fascism and National Socialism, while the Catholic church was from the beginning active in anti-Nazi resistance, even though it had tolerated the formation of clerical fascism, a hybridization of fascism and Christianity in the interwar period (Feldman and Turda 2007). Both reentered the political game after the war, humbled and in a spirit of compromise with the secular and liberal democratic order. With the exception of Spain, Portugal, and Greece, where alliances between the fascist leadership and the clergy remained until their demise in the mid-1970s (even though clergy were often involved in resistance activities underground), the churches in most Western European countries became powerful pillars of liberal democracies. For example, they upheld links with the political establishment (especially with Christian democratic parties), had a decisive role in establishing liberal democracy and European integration as a way of defending their interests (Grzymała-Busse 2015), and otherwise acted as a critical part of civil society.

In the communist part of Europe, all churches and religious groups were repressed by communist regimes and had little opportunity to enter into politics. The Western European Christian churches and the Christian democratic parties by and large sustained socially conservative positions and rejected the political demands of the feminist and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Their political antagonists were usually the equally powerful social democratic parties, although these were also often fueled by religious actors, such as Christian socialists. As a result of this political constellation, many charged policies (e.g., on abortion and divorce) passed as compromise solutions between Christian democratic and social democratic parties and against the will of the reluctant churches, while on other issues, the churches were at the helm of the progressive movement, as in the peace movement and the environmental movement (Minkenberg 2003).

The European situation was different from the United States, where religious conservative and progressive groups found themselves on a level playing field, and each side tried to garner public support and consensus by lobbying politics for their ends. Whereas in the US, non-state actors created coher-

ent and strategic alliances in support of the Republican Party, in Europe, state co-funding exercised greater control over the nonprofit space (Hennig 2022).

The metaphorical *playing field* in the US soon turned into a battlefield, and the American *culture wars,* a term coined by sociologist James D. Hunter in his book of the same title (1991), began to unfold. Hunter's book started from the observation that moral debates in American society in the post–World War II period were no longer primarily defined by denominational differences between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews but by ideological differences between moral progressives and moral conservatives. Importantly, this divide was not between the secular and religious parts of American society—although much of the popular narrative portrays it that way—but bitterly ran right through religious communities themselves. On both sides of the culture wars divide, social movements, NGOs, and foundations were created to advance specific policy goals. On the progressive side, feminist movements and LGBTIQA+ groups lobbied for equal rights and inclusion; on the conservative side, pro-family and anti-abortion groups resisted such changes. NGOs such as Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, the American Family Forum, Concerned Women for America, the Campaign Life Coalition, and the American Life League came to make up a coherent, powerful Christian-Right movement with a direct influence on politics (Flowers 2019). These institutions and their leaders defined the ideas, institutions, and strategies of Christian-Right conservatism that have become relevant today in Europe.

The American model of civil society organizing stood in stark contrast to the cooperative models of state–church relations that remained in place in most European countries. Given the role of the churches and mainstream Christian-right parties before the 1990s, Western Europe had no real counterpart to the American Christian-Right intellectual and institutional (ideas–institutions–strategies) complex, made up of powerful NGOs with many members and wealthy foundations to back them up and encompassing a whole portfolio of issues (gun rights, abortion, pornography, school prayer, race, etc.). Until the 1990s, the situation for moral conservative mobilization in Europe was thus very different from that in the US. That we now speak—as we do in this book—about a Christian Right in Europe has its roots in a process generally defined as the *globalization of the American culture wars* (Berkley Center 2019; Hennig 2022).

Scholars connect the globalization of the American culture wars—and with it the American Christian-Right ideas–institutions–strategies complex—with the expansion of the international human rights regime. From the

1990s onwards, UN institutions started to address and include in their human rights work issues that Christian conservatives wanted to keep off the list of human rights politics: women's rights, sexual orientation and gender-rights, children's rights, and reproductive rights (Bob 2012; Marshall 2017; Butler 2000; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Chappel 2006; Buss and Herman 2003).

