

Transnational norm mobilization: The World Congress of Families in Georgia and Moldova

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The focus of civil society research in the social and political sciences has, for the most part, been on progressive and liberal groups and movements who defend the cause of equal human rights against an unjust state or against oppressive majorities. Progressive norm entrepreneurs trigger debates in the course of which general principles of human rights, such as equality, justice and non-discrimination, become framed as concrete values and demands. A classic example of this is the expansion of the principle of equality from male citizens to all adult citizens through women's suffrage. The norm entrepreneurs, in this case, were women's movements. Another example for norm entrepreneurship are gay and lesbian movements, who have become increasingly successful in seeing their demands of equality and non-discrimination written into the law of most Western democracies. Both stories exemplify how a general principle becomes framed in terms of concrete values and demands and how the issues raised eventually translate into new policies. 'Norm cascade' is the term which the political scientists Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink have used to describe this dynamic.³⁸⁸ Human rights principles need active, discursive and legal implementation, which is always rooted in the choices and actions of concrete actors.

Today we have to concede that the focus on progressive, liberal civil society in the literature on norm entrepreneurship has been one-sided. Besides liberal NGOs actors on the right also mobilize. The concerns of these groups vary from anti-immigration to gun-promotion, from anti-abortion to religious exemptions. Illiberal civil society uses the very same mechanisms and strategies as a progressive civil society: actors create NGOs and transnational platforms, they employ lawyers and lobby politicians, as well as using the internet and media to attract new followers. In this contribution, I pick out one such illiberal civil society organization – the World Congress of Families (WCF) – and look at its role in two of the countries that are the focus of this compilation: Georgia and Moldova.

The WCF organizes international and regional congresses in support of the 'natural family' across Europe, the United States, and the former Soviet Union. It was founded in 1997 by American and Russian partners, with the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society from Rockford, Illinois being the main driving force for the first ten years. The Russian engagement in the WCF coordination became prominent only after 2010. In that year, the late Larry Jacobs, at the time the WCF's managing director, traveled to Russia on an official visit to speak at an event organized by the Russian pro-life organization Sanctity of Motherhood. "We were delighted by the support we found there", Jacobs was quoted in the media after this trip. "Russian pro-life/pro-family forces are eager to cooperate with their counterparts in the West. Given its traditional support for faith and family, Russia will play an increasingly important part in the international struggle to preserve the natural family".³⁸⁹ The WCF so far has organized two international congresses in the former Soviet Union; one summit in 2014 in Moscow, the other 2016 in Tbilisi. The 2018 Congress will take place in the capital of Moldova, Chisinau, in September.

The World Congress of Families is the American Christian Right going international. Since 2016 the WCF has become a chapter of the International Organization for the Family (IOF). The organization does not self-identify explicitly as Christian, but the religious character is evident. Congresses are attended by Christians of all denominations, including Mormons, and occasionally also Muslims are invited. The IOF mission statement includes a plea to 'protect freedom, faith, and family'.³⁹⁰ Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe are newcomers in this circle, and they are setting their own agenda.

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³⁸⁸ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998).

³⁸⁹ Christian NewsWire, "Jacobs Finds Support for International Pro-Family and Pro-Life Movement in Moscow," *Christian News Wire* 13 December 2010: <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/4302615709.html>.

³⁹⁰ International Organization for the Family website: <https://www.profam.org/mission/>

The local partners for the Moscow and Tbilisi summits were wealthy businessmen, Konstantin Malofeev from Russia and Levan Vasadze from Georgia. The Moscow Summit was also co-sponsored by the organization Sanctity of Motherhood, which is headed by the wife of the Russian oligarch, and former head of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin. Malofeev and Yakunin are on the international sanctions list imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The three businessmen present themselves as committed Orthodox Christians: Malofeev runs the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, which sponsors, among other things, an Orthodox private school and a TV-station that promotes Russian Orthodox statehood (tsargrad.tv)³⁹¹; Yakunin is the head of St. Andrew the First Called Endowment Fund, which finances several programs, among them the Ruski Mir Foundation and the Sanctity of Motherhood pro-life network³⁹²; Vasadze likewise founded an Orthodox private school in Tbilisi³⁹³. Both Vasadze and the Russian WCF representative Alexey Komov have studied in the United States, they know Western languages, culture and politics, and they have adopted the habitus of American Christian conservatives. Now they are importing the American culture wars into their home countries.

WCF congresses are networking events for social conservative activists, professionals and politicians from across the US, Europe and other parts of the world. Liberalism is the declared opponent. For American participants, the enemies are progressive liberals in their own country. The enemy for the Eastern Europeans is the European Union. The few Western European participants, almost all from the far-right spectrum of the Catholic Church, feature in the WCF congresses as token victims of the EU. A French participant at the Tbilisi Congress went on record in front of a Georgian TV station saying: "Do not join the EU, the EU will destroy your families", and a notorious German anti-gender activist, Gabriele Kuby, frightened the Georgian audience with the (false) statement that the EU would impose a school curriculum that teaches masturbation.³⁹⁴ One politician present in Tbilisi in 2016 was Igor Dodon, now the pro-Russian president of Moldova and the host of this year's congress.

