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Simulating Agonism: How Anti-Gender Actors Represent Themselves as Legitimate Participants in Debates on Equality Politics

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Abstract

This study examines how anti-gender actors represent themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Drawing on Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism, we argue that anti-gender actors foster conflict and exclusion through "moral panic" and the "politics of fear" regarding the issues related to equality politics, while at the same time presenting themselves as neutral, rational, and pluralistic. This dual strategy allows them to insert themselves into democratic debate and present themselves as legitimate "adversaries" rather than "enemies" to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics. We contend that such efforts to simulate agonism are particularly evident in Slovenia, where anti-gender organisations operate as covert allies of the Roman Catholic Church. In a context where public trust in the Church is low and the separation of church and state is strongly valued, efforts to re-Catholicise society rely on secularised means. We argue that this renders strategies of simulating agonism and conforming to secular-democratic values especially salient in the Slovenian context. To identify these strategies, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. Our analysis revealed four interrelated tactics: "self-victimisation", portraying themselves as excluded and marginalised; "call for dialogue," stressing a purported willingness to engage with opponents; "depoliticisation", framing their role as neutral and non-ideological; and "claim of public support", invoking a "silenced majority" allegedly constrained by a prevailing climate of "leftist" fear and censorship. The significance of this study lies in the fact that, despite extensive scholarly work on anti-gender mobilisations, analyses drawing on interviews with anti-gender actors themselves remain rare.

Keywords: anti-gender mobilizations; equality politics; de-democratization; agonism; self-victimization; secularism



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1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed the rise of so-called anti-gender mobilisations across Europe and globally, encompassing, among others, transnational and national organisations, religious institutions, and intellectual authorities that promote socially neoconservative agendas and seek legal restrictions on issues such as abortion, reproductive rights, LGBT+ equality, and gender studies (Korolczuk 2023, p. 348). These mobilisations represent one of the most prominent contemporary forms of opposition to equality politics. While situated within broader neoconservative and populist frameworks, they do not simply continue past forms of conservative resistance to equality. Instead, they represent new ways of articulating opposition to progressive politics. What sets these

articulations apart is their instrumentalisation of liberal discursive terrain—for instance, by invoking “human rights”, “freedom”, “equality” and “discrimination”—rhetoric that was, until recently, predominantly employed by progressive social movements, such as feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte 2023).

In tandem with this appropriation of progressive discourse, a defining feature of anti-gender mobilisations is their opposition to what they label as “gender ideology”, “gender theory”, or “genderism”. These are framed as threats to the traditional family, the nation, and moral order (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). As Kováts (2018) notes, opposition to “gender ideology” and similar signifiers does not reflect a clear, binary divide between progressive actors (who purportedly support the concept of “gender”) and anti-gender actors (who reject it). Instead, anti-gender actors “put contents and ideas under these labels, to form a threatening and coherent discourse, which none of the labelled actors recognizes for themselves” (Kováts 2018, p. 530). In this way, “gender ideology” operates as an “empty signifier” (Mayer and Sauer 2017), binding together diverse strategies and discourses that oppose equality politics and articulating a new, neoconservative vision of social order.

Therefore, anti-gender mobilisations should not be understood merely as a backlash, i.e., reactive responses that seek to halt or reverse perceived advances in women’s and LGBT+ rights and restore a traditional heteropatriarchal order (Paternotte 2023), even though such initiatives often trigger their emergence (as in Slovenia, where a proposal to legalise marriage equality catalysed the anti-gender movement; see Kuhar 2017). Rather, they represent a political project aimed at redefining core principles of liberal democracy, thereby contributing to contemporary processes of “de-democratisation” (Lombardo et al. 2021). In sum, the use of the “gender ideology” framework, the appropriation of progressive discourse, and the framing of anti-gender efforts not merely as backlash but as a project of societal reordering constitute three key characteristics that mark these movements as “neoconservative” rather than simply “conservative” (Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025).

This paper starts from the premise that anti-gender actors and organisations appropriate the discourse of progressive movements to gain legitimacy within the framework of public debate on equality politics. Their rhetorical strategies avoid overtly conservative or religious foundations and instead rely on a seemingly neutral, secular vocabulary. Anti-gender actors recognise that the contemporary normative framework in the field of equality politics is predominantly structured around liberal signifiers such as “human rights”, “freedom”, “equality” and “discrimination.” Consequently, they seek to appropriate this normative framework in ways that obscure their exclusionary tendencies towards sexual and gender minorities, presenting themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics (Smrdelj and Pajnik 2022).

A substantial body of research has explored the strategies and discourses of anti-gender mobilisations (e.g., Garbagnoli 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Žuk and Žuk 2019; Popič and Gorjanc 2022; Sanders and Jenkins 2022). These studies generally show that anti-gender discourse is marked by biological essentialism, the demonisation of “enemies” (such as feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists, and political elites), and the appropriation of liberal discourse. Alongside rhetorical and discursive approaches employed by anti-gender actors across different countries, research (e.g., Kuhar and Pajnik 2020; Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025) also highlights transnationally shared methods of action, including strategic use of digital media, the organisation of public gatherings and protests, and the mobilisation of legal instruments and democratic tools, including referendum initiatives.