Besides American conservative NGOs, the Catholic Church under Pope John Paul II also played a central role in pushing moral conservative positions on family and women's issues within the UN framework. It did not take long for them to enter into cooperation against the UN agenda, with the support of the Global South and often in opposition to the more secular-oriented West. The Vatican realized that its intransigent positions in terms of sexual morality and reproductive rights were no longer widely supported by the highly secularized Western European publics (McIntosh and Finkle 1995, 248). Consequently, the Catholic Church oriented itself more strongly toward the Global South while at the same time opening up to the American Christian Right, entering into cooperation with groups that were not Catholic and that included Evangelicals, Protestants, Christian Orthodox, and Anglicans, as well as on occasion Jewish and Muslim groups. In other words, at a moment when—especially in Western Europe—national churches were moving toward more progressive positions and were no longer able or willing to influence the policy decisions of their governments, alternative players stepped up, particularly the conservative civil society organizations of the American Christian Right.

The end of the Cold War accelerated the globalization of the American culture wars. Across Central and Eastern Europe, religion returned to the public sphere after decades of communism, often playing a critical role in the pro-democracy movements in the former Eastern bloc, as prominently seen in the Solidarność movement in Poland and the peaceful revolution in Eastern Germany (see Casanova 1994). While economically liberal and democratic, many new EU member states were predominantly socially conservative and thus had little space for the pluralism and minority rights advocated within the EU's rights framework. Religion and moral values emerged as a new and unexpected cleavage in secular Europe (Katzenstein 2006).

Meanwhile in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church and the increasingly autocratic leadership of Vladimir Putin imposed a conservative turn built around traditional values, patriotism, and anti-liberalism. Russia's traditionalist turn was not entirely homegrown. Russian Christian-Right actors borrowed ideas, institutional forms, and strategies from American Christian-

Right groups with which they interacted frequently over many years (Stoeckl 2020).

In short, just as we saw a *Europeanization* of the American right in the 2010s with the adoption of secular European identitarian, ethnopluralist, and populist methods and rhetoric by the Trump movement (Cremer 2023), since the 1990s and 2000s, we have seen in Europe the rise of a coherent Christian-Right complex that challenges the traditional cooperative model between religion and state in Europe. This European Christian Right resembles and imitates—in terms of ideas, institutions, and strategies—the American Christian Right and in some ways is even directly connected with it. However, just as Trumpism is no carbon copy of Europe's secular, identitarian populist right, ultra-conservative Christian activism in Europe is not simply a copy of the US Christian Right; rather, it is the result of intensive transnational interactions between local and international NGOs and social movements that show a remarkable organizational cohesion.

These organizations and groups have adapted to the political, religious, and cultural characteristics of the European continent and have embedded themselves in their own new environments in which they operate successfully. For example, the American Christian-Right law firm Alliance Defending Freedom has opened an international branch in Vienna, from where it conducts legal cases before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (ADF International 2022). Another organization, the American Center for Law and Justice, has opened an office in Strasbourg and regularly intervenes in policy debates at the Council of Europe and European Commission (ECLJ 2018). In this volume, readers will find numerous examples of European organizations with ties to or roots in the American Christian Right, one prominent case being the World Congress of Families, which is discussed by several authors. What the case studies in this volume indicate is that across Europe, there is a relatively coherent Christian-Right *blueprint*: the stress on rights, the organizational form of grassroots NGOs, the use of lobbying and strategic litigation, the closeness with (far-) right parties, and the targeting of international organizations and high-level court cases.

Dominant features and strategies of the European Christian Right

Main themes

The increasing similarity to the US Christian Right in matters of strategy and shared narratives, as well as the convergence and development of interwoven networks of grassroots movements, churches, and far-right parties within Europe, is particularly evident in the common anti-gender effort (Behrensen, Heimbach-Steins, and Hennig 2019). In fact, the case studies in this volume clearly show that the Christian Right in Europe is kept together by two dominant themes: anti-gender ideas (Kováts and Põim 2015; Graff and Korolczuk 2022) and anxieties over immigration (Schain 2018; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmann 2021). To some extent, both of these themes can be connected to a single idea, namely white Christian nationalism, as described by Gorski and Perry (2022) for the United States.

