

ARENAS

ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES
TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

*“Extremist
narratives [...] exacerbate divisions
between social
groups.”*

Gender, Extremism and Hate Speech in Europe: Historical Roots and Contemporary Dynamics

Institution leading research
UAB

Country
Spain

Find out more
[The Historical Roots of
Extremist Narratives](#)

ARENAS

ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES
TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES



Introduction

Extremist narratives have become a significant force shaping political and social debates across Europe. In recent years, issues related to gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and minority protections have increasingly been targeted by polarising discourses. These narratives are not new but are rooted in long-standing historical ideas that have evolved and adapted over time. Understanding their origins, transformations, and impact is essential to better grasp their influence on contemporary societies and democratic values.



Impact of Extremist Narratives

Extremist narratives, as defined in the [ARENAS project](#), constitute a polarizing and radical form of discourse that exacerbates divisions between social groups. They seek to delegitimize and marginalise the 'out-group', perceived as a threat, while drawing a distinction with the 'in-group', which embodies the identity of those advancing the discourse.

Learning Objectives

- Date: 2025–2026
 - Type: Training materials (legal and analytical presentations)
 - Audience: Students, researchers, policymakers, NGOs, journalists
 - Language: English
- Understand the concept of extremist narratives and their impact on society
 - Identify the main characteristics of anti-gender discourse
 - Analyse the link between far-right ideologies and gender issues
 - Explain how extremist narratives evolve and adapt over time
 - Examine the role of culture wars in shaping public debates

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 Introduction and objectives of the report

02 Historical roots of extremist narratives : gender





Introduction and objectives of the report

The ARENAS project looks at extremist narratives that affect political and social life in Europe. It examines the nature of these narratives and seeks to understand the discourses they impact, particularly about science, gender and the nation. By understanding how these narratives work, ARENAS will empower people to resist them. To foster a spirit of people living together in harmony across Europe, policy recommendations will be made as to how to prevent such narratives from taking hold in the future.

The ARENAS Analysis of and Responses to Extremist Narratives project is funded by the EU Horizon Programme, the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027), and is coordinated by Julien Longhi and his team in CY Cergy Paris Université, France. It brings together a multidisciplinary consortium of nine Universities, one NGO, two SME's as well as three associated impact partners comprised of an International Association, a National Association and an NGO.

In numerous European countries, gender rights, reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ rights are currently threatened and undermined. Extremist gender narratives, often rooted in long standing historical contexts, are being propagated by both political and non-political actors. This section of the report takes an in-depth look at the historical roots of extremist narratives around gender as well as their contemporary manifestations. Understanding the historical roots of extremist gender narratives, as well as their readjustments, mutations or changes is essential to understand the rise and mediatisation of these narratives today. This understanding is also crucial for proposing solutions to counter these extremist narratives and their social and political impacts. Furthermore, these extremist narratives fuel reactionary and conservative responses emerging in several European countries.

To this end, we first examine the origins of the so-called gender ideology. We define anti-gender narratives that can be considered extremist, in the sense that they challenge common values of respect and attack the rights of certain groups, particularly women and LGBTQI+ individuals. Extremist narratives concerning gender are rooted in a century-old vision of gender that was consolidated during the nineteenth century with conceptions of gender roles and traditional views on the role of women based on a “natural order”. These ideas are now being revitalised by new political and non-political actors in nearly all the countries examined. This section also analyses anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI+ extremist narratives in Europe.

Additionally, in most of the countries studied, anti-gender narratives cannot be understood without considering the influence of religion and the Church. Extremist narratives around gender are also connected to other types of narratives such as anti-immigration or Islamophobic narratives that will be analysed in the last part of the section.



Extremist Narratives and Hate Speech

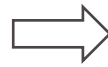
Extremist narratives, as defined in the [ARENAS project](#), constitute a polarizing and radical form of discourse that exacerbates divisions between social groups. They seek to delegitimize and marginalise the 'out-group', perceived as a threat, while drawing a distinction with the 'in-group', which embodies the identity of those advancing the discourse.