Despite numerous studies on anti-gender discourses and their strategies of action (see Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), considerably less research has focused directly on how anti-gender actors reflect on their role in the public sphere. Understanding their perspective is essential for analysing how they aim to establish themselves as legitimate actors within

liberal democracy. It is not enough to examine only the content of their discourse (e.g., appeals to protect women, children or the traditional family) or their strategies of action, but also the modes, attitudes and positional practices through which they construct their image as legitimate actors in the public sphere. In this paper, we examine the ways in which anti-gender actors present themselves as democratic, pluralistic, rational, and inclusive actors on issues related to equality politics.

To this end, we present an analysis of semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. We consider the semi-structured interview method particularly relevant and useful in this context, as it enables direct insight into how anti-gender actors themselves understand and justify their own legitimacy within the framework of democratic debate. Although such positions can also be identified in other discourses (such as social media posts by anti-gender actors or public statements and documents on the websites of anti-gender organisations), we assume that one-to-one interviews are more likely to reveal attempts to perform “objectivity”, “neutrality” and “apoliticality” rather than more overtly polarizing frameworks such as “moral panic” (Cohen 2009) or the “politics of fear” (Wodak 2015), which are more likely to emerge in public discourses aimed at a broader audience. Furthermore, the significance of this study lies in the fact that, despite the extensive scholarly production on anti-gender mobilisations, analyses based on interviews with anti-gender actors themselves remain very rare. The main reason is their tendency to refuse participation, as they perceive the academic community as their ideological enemy.¹

We chose the Slovenian context because Slovenian anti-gender organisations operate as covert allies of the Slovenian Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The RCC actively fosters lay organisations to disseminate its religious messages. In Slovenia, the public places particular emphasis on the separation of church and state, a principle enshrined in the Slovenian Constitution. Public trust in the RCC is low, especially following the financial scandals in the Archdiocese of Maribor (Kralj et al. 2021, p. 51), which became widely known at the end of 2010 and significantly damaged the RCC’s public image. Moreover, discourses grounded in sacred scripture no longer have a mobilising effect (Kuhar 2015a, 2015b). For these reasons, the connections between anti-gender organisations and the RCC are deliberately concealed and not publicly acknowledged. Consequently, the RCC seeks to secularise its public image by establishing or supporting satellite organisations, movements and initiatives that promote its messages, values and ideological positions (see Kuhar 2017 for examples that reveal these satellite ties). Through these organisations, it pursues a process of re-Catholicisation of Slovenian society, which we understand in this study as RCC’s efforts to re-legitimize itself as a social and political actor and to re-establish its moral authority in the domain of equality politics. Anti-gender organisations and actors thus present themselves as non-confessional, as a mass movement of “concerned citizens”, while in reality, they function as extensions of the RCC (Kuhar and Pajnik 2020, p. 173; Kralj et al. 2021, p. 52). Through these groups, the RCC seeks to reassert moral authority in the domain of sexual and reproductive rights, aiming to embed its doctrine into state policy and legal norms (Kuhar 2017, p. 219).²

Because of this unique context—characterised by attempts to re-Catholicise society through secularised means—Slovenia offers a particularly clear example of how anti-gender actors construct themselves as legitimate, seemingly neutral and secularised participants in public debates on equality politics.

In what follows, we first outline the theoretical framework guiding our study. We then describe the methodology of data collection and analysis. The central part of the paper presents the main findings, which are subsequently interpreted in the discussion section. Finally, we summarise the key insights and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework guiding our study builds on the work of Mouffe (2005, 2013, 2018) and her influential critique of consensus in liberal democracy, particularly through the related concepts of antagonism and agonism. Mouffe is critical of the “consensual form of democracy” (Mouffe 2005, p. 1), which, in her view, denies the antagonistic nature of politics, something she considers constitutive of politics itself. Politics, she argues, has always been shaped by conflict, struggle, contradiction, and antagonism. The key question, therefore, is not whether antagonism exists, but how it is expressed and to what extent it is regulated. This is why she rejects the deliberative model of democracy (as developed by Rawls and Habermas), which seeks consensus while simultaneously suppressing the antagonistic dimension of the political (Mouffe 2013, pp. 54–55). Mouffe contends that every consensus is inherently grounded in exclusion and shaped by those in positions of power (Mouffe 2005, pp. 11–12). For example, when consensus is established around a neoliberal understanding of society and all political actors (whether “left” or “right”)³ operate within that framework, political differentiation and pluralism become blurred, and the ideological boundaries between different political options are no longer clearly defined. In such circumstances, Mouffe warns that there is a danger that political debates will be replaced by moral and essentialist divisions such as nationality, religion or ethnicity. When political boundaries are blurred, people lose trust in political parties and prefer to identify with other, often exclusive, collective identities (Mouffe 2005, p. 30).

Mouffe therefore rejects formulations such as “beyond left and right”, “beyond hegemony”, “beyond sovereignty” and “beyond antagonism” (Mouffe 2005, p. 2), maintaining that for democracy to function properly, clear boundaries must be drawn between legitimate political options. If such boundaries are absent and a false consensus prevails, a structural space emerges for “alternatives” offered by neoconservative populist movements (including anti-gender mobilisations), which draw new dividing lines between the “establishment” and those claiming to defend the interests of “the people”.

In response to the consensual model of democracy, Mouffe proposes an “agonistic model of democracy” (Mouffe 2018, p. 91), which does not deny conflict but emphasises that it must not take the form of antagonism, where those who disagree with us are seen as enemies, but rather as adversaries. Despite political differences, adversaries should share a certain level of consensus on fundamental ethico-political values (Mouffe 2018, pp. 90–93). This consensus includes, for example, agreement on the importance of respecting equality politics and rejecting discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion or other personal circumstances.