While white Christian nationalism in the US is a specific product of America's history of both slavery and its founding myth as a Christian nation, which led to a nationalism that was specifically race-based and pro-Christian, in Europe, nationalism has historically been much more secular and cultural in nature. Specifically, it has been built around the rejection of immigration from Muslim countries and sub-Saharan Africa and the rejection of the pluralism, diversity, and non-discrimination advocated by the progressive side of the political spectrum and European institutions. The idea of defending *Christian Europe* is primarily an identitarian and secularized idea of *civilzationism* (see Brubakar 2017), involving a wide tent of concerns: pro-natalism and traditional gender roles, anti-immigration policies, intolerance vis-à-vis Islam, the conviction that Christianity is a superior religion and more progressive in respect to others, and Christian nationalism, not least because it has produced secularism and is used as a cultural identity marker. In a few countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, Christian-Right actors were able to blend Christian nationalist narratives with conspiracy theories about COVID-19, radicalizing and mobilizing new members by using their pre-existing skepticism toward liberal democracy and gender and immigration policies (Strube 2023; Van der Tol 2023).

The identification of Islam as an external and increasingly internal threat after 9/11 served as an additional factor in closing the ranks between ultraconservative Christians and the more secular far-right mainstream in Europe (Brubakar 2017; Cremer 2023). The prominence of the *clash of civilizations* theory

(Huntington 1993), which stated that religious identities would be a significant reason for conflict after the Cold War, strengthened the concept of a secularized, historically Christian Europe at war with Islam. Radical-right parties had been anti-immigration for decades (Wodak and Reisigl 2000), but with the rise of global Islamism as a major political threat in the 2000s and 2010s, long-held xenophobic attitudes merged with anti-Muslim racism. Nativism and advocacy of closed borders garnered the populist radical-right parties electoral success. As part of a strategy to deflect from the inherent racism involved in agitating against migrants, religion started to be used as an important identity marker of the *other* (Marzouki et al. 2015).

In secular Europe, it was often only given this religious definition of the other as *Muslim* that Christianity emerged, alongside secularism or *laicité*, as an analogous cultural identity marker of the *us*. Critically, this did not empirically coincide with a resurgence of any form of Christian belief, practice, or affiliation in Europe. Rather, it was symptomatic of a culturalization—perhaps even a secularization—of the symbols of Christianity itself in Europe's increasingly secular societies. In the European far right's *godless crusade*, there is a clear dissociation of Christianity as a faith from *Christendom* as a cultural identity marker of the nation (Cremer 2023; Roy 2019; Brubakar 2017).

Interdenominational and transnational collaboration

A central feature of the Christian Right in Europe is interdenominational collaboration. Why is this cooperation between different religious denominations—Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, etc.—special? It is important to remember here that Europe has a history of religious wars and religious intolerance (Casanova 2009), and until fairly recently, scholars suggested that Europe's main fault lines were actually determined by religion and culture (Spohn 2009; Katzenstein 2006). The phenomenon of the Christian Right in Europe shows that the conflict lines relevant for contemporary European societies do not run (at least most of the time) along state borders or cultural, linguistic, and religious frontlines but right through each and every society (Stoeckl 2011): they are conflicts over values.

Just as in the United States, where Hunter (1991) pointed to interdenominational ties as a main feature of the Christian Right, also in Europe, Christian groups collaborate across religious traditions and with secular currents: an organization such as the World Congress of Families brings together Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians in the name of anti-genderism or shared

conservative values and works together with proponents of strict secularism (laicité) at the National Conservatism Conference. The resistance in Europe closely relates to the concept of gender ideology, promoting the idea that gender and sexual diversity are a fundamental threat to society. This was first promoted by clergy from the Catholic Church (Bracke and Paternotte 2016) and later mainstreamed through both the Christian and the secular populist right in Europe. This cooperation between theologically opposing faith groups is particularly noteworthy, as traditionalist and fundamentalist groups, in particular, were highly hostile to the ecumenical dialogue that evolved in the post-war period, often seeing their counterparts as heretical and sectarians.