**Extremist
Narratives vs Hate
Speech**



Not always direct or explicit



Use indirect and subtle strategies



More accessible and persuasive than traditional hate speech



Rhetorical Strategies and Impact on Society

The rhetorical strategies of extremist narratives are based on :

Oversimplification

Emotional appeal

"Us vs Them" dichotomy

Stereotypes and caricatures

Consequences of such rhetoric on society :

Normalisation of hatred

Justification of discrimination

Social division and hostility

Violence

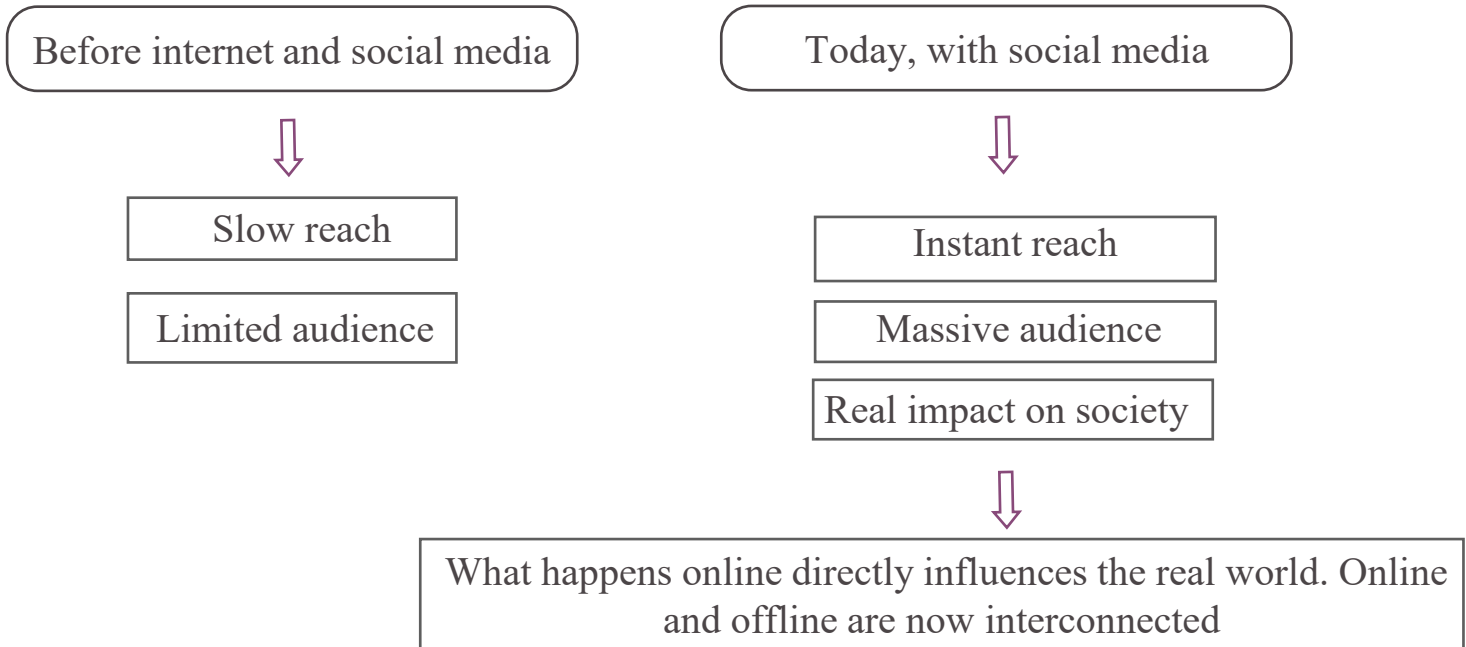


Hatred becomes rational and justified



How Digital Technology Amplifies Extremist Narratives

Today, extremist rhetoric spreads much more quickly and widely thanks to digital technology.



Legal Perspective - Freedom of Expression vs Protection



⊗ Not legally defined because they are not a legal category

Extreme narratives became problematic when they incite hatred or discrimination and thus have effects similar to hate speech

☑ Legally defined and recognized as inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination based on characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or gender.

- ⇒ Regulating extremist narratives involves setting limits on freedom of expression.
- ⇒ These limits apply when speech incites hatred, violence, or discrimination.
- ⇒ Without regulation, such narratives reinforce power hierarchies and domination between groups.
- ⇒ Protecting against these discourses also helps ensure a fairer freedom of expression.