For the Eastern European sponsors of the WCF events in Georgia and Moldova the ideological battle clearly goes beyond family questions. The larger context is the question whether their countries should orient their political and economic development westwards or eastwards, towards the EU or towards Russia. The way westwards is depicted as capitalist, immoral, anti-religious and anti-family, the way eastwards as path of salvation, complete with state-regulated (and not global capitalist) economies, morality, Orthodox religious education and demographic growth. A recent speech by Vasadze in Moldova published by Visegrad Post outlines the economic and political side of the program.³⁹⁵ What makes this agenda new with regard to the anti-Westernism of the traditional Orthodox, Russian or Soviet kind is that this anti-liberalism identifies allies in the West. It is not the West as such that is rejected, but the 'liberal West'. Social conservatives of all denominations from the West are welcome partners.

This alliance with the Western Christian right constitutes a real innovation in the context of rampant Orthodox anti-ecumenism. The strong message of political support that is sent out by church leaders who attend the WCF cannot be underestimated: just consider that Patriarch Ilia of Georgia, who merely conceded an airport meeting to Pope Francis on his visit to Georgia in 2016, made a personal appearance at the WCF summit in Tbilisi, and that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow announced that he would attend the congress in Chisinau in September 2018. If he will make true on this promise, he will also send a message to the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate of Bucharest, which competes with Moscow over canonical jurisdiction in Moldova.

³⁹¹ St Basil the Great Foundation website: <http://fondsvv.ru/about/>

³⁹² St Andrew Foundation website: <http://www.st-andrew-foundation.org/about-found/>

³⁹³ Iakob Gogebashvili School website <http://www.kiketischool.ge/?lan=en&p=Nig>. For a good background article about Levan Vasadze that is still relevant today, see: Davit Batashvili, "A Political Project," Tabula, December 2013: <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/78568-a-political-project>

³⁹⁴ For a good report of the Tbilisi event, see: Masha Gessen, "Family Values. Mapping the Spread of Antigay Ideology," Harper's Magazine, March-issue (2017): <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/03/family-values-3/>

³⁹⁵ Levan Vasadze, "About Post-Communist Economies," Visegrad Post, no. 7 January 2018: <https://visegradpost.com/en/2018/01/07/about-post-communist-economies-by-levan-vasadze-georgian-entrepreneur/>

The WCF is a social conservative caravan of always the same people and topics that tours different cities: Prague 1997, Geneva 1999, Mexico City 2004, Warsaw 2007, Amsterdam 2009, Madrid 2012, Sydney 2013, Moscow 2014, Salt Lake City 2015, Tbilisi 2016, Budapest 2017, and Chisinau 2018. The congresses in Eastern Europe, at least those I have followed more closely, have always served a dual purpose of launching a political message and of boosting local civil society activism. Pro-life groups from all over the former Soviet Union had been invited to Tbilisi in 2016, some of them visibly at their first experience of presenting their work in English in front of an international audience. The Budapest WCF featured a family street festival. To local activists, WCF offers a global narrative for concrete grievances (for example high abortion rates) and a promise of influence. It is the ideological alternative to the progressive and liberal civil society that already exists in their countries and that is faced with increasing pressure (the campaign against George Soros in Hungary or restrictive NGO-legislation in Russia). The illiberal civil society promoted by the WCF and its local sponsors retains some of the attractive features of the progressive program – internationality, predominance of English language, the opportunity to access funds and obtain travel grants – but at the same time is it politically conformist, ideologically ‘safe’ in an illiberal, repressive political environment and it appeals to people’s religious feelings.

The WCF acts as transnational norm entrepreneur, much of the same kind as norm protagonists described in the beginning of this paper, only that it is illiberal and conservative, not liberal and progressive. It contributes to the rise of illiberal civil society in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It also makes its influence felt in Western Europe, with actors from the Christian Right, who are a minority in their home countries, finding large audiences. It is an open question whether this development will lead to a European scenario of protracted but ultimately stable liberal-conservative culture wars as we know them from the United States, or whether this development has the potential to become fundamentally destructive for EU integration and liberal democracy on the long run.

Recommendations for action³⁹⁶

In light of the challenge posed by the WCF and the rise of illiberal organizations across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union there are two recommendations that may be helpful for the international community to explore. These are:

- The creation of fora where representatives of liberal and illiberal civil society may engage in dialogue. This will represent a departure from the current situation where liberal and illiberal civil society exists in entirely autonomous conditions. Increased dialogue may help to stem the increasing polarization that has affected democracies in both East and West with the rise of populism.
- Improving communication on EU non-discrimination policies that are perceived in many Eastern European countries as a threat to traditional values held by the majority of the Eastern populations.

³⁹⁶ The author wishes to thank Caroline Hill for input on the recommendations.