Not all religious actors approve of this kind of cooperation; in fact, the Vatican itself has changed position on the global culture wars under Pope Francis, calling Christian-Right transnational networks "an ecumenism of hate" (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017). Most of the Catholic activism that readers will find in this book thus takes place in spite of the reluctance of the Catholic Church to join with the far right in Europe and the US (Casanova 2020). Similarly, the support of far-right movements from Protestant mainline churches is mostly an effort of the conservative grassroots in opposition to the liberal church mainstream and leadership. This conservative grassroots effort is partly the consequence of the increasing cultural and consequently political influence of US-style evangelicalism within Christianity in Europe (Elwert and Radermacher 2017). The Russian Orthodox Church, however, plays a significant role in organizing the transnational Christian Right (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has since changed the picture, making the future of Russia's role in interdenominational alliances less clear. From the perspective of the global culture wars, it is only of secondary importance whether those engaged in the struggle are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christian, as the decisive characteristic becomes whether they identify as conservative or liberal. This binary, characteristic of the American context since the 1970s, is beginning to impact politics in Europe.

The transnational character of the Christian Right is not primarily the result of bottom-up outreach by nationally organized Christian-Right networks, but it is strategically used to strengthen the Christian Right's self-perception as a successful global movement. The strong transnational collaboration of the Christian Right does not contradict their Christian nationalist ideology, as they view themselves as united with their European counterparts in a common struggle (Hennig and Hidalgo 2021).

In contrast to populist extreme-right parties within the EU, the Christian Right in Europe experiences fewer fundamental policy disagreements that hinder transnational coalition building. Instead, these networks can fully utilize populist instruments without being constrained by the need to propose programs and laws that must navigate institutional and international norms and restrictions.

Relationships with right-wing parties

The emergence of the Christian Right in Europe stands in an intricate and complicated relationship with the rise of populist radical-right parties, which have established themselves in the European system over the past 15 years (Mudde 2020). As a result, in their relationships with one another, politicians and clergy are initially very cautious about not overstepping the established public norms between politics and religion.

While religious tropes, narratives, and symbols have increasingly been used by radical-right parties in the last decade, these parties are prudent in avoiding being perceived as distinctively Christian-Right parties, as their association with Christian fundamentalism could deter their secular or pagan far-right supporters and obstruct their mainstreaming strategies for attracting more voters from the political center. Moreover, even right-leaning clergy are often equally careful not to openly support far-right parties, while the more liberal mainstream of the established churches often count among the most vocal critics of the far right in Europe (see Cremer 2021). As a result, even highly conservative clergy may limit themselves to supporting far-right ideas and slogans or criticizing their political opponents and their political ideologies. Exceeding this norm by openly endorsing a candidate is avoided, as it could jeopardize their position and influence, hence resulting in disciplinary proceedings within the hierarchically organized mainstream churches, as well as endangering the goal of gaining more influence within the churches.

The rise of new Christian-Right organizations offers a political opportunity for Christians and their faith leaders who are dissatisfied with the political status quo and the Christian democratic and conservative parties. This schism within EU politics became increasingly evident following the fragmentation of the European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament in 2019. Accusations concerning the political trajectory of the coalition led to the exit of its most conservative faction, resulting in the formation of new European parliamentary groups on the right: the European Conservatives and Reformists

group and the Identity and Democracy group. While most of the members of these parties are secular populists, some others are connected to the network Agenda Europe, an alliance comprised of 20 US-based think tanks and European Christian-Right organizations, further emphasizing the shifting landscape of European politics (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Chelini-Pont 2022).

As the chapters in this book show, the cautious relationship between the Christian Right and right-wing parties in Europe has led to outcomes that are only in part comparable to the United States. First, within the European Christian Right, anti-gender NGOs play a role as central policy-making platforms, where both religious and political actors can move beyond institutionalized patterns and traditional norms in the collaboration between politics and religion (Tranfić and Koch 2022). However, this *triangle of collaboration* between far-right parties, conservative clergy, and anti-gender NGOs is not a mandatory component; it is only needed until the open links and endorsements between parties and church have been successfully de-tabooed by the narrative alliances in place.