Building on the theoretical assumptions proposed by Mouffe (2005, 2013, 2018), we argue that the actions of anti-gender actors are both antagonistic and seemingly agonistic. On the one hand, anti-gender actors foster conflict, polarisation and exclusion by framing issues related to equality politics as inherently divisive and controversial, primarily through the already noted strategies of “moral panic” and the “politics of fear”. This reflects the antagonistic dimension of their engagement. On the other hand, by appropriating liberal discourse, they project an image of normality, neutrality and alignment with the dominant consensus in liberal democracies. At the core of this consensus is the idea that democratic debate should be pluralistic, open to different viewpoints and grounded in human rights, opposition to discrimination, and the provision of equal opportunities for all citizens. They seek to insert themselves into this framework of democratic debate, portraying themselves as rational, pluralistic actors capable of practising an agonistic form of politics, while concealing their opposition to equality politics. In this way, their aim is to position themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Or, to use Mouffe’s

(2018) terms, they seek to present themselves as “adversaries” (legitimate “opponents”) rather than “enemies” to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics.

While existing research on anti-gender strategies and discourses primarily emphasises their antagonistic character (see [Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025](#)), we argue that interviews with anti-gender actors can reveal not only this antagonistic dimension but also their seemingly agonistic attempts to simulate agonism. Thus, our analysis focuses on identifying the discursive tactics through which anti-gender actors perform this simulation of agonism. We stress that these anti-gender efforts do not constitute genuine agonism but rather represent strategies of apparent agonism, intended to gain visibility in the public sphere under the guise of advocating democratic dialogue and pluralism.

3. Methodological Framework

The empirical material for our research is based on five semi-structured interviews conducted with eight Slovenian anti-gender actors (one interview was conducted with three participants from the same organisation). To ensure a diversity of perspectives within the anti-gender movement, we invited representatives from various types of organisations, including civil society actors engaged in anti-gender initiatives (e.g., organisations opposing reproductive rights) and “right-wing” politicians who employ anti-gender rhetoric and serve as important allies of these actors in Slovenia.

To ensure the anonymity of respondents, we do not disclose the organisations they represent or the areas in which they are active. As all are publicly known, they could be identified even from the type of organisation or field of activity. Not disclosing this information does not present an issue for the analysis. Numerous studies (e.g., [Kuhar and Paternotte 2017](#); [Paternotte 2023](#); [Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025](#)) have demonstrated that anti-gender mobilisations involve organisations and actors active in diverse areas, yet all employ similar rhetoric and discourse, framed within the notion of “gender ideology”. As will be demonstrated later, our interviews confirm this—regardless of organisational background or field of activity, the actors reproduce similar discursive patterns (in our case, similar strategies of simulating agonism).

In the semi-structured interviews, we asked anti-gender actors about their areas of activity, the social problems they identify, and their understanding of “gender theory”. We were interested in their main goals, the strategies they employ to achieve them, how they evaluate the success of their campaigns, and the ways in which they attempt to influence public policy. We also inquired about their cooperation with other organisations in Slovenia and abroad, potential conflicts with allied groups, and their internal organisational structures and decision-making processes. Special attention was given to the role of (social) media in their activities, the use of emotions in their communication with the public, and their future plans.

The interviews were conducted in December 2023 and January 2024 via Zoom. All interviews were recorded and, following transcription, the recordings were deleted. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees are identified in the analysis as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and so on. All participants signed an informed consent form. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, on 4 May 2023.

By conducting the interviews in late 2023 and early 2024, we gained insight into the perspectives of Slovenian anti-gender actors at a time when, after approximately a decade and a half of active engagement, they had already developed their strategies, refined their discursive approaches, and established themselves as recognisable participants in public debates on equality politics. This allows us to analyse their self-presentation in a context where they are no longer merely opponents of individual legislative initiatives, as they

were in the early stages of their formation (i.e., in 2012 and 2015, when they initiated two referendums against marriage equality; see Kuhar 2017), but political actors with a broader, ideologically driven agenda that they seek to implement in society.

We began our analysis of the semi-structured interviews by reading all transcripts and identifying passages in which the interviewees simulated agonism (e.g., by creating an impression of openness to dialogue, respect for plurality, or willingness to cooperate with ideologically different actors). Although the interviews also contained distinctly antagonistic moments (such as references to “moral panic” or the “politics of fear”), these were not the focus of our research and were therefore not analysed. In the next phase, we coded the selected passages inductively, asking whether discursive patterns recurred and whether they could be grouped into categories. Through this process, it became clear that the interviewees’ statements clustered around four dominant strategies, which appeared in differing combinations and often overlapped. These strategies are presented in detail below.

4. Results of the Analysis

Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with anti-gender actors, we identified four key strategies aimed at simulating an agonistic stance and thereby presenting themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. The first strategy, which we term “self-victimisation”, involves anti-gender actors portraying themselves as excluded, silenced, and marginalised in society. The second, which we call “call for dialogue”, highlights their proclaimed willingness to engage with ideologically opposing actors. The third strategy, which we refer to as “depoliticisation”, consists of efforts to present their role in the public sphere as neutral, apolitical, and non-ideological. Finally, the fourth strategy, which we label “claim of public support”, centres on assertions of broad public backing from the “silenced majority”, who purportedly refrain from expressing agreement with anti-gender views due to a dominant “climate” of fear and censorship. While these strategies often overlap in the interviews and are not always easily distinguished, we present them separately in the following sections for the sake of analytical clarity.