Why Focus on the Far Right?

In recent decades, the far right has undergone a significant transformation in Europe. Once consi

The far right encompasses both radical right movements, which challenge liberal democratic val



Main Themes in Extremist Narratives

One of the most prominent themes in extremist narratives is the rejection of immigration and minority rights. These issues are often framed as existential threats to national identity, cultural cohesion, and traditional values.

Such narratives are closely linked to what has been described as a “cultural backlash,” in which segments of the population react against social and cultural changes perceived as destabilizing. In this context, extremist narratives provide simplified explanations and clear targets for complex societal transformations.



The Normalisation of Extremist Narratives

A key development in recent years is the increasing normalisation of extremist narratives. Ideas that were once considered marginal or unacceptable have gradually entered mainstream political discourse.

This process has blurred the boundaries between extremist and non-extremist positions. In some contexts, narratives that promote exclusion or oppose minority rights are no longer perceived as extreme, but rather as legitimate political opinions.

As a result, identifying extremist narratives has become more complex, particularly when they are embedded in widely accepted political or media discourse.



Why Are They Difficult to Identify Today?

The growing normalisation of extremist narratives makes them harder to detect. Their integration into mainstream discourse means they often appear as common sense rather than ideological positions.

Moreover, what is considered extremist can vary significantly depending on the national context. In some cases, narratives defending human rights or minority protections may themselves be framed as extremist, illustrating the shifting nature of these boundaries.



The Evolution of Extremist Narratives

Extremist narratives are not static. Rather than disappearing over time, they evolve, adapt, and re-emerge in new forms. Their development does not follow a linear trajectory but instead reflects a continuous process of transformation.

This adaptability allows them to remain relevant across different historical and social contexts, making them particularly resilient and difficult to counter.



The Recycling of Narratives

A key feature of extremist narratives is their ability to recycle ideas, symbols, and historical myths. Elements from the past are reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary issues, allowing these narratives to resonate with new audiences.

This process of recycling plays a crucial role in maintaining group cohesion and reinforcing collective identities. While the context may change, the core ideas often remain consistent, ensuring the continuity of the narrative over time.





Culture Wars and Narrative Conflicts

Culture wars play a central role in the dissemination and transformation of extremist narratives. These conflicts revolve around values, beliefs, and social norms, and often focus on issues such as gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism.

By framing these topics as fundamental threats to society, extremist narratives intensify social divisions and reinforce antagonistic worldviews. In this sense, culture wars provide a fertile ground for their expansion and renewal.



The Evolution of Extremist Narratives

Understanding extremist narratives is essential for policymakers, as these narratives have a direct impact on public opinion, political discourse, and policy development.

Their growing influence can challenge democratic principles, including respect for human rights, the rule of law, and social inclusion. Recognising how these narratives operate, evolve, and spread is therefore a crucial step in addressing their effects and promoting more resilient and inclusive societies.

Aim of the Report

- Analyse the historical roots of extremist narratives related to gender
- Examine how these narratives have evolved in contemporary Europe
- Identify key themes such as anti-feminism, anti-LGBTQI+ discourse, and “gender ideology”
- Explore the role of political, social, and religious actors in their dissemination
- Highlight the impact of these narratives on society and democratic values
- Provide insights to better understand and counter these discourses



Historical roots of extremist narratives : gender



From Norm to Extremism: A Historical Shift

It is important to underline that narratives we now consider extremist were not always perceived as such. For example, heteronormative views of the “traditional family,” based on strict gender roles, were once widely accepted across European societies.

Over time, however, social norms, laws, and collective attitudes have evolved. As a result, these previously dominant narratives have increasingly been challenged and are now often regarded as outdated, exclusionary, or extremist.

Understanding this shift is essential, as it highlights that extremism is not fixed but historically constructed and context-dependent.



What Are Anti-Gender Extremist Narratives?

Anti-gender extremist narratives refer to discourses that oppose the evolution of gender equality and challenge the recognition of gender as a social construct.

These narratives typically deny structural inequalities between men and women, fail to question patriarchal systems, and oppose women’s bodily autonomy as well as the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals.