The second consequence is that the uneasy alliance between right-wing Christians and the extreme right has shifted from the public square to the back room, far from the critical public sphere and the more liberal Christian mainstream. Outspoken partisan support, such as clergy publicly praying for and calling for the election of politicians or joint appearances at election rallies or church services, are considered rare exceptions and strongly opposed by church hierarchies who remain largely united in their condemnation of the far right and seek to maintain social taboos around them among their voters (Cremer 2023). Indeed, unlike in the United States, Christians in Europe are on average significantly less likely to vote for far-right parties than their secular neighbors, leading scholars to speak of a longstanding religious immunity against the far right in Europe (Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Cremer 2023; Perrineau 2017; Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015). Finally, the aforementioned secrecy, together with the comparison with the strident US Christian Right, leads to the European counterparts being underestimated by the general public, politics, and academia, as well as within religious groups themselves, and they are thus able to engage in transnational networking and fundraising without generating attention.

Lawfare

Another central strategy in the collaboration between Christian-Right organizations in Europe is lawfare. Lawfare describes the use of lawyer associations to achieve political goals, namely through forms of "legalized contestations over political and social change, where ideologically opposed groups use rights, laws and courts as tools and sites of battle" (Gloppen 2023, 1). This dynamic is linked to the juridicalization of politics (Hirschl 2011), moving conflicts around migration, gender, and sexuality from political arenas to courts. It is increasingly relevant due to the ongoing efforts to harmonize anti-discrimination and sexual education policies within the European Union as well as the role of the European Court of Human Rights, as analyzed in the chapter on the United Kingdom (Hatcher 2023). Supporting and leading legislative initiatives against abortion or same-sex marriage increasingly build on a transnational network of lawyer associations adapting to the human rights laws on libel used in both local and supranational institutions (Yamin, Datta, and Andión 2018). For example, they attack researchers, journalists, and institutions with strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) in order to silence and intimidate them. The use of legal strategies to achieve their political aims is similar to another strategy that is often employed by the Christian Right, namely framing their arguments in secular language in order to increase their appeal and influence, also known as *strategic secularism* (Bailey 2002; Cornejo-Valle and Blásquez-Rodríguez 2022).

Differences in legal systems have further consolidated the idea that there is a clash between gender and sexual diversity rights and traditional family values. While many Western European countries follow an individualistic legal tradition, defending gender and sexual diversity rights based on international human rights standards, many conservative governments in Central and Eastern Europe and, in particular, Russia have formulated new laws for the promotion of traditional family values (Mancini and Palazzo 2021, p. 409).

Online spaces and the Christian Right

As social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter surged in popularity across Europe, they became powerful tools for political and religious communities to mobilize their constituencies, circumvent traditional media, and inflate the relevance of their own ideologies. The internet has provided not only a cost-effective platform to promote various campaigns but also an avenue for

recruitment and reaching new audiences. Initially, Christian-Right activism and anti-feminism appeared as separate movements. However, the emergence of Gamergate, an outburst of online misogyny under the cover of ethical standards for gaming journalism, generated new discussions about ways of addressing online harassment and sowed the seeds of radicalization within far-right movements (Ging 2019), eventually leading to a symbiotic association.

This intersection gave rise to a shared narrative of perceived threat, creating the foundation for right-wing alliances across Europe (Fejős and Zentai 2021). By pivoting to family politics, these groups found a common rallying point, and online spaces served as the perfect platforms to enable this political realignment. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in the diffusion of this narrative by amplifying the most vociferous voices. Powered by algorithms designed to boost engagement, social media disseminated these messages widely, sparking interactions. Thus, contentious religious debates, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality, were not only popularized but also mainstreamed and normalized through the extensive use of social media (Persily and Tucker 2020). These platforms nurtured a unique blend of religious and nativist ideas, setting the stage for a new wave of conservative discourse across the European continent.

Conflicts surrounding online harassment have significantly influenced the strategic approaches of Christian-Right organizations. First, organizations had to evolve with the changing media landscape, modifying their messaging and reframing their ideas in line with the standards set by hate speech regulations. For example, they have had to use softer content or codes that are either harder to detect or no longer violate community standards. Because of these adaptations by Christian-Right groups, mainstream social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, continue to play an integral role in the Christian Right's communication and recruitment strategies, even though alternative messaging clients, such as Telegram, are increasingly used. These platforms host Christian influencers and mainstream Christian-Right media outlets, thereby expanding their outreach. Second, these organizations have invested considerable resources into the development of alternative social media strategies. Their goal is to bypass the restrictions imposed by hate speech legislation by using various other platforms and alternative news channels, as well as successfully transferring their print outlets into the digital market.