4.1. Self-Victimisation

The strategy of self-victimisation is characteristic of both anti-gender actors (Kuhar 2017) and broader populist movements and parties (Wodak 2015; Lazaridis and Campani 2016). It is marked by the tendency of actors to present themselves as excluded, silenced, and marginalised in society. By performing their alleged powerlessness and exclusion, they attempt to justify why they deserve greater visibility in public debate. The interviews reveal that the self-victimisation strategy is primarily directed against two supposedly hegemonic forces that marginalise them: the “left” and the “media”.

According to Interviewee 1, cooperation is impossible under a “leftist” government:

But when, for example, a left-wing government is in power, I get the feeling that the door to the ministry—say, the [area covered to ensure anonymity]—is locked with ten locks. I would have much to say, especially in the field of [area covered to ensure anonymity], but also in other areas, yet I can’t. That’s just how it is. For them, I’m someone who is not allowed in. [...] But all of this is counterproductive—for the nation and for the field they are in charge of. (Interviewee 1)

Here, self-victimisation can be observed in the way the actor presents himself as constructive, professional, and competent; someone with expertise who could contribute to better policymaking yet simultaneously frames the “leftist” government as antagonistic and unwilling to listen, while portraying himself as agonistic, i.e., open to dialogue: “I hope

I will have the opportunity to contribute my opinion when a centre-right government is in power again. Then you will see that it is a completely different approach.” (Interviewee 1)

A similar logic of self-victimisation is evident in the way anti-gender actors refer to the media: “We don’t have any opportunity to tell our side, because nobody asks us anything. They only ask Nika Kovač, or some institutes and NGOs.” (Interviewee 7) By invoking media attention to the head of the 8th of March Institute, the main “progressive” and “leftist” NGO in Slovenia, anti-gender actors create the impression of pronounced media bias. They stress that “leftist” voices are privileged, while they themselves are systematically silenced, thereby justifying their demand for greater representation in the public sphere. At the same time, they reduce the political sphere to a simplified binary division between “left” and “right,” portraying the “left” as a hegemonic actor that excludes dissenting voices and is incapable of fostering pluralistic, agonistic debate.

An important aspect of the self-victimisation strategy is the claim that contemporary debates on equality politics are framed within a “totalitarian” discourse, allegedly imposed by the “left”: “When the principle that everyone should be respected and have equal rights no longer applies, it becomes totalitarian. We all have to think the same.” (Interviewee 5) By portraying equality discourse itself as repressive, anti-gender actors position themselves as the true defenders of pluralism.

4.2. *Call for Dialogue*

The next strategy, closely linked to self-victimisation, is the anti-gender actors’ call for dialogue with ideologically different voices. We argue that such calls for dialogue do not reflect a genuine desire for discussion but rather serve as a strategic attempt to secure a place among the legitimate actors in the field of equality politics. In Mouffe’s (2005, 2013, 2018) terms, they instrumentalise the agonistic ideal of democratic dialogue to frame their exclusionary positions as acceptable in the public sphere. In these calls, anti-gender actors manipulate the normative ideal of consensus in liberal democracy, which assumes that all perspectives should be heard and represented in the public sphere:

To confront opinions, to allow everyone to express their views, even if they are opposing. As I said, also on television—so that people can hear all these perspectives, not just one-sided information. And often they are very aggressive, and of course then they dominate. Maybe those of us who are a bit more conservative, a bit more cautious about such things, don’t get to have our say. (Interviewee 6)

Here, the interviewee affirms the importance of confronting different opinions while simultaneously invoking self-victimisation, portraying neoconservative actors as excluded from public debate due to the allegedly aggressive dominance of the “leftist” side. In doing so, Interviewee 6 frames the conservative position as reasonable and open to dialogue (one that aligns with the ideal of agonistic debate) while characterizing the opposing side as antagonistic and incapable of democratic engagement. In this way, the interviewee constructs a black-and-white image of the political sphere.

Interviewees identified around 2010 as a temporal turning point when, in their view, democratic debate began to decline:

From the 1990s until 2010, I had the feeling that we were really talking in this society. Even if we didn’t share the same positions or diverged in our views, we were still capable of dialogue and of seeking at least some minimal common ground. (Interviewee 1)

The period that the interviewee identifies as the end of democratic dialogue coincided with the centre-left government’s proposed Family Code reform, which triggered the emergence of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia and subsequent mobilisations, including

the 2012 and 2015 referenda on marriage equality (Kuhar 2017). In the debates on marriage equality (and later, after 2015, on other issues such as reproductive rights), progressive “leftist” actors deliberately refrained from engaging with anti-gender actors so as not to confer legitimacy on discriminatory practices. Anti-gender actors, in turn, framed this lack of dialogue as evidence of democratic decline:

[...] Social dialogue—most visibly expressed through confrontations between people with different opinions—was [perceived as] something negative, supposedly because it incited hatred, moral panic, and division. And since then, we can see that major confrontations have practically disappeared. (Interviewee 1)

The discourse on the decline of democratic dialogue also emerges in relation to the media:

In the past, we had television shows where you could speak for five, seven, even eight minutes. Substantive, constructive debate was possible. Later, if a confrontation even happened, we were restricted. Then came shows where you had only a minute or two. (Interviewee 1)

The perceived lack of dialogue results in a divided society, where each side speaks only to its own audience:

Each side is only addressing its own. In my opinion, this is why the division in the nation is actually increasing. We live in two separate worlds, which I believe is radically bad. Radically bad, because we are no longer a society of dialogue. I personally want dialogue, but we are becoming a society of separate worlds. This is a big problem. (Interviewee 1)

Despite diagnosing society as polarised and non-dialogical, interviewees still called for direct confrontations with “leftist” organisations:

I would expect that just as politics debates within parliament, civil society should also debate through its own channels—in the media, at round tables, sometimes organized by one side, sometimes by the other. The point is to try to find whatever common ground there may be, or, if that’s not possible, at least to try to understand each other. Even that would mean a lot. Misunderstanding is often the basis for hatred, for disrespect, and for actions that would otherwise never happen. Even if we didn’t agree on anything, just having personal contact—simply easing interpersonal relations—would already be something very good and useful. But that’s not happening. I don’t know. If you notice it happening, let me know where, because I don’t see it. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 reinforces his self-image as an agonistic participant in public debate by invoking phrases such as “personal contact” and “interpersonal relations.” In doing so, he attempts to depoliticise the conflict, framing it not as a clash of ideologies but as the result of strained personal dynamics that could be eased through civility and mutual respect. In this way, he constructs an image of himself as more humane and ethically grounded than the “opposing” side.

This also raises the question of how the interviewees imagine public debate and what normative frameworks they believe should shape it. Respectful communication, as a condition for democracy, is one of the core normative values frequently emphasised by the interviewees:

I believe that nothing can replace basic respect between different people and the dialogue between them. I can repeat my point day and night, but until I respect you, and until I see in you a person equal to me [...] it won’t work. (Interviewee 1)

However, in practice, “respect” is often equated with the right to voice exclusionary views: “We’re getting to the point where respectful communication is no longer possible, where we can’t truly hear each other, and where it is actively being prevented.” (Interviewee 5) These quotations imply that the conditions for dialogue are obstructed, with the blame projected onto the allegedly “disrespectful” opposing side, which is implicitly portrayed as rejecting open dialogue. However, “respect” is often understood as the right to voice exclusionary views:

In reality, this is a problem today, because every differing opinion is immediately declared extreme and intolerant. This seriously undermines democracy, even though it is precisely those who claim to care about democracy and democratic values who promote such things. (Interviewee 5)

The legitimisation of the anti-gender position in public debate is often justified by the need for greater mutual understanding, which is expected to reduce social polarisation and diminish antagonisms:

If we tried to understand each other, we would get closer more easily. It would be easier to take into account what the other person says and why they say it, and we would have more understanding. But since we are constantly drifting apart, these possibilities are diminishing. (Interviewee 5)

In this passage, we can observe the depoliticisation of conflict, where differences between social groups are portrayed merely as the result of misunderstanding and a lack of empathy (issues presumed to be resolvable through greater listening and interpersonal contact) rather than as outcomes of the distinct structural positions these groups occupy within society.

The interviewees emphasise the importance of “professional” public debate that is substantively in-depth and impartial:

It seems to me that we’ve really gone off track. There is no space for debate anymore, not even for professional ones. [...] We should allow as many ideas as possible to come to the table, so that we can somehow draw from them. (Interviewee 6)

This line of criticism continues in their perception that public debate fails to provide sufficient information and is overly selective. They evoke the ideal of an educated, reflective citizen who engages in public discourse thoughtfully. This notion is closely tied to the Enlightenment ideal of reason as the foundation of democracy: “I mean, you can’t expect people to really know or understand things, or be familiar with them, if they’re receiving such selective, superficial information[.]” (Interviewee 6)

4.3. Depoliticisation

Under the strategy we refer to as “depoliticisation”, we include the efforts of anti-gender actors to portray their role in the public sphere as neutral and non-ideological. This does not indicate an actual withdrawal from political positioning, but rather a tactic aimed at presenting their actions as broadly acceptable, inclusive, and oriented towards the common good. Through this apparent depoliticisation, they seek to make their discourse acceptable to a wider audience, including citizens who might otherwise reject overtly ideological or exclusionary positions. For example, Interviewee 1, who collaborated with the “right-wing” government, describes his role in the government office in a distinctly moderate and non-partisan tone:

I was aware that [area covered to ensure anonymity] should not become a politically right-wing field but should remain a Slovenian field. I knew we had

to involve people who understood the importance of [area covered to ensure anonymity] from both the left and the right. This was my approach to [area], and I believe that something similar should apply in other areas as well, as far as I know them. (Interviewee 1)

In the above passage, we can recognise an attempt to construct the impression of a general, national interest that transcends ideological divisions, conveyed through the term “Slovenian field.” In doing so, the interviewee seeks to position himself as a neutral, reasonable, and non-partisan expert rather than as an ideologically defined political actor. This reflects a specific strategy in which an ideologically marked position is made to appear universal and broadly acceptable. Similar to the androcentric perspective, where the “male” view is presented as neutral, universal, and unchallenged (Jogan 2013), the anti-gender stance here is likewise masked as representing the general interest. Thus, the label “Slovenian field” does not function as a marker of genuine inclusiveness but operates instead as a discursive tool for normalising an anti-gender ideological orientation. A similar attempt to demonstrate broader inclusion can also be observed in the interviewee’s statement regarding how the Ministry of Labour should be led:

If I were the Minister of Labour, I would certainly try to shape key policies in agreement with both sides. That way, the most important solutions would remain in place even long after I was gone. Any normal person would act that way. But they work without dialogue, doing things their own way, and then it’s no surprise that everything starts over again when the government changes. (Interviewee 1)

Furthermore, interviewees emphasise their willingness to cooperate and support this claim with accounts of past collaboration with various social and political actors. In doing so, they follow the agonistic logic of pluralism, portraying themselves as capable of cooperating with anyone, thereby justifying their image as “normal” and “inclusive”:

If you were to look at everything we did, you would see that we cooperated with different governments, from the very left to the very right. [. . .] I tried—though I won’t name specific individuals—to establish contact with representatives on the left whom I knew were working to support women, children, and related issues. I met with them, talked with them, and tried to build substantive bridges in our field of work. (Interviewee 1)

In general, anti-gender discourse within the context of depoliticisation is framed affirmatively. Rather than focusing on whom anti-gender actors oppose, they emphasise their own openness, moderation, and willingness to cooperate. This allows them to present their political position as legitimate, inclusive, and “normal” in contrast to the supposedly exclusionary stance of the “left.”

4.4. Claim of Public Support

Under the final strategy, we include instances in which anti-gender actors emphasise that they enjoy broad public support that cannot be openly expressed due to the prevailing “totalitarian” political climate, as shown in the context of “self-victimisation”. They highlight a contrast between “private” and “public” support, claiming that in private interactions, they often receive recognition and praise, while in public, such expressions are consistently hidden due to fear of exposure. In doing so, they create the impression of the existence of a “silent majority” (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017) that supports their views but is unwilling or unable to express this support publicly:

People are very afraid to stand up for the opinion they hold. They read everything, they see everything, and many people tell me, ‘Yes, I saw this, I saw what you’re

doing,’ but they don’t even dare to press ‘like,’ because it’s such a politicised topic, to the point that people are almost intimidated. (Interviewee 4)

In doing so, they aim to create the impression that they represent widely shared societal views that have been pushed to the margins of public debate:

You would be surprised how many people actually agree with me, but they just don’t dare to say it out loud, so that they wouldn’t be labelled as transphobes, homophobes, and so on. (Interviewee 7)

Through this strategy, anti-gender actors attempt to portray themselves as defenders of “the people”, oppressed by a “leftist” elite that restricts “freedom of speech”. By presenting supporters as silenced or intimidated, they suggest that this suppressed majority deserves recognition within democratic dialogue.

5. Discussion

The strategies identified in the analysis—self-victimisation, calls for dialogue, depoliticisation, and claims of public support—offer insight into how anti-gender actors simulate agonism in their self-presentation. Through these strategies, they seek to align themselves with the dominant consensus in liberal democracy, which conceives democratic debate as pluralistic, open to differing viewpoints, and grounded in human rights, opposition to discrimination, and equal opportunities for all citizens.

In contrast, the “left” is consistently portrayed in their discourse as the source of polarisation, obstructing dialogue, and rejecting plurality. “Responsibility” for social problems such as the lack of dialogue and growing societal division is attributed exclusively to the “left” (and, in some cases, also to the “media”), which is homogenised within anti-gender discourse. This simplification of the political field is characteristic of discourse on “gender ideology” (Pajnik et al. 2025). It relies on constructing a clear dichotomy between “normal”, “Slovenian” values (represented by anti-gender actors) and “radical”, “ideological” values (represented by the “left”). Thus, even the seemingly inclusive and affirmative discourse of anti-gender actors contains a clear exclusionary component, since the “left”, despite calls for dialogue and cooperation, is already marked in advance as problematic and “responsible” for major social issues. This strategy can also be recognized more broadly at the international level, where anti-gender actors consistently seek to undermine opponents’ credibility and frame them as responsible for societal division (Zervoulakou et al. 2025).

By presenting themselves as defenders of democratic values while portraying the “left” as undemocratic and antagonistic, anti-gender actors blur the line between genuinely progressive and exclusionary positions. This enables them to increasingly occupy and shape discursive terrain previously reserved for progressive social actors. Although this dynamic has long been recognised in the existing literature (Vučković Juroš et al. 2020; Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), we draw on interview data to demonstrate the concrete tactics through which this instrumentalisation of liberal discursive terrain occurs.

Since all the strategies were identified through interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors, their interpretation must consider the specificities of the Slovenian context. As outlined in the introduction, anti-gender organisations and actors function as satellite organisations of the Slovenian RCC. Through these organisations, the RCC seeks to establish hegemony over issues related to gender, sexuality, and reproduction. The strategies identified contribute to this objective by obscuring their religious origins and supporting broader efforts at re-Catholicisation through secular means. Among them, the strategy of depoliticisation is particularly significant, as it presents contemporary neoconservative engagement as apolitical and above “left” and “right”, thereby enabling the RCC

to expand its influence without overtly confessional messaging or explicit references to the Church. Similarly, the call for dialogue allows RCC-linked actors to enter the secular sphere while concealing their religious agenda, blurring the line between the secular and the ecclesiastical. Both strategies are crucial for anti-gender actors in a context marked by low public trust in the Church and heightened sensitivity to the constitutional principle of church–state separation.