They promote a vision of society based on a so-called “natural order,” in which gender roles are fixed, hierarchical, and biologically determined. In doing so, they obscure historical power relations and legitimize the subordination of women and minorities.





A Call to Return to a Mythified Past

A central feature of anti-gender extremist narratives is the call for a return to an idealised and simplified past. This past is often portrayed as a time when gender relations were stable, clear, and socially accepted.

Such narratives rely on nostalgia and selective historical memory to promote rigid gender norms. By idealising earlier periods, they ignore the inequalities and power structures that shaped these social arrangements.



Factors Driving the Radicalisation of These Narratives

The radicalisation of anti-gender narratives can be explained by several interconnected dynamics.

First, societal evolution has led to increased recognition of gender equality, making traditional gender norms less dominant. As these norms lose their legitimacy, the narratives defending them become more radical and oppositional.

Second, specific political and social actors continue to promote these narratives, despite their decreasing alignment with broader societal values. These actors often frame gender equality as an ideological imposition associated with liberal or left-wing elites.

Finally, the broader context of political polarisation and the rise of far-right movements has contributed to the politicisation of gender issues. Within this framework, gender equality is often portrayed as a threat to national identity or social cohesion.





Anti-Gender Narratives as Counter-Narratives

Anti-gender extremist narratives can also be understood as counter-narratives reacting to progress in gender equality.

They oppose not only specific policies or rights but also the actors and institutions associated with these changes. In this sense, they are often embedded in a broader rejection of liberal democracy, multiculturalism, and perceived “elite-driven” agendas.



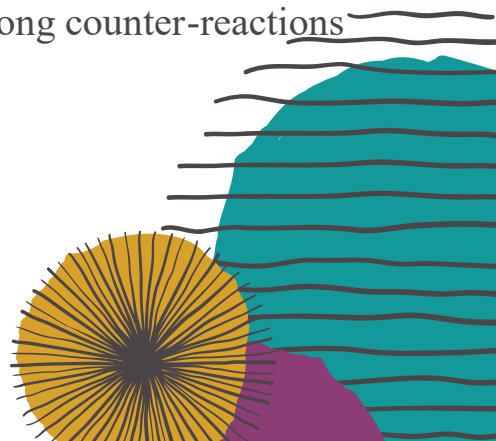
Key Moments in the Resurgence of Anti-Gender Narratives

The development of anti-gender narratives has not been linear but marked by several important phases.

The first significant wave emerged in the 1980s, as a reaction to feminist movements of the 1970s that achieved major legal and social advancements. These changes triggered strong opposition, particularly from conservative actors.

A second wave developed from the 2000s onwards, in response to the legalisation of same-sex marriage and renewed debates around reproductive rights. These developments led to coordinated mobilisations across Europe.

More recently, the MeToo movement from 2017 onwards has contributed to a global resurgence of feminist activism, which in turn has provoked strong counter-reactions and reinforced anti-gender discourses.





The Emergence of “Gender Ideology” as a Political Concept

The notion of “gender ideology” has become a central element in anti-gender narratives. Initially developed in the 1990s, it has been widely used to discredit feminist and LGBTQI+ movements.

This concept frames gender equality as an artificial and dangerous ideology imposed on society, often associated with globalisation, liberalism, or external influences.

It has been instrumentalised by various political actors, particularly within far-right and conservative movements, to oppose policies related to gender equality, education, and minority rights.



Transnational Dynamics of Anti-Gender Mobilisations

Anti-gender narratives are not confined to national contexts but operate within transnational networks. Similar discourses, strategies, and slogans can be observed across different countries.

Organisations and movements collaborate across borders, contributing to the diffusion and reinforcement of these narratives. This transnational dimension enhances their visibility, coherence, and political impact.



The Denial of Structural Gender Violence

Another important characteristic of anti-gender extremist narratives is the denial of structural gender-based violence.

These narratives tend to reinterpret such violence as isolated interpersonal issues rather than systemic problems. In doing so, they often oppose legal frameworks and policies aimed at protecting victims and addressing inequalities.



Gender as a “Natural Order”

At the core of many anti-gender extremist narratives lies the idea that gender relations are rooted in a “natural” and immutable order.

This perspective presents gender roles as biologically determined and socially necessary, often linking them to the preservation of the family and the nation.