A prominent example of the occupation and shaping of online spaces by Christian-Right and anti-gender networks is the development and dissemination of the CitizenGO platform. Launched in 2013 by HatzeOir, a Madrid-based

anti-gender organization, CitizenGO is a global-focused, multi-language platform for online petitions, highlighting issues ranging from anti-gender activism and abortion to religious freedom (Barrera-Blanco, Cornejo-Valle, and Pichardo 2023). The aim is to constantly mobilize existing supporters and recruit new ones from a variety of backgrounds. In their petitions, they refer to supposedly objective and specialized far-right news portals, which, however, also belong to HatzeOir and indirectly point to far-right parties as the political implementers of their views (Datta 2021).

The business model also includes the fact that CitizenGO, according to its own statements, makes its technology available to other NGOs free of charge. Above all, the personal data and interests of the users collected through the petitions are passed on to generate further petitions, articles, calls for demonstrations, and user organizations tailored to specific interests (Datta 2021).

These alternative strategies not only provide platforms for their messaging but also ensure the continuity of their communication efforts despite the stringent regulations.

Astroturfing and finances

The increasing use of social media platforms has led to innovations in political strategies that have affected both radical-right parties and the Christian-Right networks in Europe. Astroturfing, defined as a tactic to deceive the public about the real dimensions and origins of a campaign, is arguably an important part of the Christian-Right mobilization.

First, astroturfing is used to cover up a lack of far-reaching popularity by setting up fake organizational activity online that creates the false impression of a spontaneous grassroots movement. The Christian-Right groups analyzed in the chapters in this book are, by and large, minorities in their respective national contexts. For the most part, their ultra-conservative, right-wing views exist as minority opinions even within their own churches. Despite being small organizations with few members, many Christian-Right organizations are very active online. One of the aims of astroturfing is the manipulation of potential target groups, such as politicians who are induced to think that the political demands are backed by a substantial part of the electorate. As Strube showcases (2023), astroturfing is used to manipulate and lure potential supporters into thinking that they will be part of a mass movement. In reality, most of these organizations are controlled by a few moral conservative entrepreneurs, some of whom operate several such organizations in

parallel. The supporters are emboldened and strengthened in their process of radicalization and social isolation, an effect that is reinforced and amplified online (Zerback and Töpfl 2022). This is used as a strategy to influence online discourses and shift perceptions of social norms online, as well as to normalize Christian-Right ideas. As a consequence of this strategy, ideas that actually represent radical, extremist, and fringe opinions in the theological and political mainstream are amplified and legitimized.

Second, astroturfing is used to conceal the provenance of funding. While most Christian-Right organizations pretend that their funding is provided through their grassroots support, research by the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (Datta 2021) shows how transnational connections, rich business sponsors, and foundations are instrumental in securing financial resources for Christian-Right activities. According to the EPF, a substantial part of funding for anti-gender actors in Europe between 2009 and 2018 originated in the US, specifically from US Christian-Right organizations. Organizations such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the American Center for Law and Justice, and the Alliance Defending Freedom International, as well as several other American Christian-Right advocacy organizations, have doubled their financial support to European organizations since 2009, supporting European networks with funding and strategical advice. The money that the US Christian Right distributes in Europe can itself be traced back to conservative foundations and mega donors such as the Koch family, whose wealth is based on fossil fuel industries and who have made significant contributions to the US Christian Right, the Republican Party, and a number of climate change deniers.