However, although these strategies play a particular role within the Slovenian context, they are not unique to it. They can also be observed more broadly in anti-gender mobilisations across Europe (Kuhar and Smrdelj 2025), as well as in the activities of populist political parties and movements. Many of them have been identified in the literature on “right-wing” populism (e.g., Wodak 2015; Lazaridis and Campani 2016). One such example is the strategy of self-victimisation, which in our analysis was primarily manifested through the interviewees’ claims of being ignored or marginalised by the “left” and the “media.” Mass media, particularly public broadcasters, are often portrayed as tools of a “corrupt elite” allegedly acting against the interests of “ordinary people” (Holtz-Bacha 2021). As research shows, actors on the political “right” are significantly more likely to accuse the “media” of bias than their counterparts on the centre “left”. For instance, Strömbäck and Åkerlund (2025), in their analysis of Swedish tweets, demonstrate that discourse about biased “media” is strongly marked by classic tropes of “right-wing” populism, wherein the “mainstream media” are framed as part of a “corrupt” and dishonest elite spreading “politically correct” disinformation.

Similar elements of populism can also be observed in the context of calls for dialogue, particularly through a distinctive discursive move employed by “right-wing” populist actors, who frame any response to their discriminatory or exclusionary positions as an attack on freedom of speech, as shown in our interviews. This tactic seeks to create the impression that every position, regardless of its content, is equally legitimate, even when it directly contradicts the principles of human rights and equality. The situation becomes even more complex when exclusionary views are framed as being in line with these very principles. Whether presented as liberal or openly exclusionary, interviewees treated all positions entering the public sphere as equivalent, without acknowledging the power dynamics and structural inequalities from which particular voices emerge. This failure to recognise fundamental differences between positions leads to the portrayal of minority-rights advocates and their opponents as equal participants, despite clear asymmetry in their structural positions and the vastly different social consequences of their claims. Anti-gender discourse extends the democratic principle that every vote counts equally in elections to the claim that every opinion should be equally represented and considered, even when such opinions advocate the exclusion of certain social groups or amount to hate speech. However, as Mouffe (2018, pp. 90–93) argues, democratic debate requires at least a minimal consensus on shared ethico-political values that define the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Agonistic democracy is not unbounded relativism. It presupposes that positions rooted in exclusion are not acceptable, as they undermine the very foundations of democratic coexistence.

Through self-victimisation and calls for dialogue—particularly appeals for feminist and progressive actors, such as the 8th of March Institute, to meet with them regularly in public confrontations—anti-gender actors create pressure on media institutions, policy-makers, and the broader public to give space to all perspectives—even those grounded in discrimination—under the guise of “objectivity” (Luthar 2017) and “balanced reporting” (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). When, for instance, the media respond to this pressure, it often produces “false equivalence” (Haas 2007), where an expert or a representative of a social minority is placed alongside someone who advocates discriminatory positions or represents social power and dominance, yet both positions are presented as equally valid

in the name of neutrality and balance. In this way, the ideal of balance becomes a tool for normalising radical positions by equating all viewpoints as equally legitimate, without acknowledging the positional inequalities from which these views emerge. This leads to the following dilemma: if equality politics advocates agree to engage in dialogue with anti-gender actors and, for instance, take part in shows where an anti-gender actor is also present, they risk legitimising the anti-gender stance. But if they choose not to participate in such debates to avoid reinforcing the legitimacy of discriminatory arguments, they are criticised as “totalitarian,” undemocratic, and obstructing pluralistic debate and generating polarisation, as shown in our interviews. However, research on feminist responses to anti-gender mobilisations (see [Smrdelj and Kuhar 2025](#)) shows that feminist, LGBT+, and other equality-politics actors have not remained trapped in this double bind. They have sought to overcome the dilemma by shifting from predominantly reactive strategies—those directly responding to the actions and statements of anti-gender actors—to more proactive tactics that move beyond a defensive stance and toward the independent articulation of their own political priorities, which are not tied to anti-gender initiatives and do not correspond to provocations or demands for “dialogue”. In this way, equality-politics advocates set the terms of debate themselves and refuse to recognise anti-gender actors as legitimate opposition within debates on equality politics.

The final strategy, a claim of public support, could also be situated under self-victimisation, as its essence lies in emphasising that anti-gender actors enjoy broad public backing, yet this alleged “silent majority” ([Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017](#)) remains invisible and unheard because it is supposedly intimidated and silenced by the “left”. Despite this proximity to the self-victimisation strategy, we classify it as an independent tactic within the framework of simulating agonism. The reason is that it represents a distinct discursive move not primarily aimed at portraying one’s own victimhood, but at creating the impression of broad social support. This support is never empirically verified or demonstrable in the interviews; rather, it remains a discursive construction. In this sense, it is more an “imaginary” than a “silent” majority. This strategy serves two purposes: first, to consolidate the legitimacy of anti-gender actors in the field of equality politics by invoking the widespread public support they claim to have; and second, to delegitimise the “left”, which is portrayed as alienated from “real” people, that is, from most ordinary citizens. The implicit message is that if anti-gender actors are backed by the majority, then the “left” represents only a minority. A similar strategy of invoking a “silent majority” has also been documented in the Croatian context (see [Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017](#)), where anti-gender actors rely on claims of representing broad but invisible popular support to legitimise their positions.