By framing gender in this way, these narratives seek to legitimise traditional hierarchies and resist social change.



Recycling Historical Narratives

Anti-gender extremist narratives frequently draw on historical references and reinterpret past ideologies.

They revive older discourses about family, gender roles, and social order, adapting them to contemporary contexts. This process of recycling allows these narratives to maintain continuity while appearing relevant to current debates.



Historical Roots of Anti-Feminist Narratives

Anti-feminist narratives have deep historical roots that can be traced back to the 19th and 20th centuries. These narratives emerged in opposition to early feminist movements and were often aimed at restricting women’s roles to the private sphere, particularly by excluding them from political and public life.

Over time, these ideas have not disappeared. Instead, they have been recycled and adapted to new contexts, allowing them to persist and evolve in contemporary political discourse.





Feminist Progress and Backlash

The development of feminist movements, particularly from the 1970s onwards, marked a turning point in European societies. Key demands such as access to abortion, reproductive rights, and gender equality led to major legal and social transformations.

However, these advancements also triggered strong opposition from religious, conservative, and political actors. Anti-feminist narratives framed these changes as threats to social order, the traditional family, and male authority.

This dynamic of progress and backlash remains central to understanding contemporary anti-gender extremism.



Anti-Feminist Narratives Today

Today, anti-feminist narratives continue to portray feminism as harmful to society. They often depict feminists as responsible for social instability, the decline of traditional values, and the weakening of male roles.

These narratives frequently adopt a victimisation rhetoric, presenting men as disadvantaged or under attack. This framing has contributed to the rise of online communities and movements, often referred to as the “manosphere,” which amplify and spread these ideas.



The Role of Women in Spreading Anti-Feminist Narratives

Importantly, anti-feminist narratives are not only promoted by men. Some women also actively participate in their dissemination, advocating for traditional gender roles and opposing feminist principles.

These actors often promote ideals centred on motherhood, chastity, and domestic roles, presenting them as empowering alternatives to feminism. This contributes to the normalisation and diversification of anti-feminist discourse.



Anti-Abortion Narratives and Mobilisations

One of the most consistent elements of anti-feminist extremist narratives is the opposition to abortion. Anti-abortion movements, often framed as “pro-life,” operate at both national and transnational levels.

These movements seek to influence public policy and, in some cases, have successfully contributed to restricting abortion rights in certain European countries. Their actions illustrate the direct impact of extremist narratives on legislative processes and public institutions.



Political Actors and the Mainstreaming of Anti-Feminism

Today, anti-feminist narratives continue to portray feminism as harmful to society. They often depict feminists as responsible for social instability, the decline of traditional values, and the weakening of male roles.

These narratives frequently adopt a victimisation rhetoric, presenting men as disadvantaged or under attack. This framing has contributed to the rise of online communities and movements, often referred to as the “manosphere,” which amplify and spread these ideas.



Reactionary Female Activism

In several countries, reactionary forms of female activism have emerged in opposition to feminist movements. These groups advocate for a return to traditional gender values and actively mobilise against policies related to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights.

Their presence demonstrates that anti-gender narratives are not only ideological but also organisational and mobilisational.





Extremist Narratives on LGBTQI+ Rights

Extremist narratives targeting LGBTQI+ rights have evolved alongside broader social changes. W

These narratives typically frame LGBTQI+ rights as threats to the traditional family and social sta



Strategic Adaptation and Instrumentalisation

In recent years, some far-right actors have adopted seemingly more tolerant positions on LGBTQI+ issues. However, this shift is often strategic rather than ideological.

In certain cases, LGBTQI+ rights are instrumentalised to stigmatise other groups, particularly migrants and Muslim communities. This phenomenon reflects a broader strategy of redefining exclusion through new narratives.



The Rise of Anti-Trans Narratives

More recently, extremist narratives have increasingly targeted transgender rights. These narratives often create moral panic by portraying transgender identities as threats to social norms, children, or women's rights.

This shift illustrates how extremist narratives adapt to new social debates, focusing on emerging issues to maintain their relevance and mobilising capacity.





Religion and Anti-Gender Narratives

Religion has historically played a significant role in shaping and legitimising anti-gender narratives. Religious values are often mobilised to defend traditional gender roles and oppose changes related to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights.