The leading role that the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church have played in promoting the Christian-Right ideas in the last 10 years is also reflected in the fundraising networks. Oligarchs such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev, who have close ties to Putin and Patriarch Kirill, have set up think tanks, institutes, conferences, and news portals to disseminate their ethnonationalist, anti-democratic, and anti-gender convictions in Russia and abroad. Some Russian Christian-Right actors have also set up cooperation agreements through which they fund far-right parties in Europe, such as the Italian Lega and the Rassemblement National in France (Shekhovtsov 2017). While the sanctions after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 did little to stop the financial support from Russia for European anti-gender and Christian-Right organizations, the sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are

more likely to have incisive financial consequences for the ultra-conservative organizations that have so far benefited from Russian money.

Most importantly, an increasing part of the funding for anti-gender activities comes not from private donors but from public funding. In some cases, tax payers' money is used by conservative politicians and governments to fund programs run by Christian-Right groups. Examples of this are so-called *crisis pregnancy centers* and organizations that propagate reactionary sexual education material in public schools (Datta 2021), such as in Spain and Italy. The illiberal governments in Poland and Hungary are actively sponsoring Christian-Right NGOs, such as Ordo Iuris (associated with Tradition, Family, Property), with money derived from EU funds (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Curanović 2021). Frequently, they create *government-organized NGOs* that mimic civil society and grassroots engagement while reinforcing the governments' socially conservative ideas domestically and internationally.

Successes and dangers

A common thread among these examples consists of shared political goals and strategies that span different regions and value systems: the weakening of liberal democracy and the rule of law; changes in the role and composition of the highest courts; vehement opposition to sexual diversity or gender equality; and populist, nationalist agendas aiming to marginalize and discriminate against people who are identified as foreign or simply *different* (Hennig 2021).

The political track record of the Christian Right in Europe exhibits significant variations. The contributions to this book suggest a correlation between the influence of the Christian Right in a respective country and the success of illiberal political actors. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, where it represents a considerable electoral force, the Christian Right has played a significant role in the ascent and sustenance of illiberal governments. By contrast, Christian-Right politics in Russia has emerged as a significant instrument for shaping foreign policies, in particular. In the rest of Europe, the political success of the Christian Right has been more varied and is closely tied to the popularity and electoral achievements of parties that support their ideology. Where successful, depending on their political clout, these efforts have led to delays and obstacles in passing legislation or in the reinforcement of existing legislation, as well as participation in lawfare. In countries where referendums are possible, Christian-Right organizations and networks have been able to break

out of these limitations, as seen in Croatia (Grozdanov and Zelič 2023) and Romania (Alecu 2023).

The Christian Right in Europe poses an immediate but less visible threat through the deliberate manipulation and influence of societal discourse. This has been achieved, for example, by employing strategies associated with the American culture wars. Inspired by the tactics of the New Right, which aims to politicize the pre-political space, the global nature of the culture wars allows for the rapid importation and adaptation of the latest tactics, talking points, and strategies that are in circulation. A current example of this is the utilization of anti-trans narratives (Brockschmidt 2022). Furthermore, culture war strategies provide opportunities to form alliances with secular far-right parties, scandalize, and reach beyond their target audience, impacting the secular conservative mainstream and the wider public discussion.

The significant consequences of these strategies are clearly evident in the United States. Over the course of decades, their implementation has led to an escalation of polarization and divisiveness, resulting in a substantial decline in civil discourse and the erosion of social cohesion. This has had political ramifications, such as the radicalization of the Republican Party during and after the Trump presidency and policies such as the notorious Muslim ban of 2017 and the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the 2022 Dobbs case (Gorski and Perry 2022). It is often suggested that these polarizing strategies have contributed to the radicalization of the political right in the US, culminating in the Capitol insurrection of 2021.

The rise of the Christian Right in Europe threatens churches and religious traditions. Conservative churches and religious communities often share the ideological base of the Christian Right and their ideas on gender, family, and abortion. However, they do not tend to share or support the institutional ambitions and strategic outlooks of right-wing groups, and they sometimes speak out against them. Mainstream churches remain tied to traditional hierarchies, support for liberal democracy, and the consensus-oriented dialogues with governments that were established in past decades. From a theological perspective, the rise of the Christian Right threatens fundamental Christian dogmatic beliefs, especially those related to the dignity and equality of life for all human beings, as well as bringing the danger that ideas, identities, or ideologies take the place of God's universality. The confrontational style of the Christian Right and its association with the nativist far right can alienate believers; especially those of racial minority backgrounds who are themselves becoming majorities in many congregations. However, just as Christian Democratic parties are

losing ground to more extremist right-wing groups, mainstream churches are being challenged by more sectarian and radical groups among some of the congregants.