When considering the implications of simulating agonism for democracy, it is essential to clarify that we do not treat democracy as a self-evident foundation of social reality or as an absolute ideal beyond critique. Rather, democracy is an open, historically and socially variable framework that can be filled with different and often conflicting meanings. This is precisely why we argue that “de-democratisation” does not occur only in the most “obvious” cases, such as Hungary, where authorities directly undermine democratic institutions ([Lombardo et al. 2021](#)). It can also occur more subtly, through discursive practices that usurp the public sphere and gradually transform it so that exclusionary views are presented as legitimate components of democratic dialogue. Anti-gender actors do not openly oppose democracy; on the contrary, they often present themselves in public discourse as its staunchest defenders. Yet, precisely by simulating agonism through the strategies identified in our analysis, they create the impression of reinforcing democracy while in fact undermining it. This means that the threat of “de-democratisation” is not limited to formal institutional or legal changes but also emerges through communicative

practices outside state institutions, at the informal level, where discourses simulating agonism play a central role.

From a methodological standpoint, we must also reflect on how we obtained interviews with anti-gender actors in the first place, given their perception of the academic community as an ideological opponent—a stance especially pronounced in the Slovenian context, as highlighted in the introduction. Initially, we sent numerous requests to various organisations and individuals. Most did not respond, some explicitly declined, and only a minority agreed to participate. The reasons for their decision to cooperate are not entirely clear. However, we presume that they perceived participation in the interview as an opportunity to assert themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics within academia. In other words, they may have regarded the interview as a channel through which to disseminate their views to an audience otherwise difficult to access. Consequently, the recognition of the interviewer as an “ideological opponent” shaped the interview context and likely prompted a cautious performance, marked by an emphasis on dialogue and a pronounced simulation of agonism, which helps to explain why these strategies featured so prominently in the interviews. Of course, these interpretations remain speculative, as we did not directly inquire about their motivations. Equally intriguing is the question of why most of those invited either did not respond or explicitly declined. Since we did not investigate their reasons, the answer remains unknown and can only be inferred. One possible explanation is that, unlike those who accepted, they may have perceived participation as too risky, since they probably believed that engaging with interlocutors recognised as ideological opponents could expose them to confrontation or be seen by their supporters as an undesirable legitimisation of adversaries.

6. Conclusions

In our study, we examine how anti-gender actors present themselves as legitimate participants in debates on equality politics. Drawing on Mouffe’s (2005, 2013, and 2018) distinction between agonism and antagonism, we argue that anti-gender actors not only foster conflict and exclusion through “moral panic” and the “politics of fear”, but also simultaneously present themselves as neutral, rational, and pluralistic to insert themselves into democratic debate and appear as legitimate “adversaries” rather than “enemies” to those who genuinely advocate for equality politics.

To identify these strategies, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Slovenian anti-gender actors. The analysis revealed four interrelated tactics: “self-victimisation”, portraying themselves as excluded and marginalised; “call for dialogue”, stressing a supposed willingness to engage with opponents; “depoliticisation”, framing their involvement as neutral and non-ideological; and “claim of public support”, invoking a “silenced majority” allegedly constrained by a prevailing climate of “leftist” fear and censorship.

Our study opens up numerous possibilities for further research. One potential direction would be to expand the focus beyond the leading figures of anti-gender organisations but also seek to interview their supporters, who represent the alleged “silent majority” (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017) continually invoked in anti-gender discourse. Such research could investigate whether these supporters also adopt agonistic rhetoric or articulate their positions differently. Furthermore, our findings are tied to the Slovenian context, whose specific characteristics tend to promote strategies of simulating agonism. However, to explore different forms of self-representation, future research should also examine other national and religious contexts where anti-gender organisations are not satellite organisations of religious institutions, highlighting the importance of intersecting this analysis with the study of religion (cf. Jurekovič 2024a, 2024b, and 2025). This would allow us to see how antagonistic and agonistic strategies intertwine in new ways.

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Notes

- ¹ The hostility toward the “academic community” is particularly pronounced in the Slovenian context, where academics and scholars are regarded as important allies of progressive and feminist organizations and actors. This is also likely why Slovenian anti-gender actors often use the term “gender theory” instead of the more established “gender ideology” (Smrdelj 2025). By labeling “gender” as a “theory,” they aim to depict it as an academic construct disconnected from common sense and real-life experiences (Kuhar 2017, p. 230).
- ² It should be emphasized that cooperation between anti-gender organizations and the Slovenian Roman Catholic Church (RCC) was envisioned long before the emergence of anti-gender movements in Europe. As early as 2002, the Slovenian RCC issued a comprehensive action plan titled *Choose Life*, which served as the final document of the plenary session of the RCC in Slovenia. Among other things, the document called for the establishment of various lay organizations aimed at promoting the Church’s message (Kuhar 2017, p. 220).
- ³ Political labels such as “left” and “right” are placed in quotation marks throughout the text to avoid reinforcing their assumed self-evidence. These terms are context-dependent and historically contingent. What is regarded as “leftist” today may differ markedly from what the same label signified in the past, e.g., half a century ago. Moreover, such labels are often the subject of ongoing political contestation. For example, when a right-wing actor describes someone as a “radical leftist,” this act primarily functions to construct and affirm their own imagined map of the political field, rather than accurately reflect the actual distribution of political positions within society (Bobbio 1996).

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