Religious institutions and networks can influence public debates, support mobilisation efforts, and contribute to the diffusion of these narratives across different countries.



Gender and Anti-Immigration Narratives

Anti-gender extremist narratives are frequently intertwined with anti-immigration discourses. Women are often portrayed as bearers of national identity and are encouraged to fulfil reproductive roles in order to preserve the nation.

These narratives are closely linked to ideas of demographic threat, such as the so-called “Great Replacement” theory. In this framework, gender, reproduction, and migration become interconnected political issues.



The Politicisation of Motherhood and Demography

Motherhood is often politicised within extremist narratives as a tool for national survival. Women are encouraged—or pressured—to have more children in order to counter perceived demographic decline.

At the same time, women who do not conform to these expectations may be criticised or blamed for weakening the nation. This illustrates how personal choices are reframed as political responsibilities.



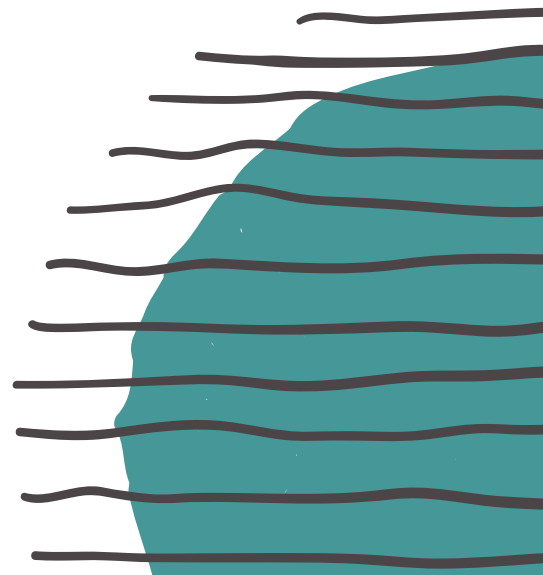


A Complex and Evolving Phenomenon

Contemporary anti-gender extremist narratives can be understood as counter-reactions to decades of feminist and LGBTQI+ progress. They construct a sense of threat and insecurity in order to justify opposition to social and legal advancements.

These narratives are closely connected to broader extremist ideologies, including xenophobia and nationalism, and are amplified by media dynamics, social networks, and political actors.

While they are often associated with far-right movements, their diffusion across different political and social spheres highlights their complexity and the need for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis.





References

- ARENAS Project.** (2023–2027). *Analysis of and responses to extremist narratives*. Available at: <https://arenasproject.eu/>
- Askola, H.** (2019). Wind from the North, don't go forth? Gender equality and the rise of populist nationalism in Finland. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1), 54–69.
- Bertsou, E.** (2019). Rethinking political distrust. *European Political Science Review*, 11, 213–230.
- Campolongo, F., Scanni, F. M., & Tarditi, V.** (2024). The pandemic crisis narrated by the populist radical right parties: The cases of the Lega per Salvini and the Rassemblement National. *International Communication Gazette*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485241249008>
- Camus, J.-Y., & Lebourg, N.** (2017). *Far-right politics in Europe*. Harvard University Press.
- Ekman, M.** (2022). The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims. *Convergence*, 28(4), 1127–1143.
- Faludi, S.** (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against women*. Crown Publishers.
- Farris, S. R.** (2017). *In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Forti, S.** (2021). *Extrema derecha 2.0: Qué es y cómo combatirla*. Siglo XXI.
- Forti, S., Soler López, S., Del Río Morillas, M. Á., Bauvois, G., Jareño Gila, C., & Miklóssy, K.** (2024, October). *D3.1 Historical roots of extremist narratives in Europe*. ARENAS Project. Available at: <https://arenasproject.eu/>
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E.** (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.
- Hunter, J. D.** (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to control the family, art, education, law, and politics in America*. Basic Books.
- Mudde, C.** (2019). *The far right today*. Polity Press.
- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R.** (2018). Disentangling and locating the “global right”: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3).
- Puar, J. K.** (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press.
- Rosanvallon, P.** (2008). *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sauer, B.** (2019). Cultural war 2.0? The relevance of gender in the radical populist-nationalist right. In *Capitalism in transformation*. Edward Elgar.