An overview of the Christian Right in Europe

This volume provides analyses of Christian-Right movements from 20 European countries (Austria, Belarus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom), as well as examining their activities within European institutions.

Four chapters are placed outside of alphabetical sequence and follow the introduction directly. This reflects their pivotal role in enabling us to comprehend the Christian Right in Europe. The chapter on the European bubble not only provides an overview of the different NGOs attempting to advance anti-gender legislation at the European level but also underscores the concentrated and transnational efforts of the Christian Right. The chapter on Russia emphasizes the distinctive role that Russian actors have played within the Christian Right and the influence they have exerted on the Ukrainian conflict and the broader European landscape. The chapters on Poland and Hungary illustrate how empowered and influential Christian-Right actors can contribute to the erosion of democracy in Europe.

In order to facilitate comparability and access, each chapter starts with a short summary of the political system and the political landscape, followed by an overview of the religious landscape that is characteristic of the country in question. What is the constitutional church–state relationship? What are the major confessions and traditional affiliations, and how have they developed over time? The authors subsequently identify the Christian-Right protagonists in the specific contexts that they analyze. Are there groups/denominations that are ultra-conservative and actively pursuing political alliances? Who are they? Are they seeking interconfessional alliances? Is it minority Christian groups or rather Christian majorities that are engaged in processes of politicization or radicalization of religion? The contributors to this volume—and the attentive reader—identify across the case studies several international ties and connections between like-minded parties and organizations. Each of the chapters identifies and analyzes the narratives and ideologies that motivate the Christian-Right groups in question. Some of these narratives are transver-

sal in that they exist in many countries (in different languages and with different religious focuses), while others are country-specific. Finally, the chapters address the question of how successful Christian-Right groups are in the political game—on the domestic level, but also on the level of transnational alliance building or EU institutions.

The wealth of information contained in this volume throws into sharp relief how the Christian Right in Europe is not a fringe phenomenon but instead poses a real threat to liberal democracy. The chapters show that Christian-Right politics has succeeded in many areas of policy making and has become part of the political establishment in many countries. Christian-Right ideas are represented in many European institutions and governments, including the coalition governments in Italy, Sweden, Austria, Poland, and Hungary. In some of these contexts, Christian-Right ideas interlock seamlessly with an older Christian democratic agenda; in others, they actually constitute a break and challenge the more moderate Christian democratic mainstream (Biebricher 2018). It should not be overlooked that this development has created a new political home for fundamentalist Christians who were already critical of the political establishment and their churches for gradually becoming *too* liberal, reformist, or compromising. While these fundamentalist Christians are within their churches and also within the far right, their demands are amplified by political actors on the right who echo their radical ideas. While these leaders may not share all aspects of a religious teaching, let alone follow them in their private lives, they nonetheless capitalize politically on a positive language of religion, culture, tradition, and family.

The aim of this book is to inform academics, policymakers, religious leaders, and the general reader about a political phenomenon that poses a real challenge to liberal democracy. Balancing out different worldviews and normative commitments is part and parcel of any democracy. Reconciling religious and secular sensibilities can fail and lead to trade-offs and frustrations. This is quite normal in modern societies, and no side—neither progressive nor conservative—is immune from having to make compromises. The starting point for this volume lies elsewhere. It is the observation that the politicization of Christian ideas in Europe has shifted in the last decade or two, giving rise to greater polarization and leading to new forms of mobilization and novel political strategies. Far-right parties, which in the past were either pagan or nonreligious, have discovered Christianity as a cultural identity marker of the *us* against the *Islamic other*, thereby challenging the mainstream churches, academic theology, and our democratic institutions. This book provides evidence

of the urgency of the need to understand the development and dynamics of this phenomenon. It is hoped that academics, policy makers, religious leaders, and those invested in the development of democracy and constitutionalism in Europe will benefit from it.

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