Choosing the Lesser Evil: The Anti-Gender Movement in Kazakhstan in the Context of Coloniality

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Abstract: When it comes to the topic of antigenderism, most scholarly and international advocacy works concentrate on the (East) European context, leaving the countries of the so-called 'third world' invisible. However, if we look beyond the idea that anti-gender movements are intrinsic only to countries that are moving away from modernity, we can see that the phenomenon also exists in other geographical contexts. In this regard, Kazakhstan presents an interesting case. Over the course of the last few years, there has been a rise in state-sponsored anti-gender activities backed by citizen movements that are advocating against 'gender ideology'. Looking at this from a decolonial perspective, the anti-gender movement in Kazakhstan is a peculiar case, as, on the one hand, the traditionalist discourse relies on essentialist notions of identity, especially in relation to restoring 'true Kazakhness' from pre-Soviet times, while, on the other hand, when it comes to the attacks on feminism and human rights, it is possible to observe a shift in discourse towards the ideas of Western ideological imperialism. This echoes the rhetoric that has been deployed by the Russian anti-gender movement, and this discourse sometimes even uses the same messages and sources. This paper analyses how the anti-gender movement in Kazakhstan navigates between resistance to the Russian and Soviet colonial past and present-day Western coloniality and (re)defines traditions in this context.

Keywords: anti-gender movement, Kazakhstan, sexual politics

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There has recently been a noticeable mobilisation around anti-gender ideology in Kazakhstan, mirroring a global phenomenon that has been evolving for decades. This discourse presents itself as a counterforce combating the perceived moral decay attributed to 'gender' and homosexual propaganda. In Kazakhstan, this discourse has gained momentum, particularly in efforts to block the draft Bill on Countering Domestic Violence by groups claiming to protect the nation's children. The efforts to block the new legislation on domestic violence[1] have sought to generate a moral panic regarding the future of the nation, which they perceive as being endangered due to harmful ideas of gender and sexual diversity among children, and the potential loss of parental control within the family. These discourses around family and child rights often invoke the active demonisation and othering of LGBTQ+ people as the main source of the threat to the aforementioned.

Such anti-gender sentiments have been mirrored in the state discourse as well, with the official anti-LGBTQ+ stance becoming more salient over recent years. This is evidenced by the official ban that was imposed on the screening of a cartoon film that contained a scene with a same-sex kiss (Kumenov 2022), the adoption of a law that prohibits the adoption of children by LGBTQ+ people (Loginova 2024), the renewed calls by some members of Parliament to adopt changes in the Act on Mass Media to prevent mass media from writing on topics related to LGBTQ+, and the most recent initiatives to introduce criminal liability for 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' (Vaal 2024). Moreover, the more explicit rejection of so-called Western values has been foregrounded in official interviews and speeches by the country's president. Thus, in contrast to what Patalakh (2018) noted earlier as Kazakhstan adopting a more neutral position on LGBTQ+ rights, what we have been able to see more recently is a trend of increasing the visibility of LGTBTQ+ people (Wilkinson 2020: 3) in order to fear-monger around the ideas of moral decay and promote so-called traditional values as allegedly essential to the survival and prosperity of the nation.

The link between the discursive instrumentalisation of traditions and nation-building has been well-researched in both wider and local contexts. For instance, Chatterjee (1989) describes how the appeal to and the re-definition of traditions have been used in postcolonial contexts as a part of nation-building efforts. He demonstrates how nationalist projects heavily rely on reforming traditions by relegating them to the internal sphere of national identity, the one which has the utmost value, and the one that, despite the material disadvantages of the colonised, could not be subjugated by the oppressor. Within such a model, women are responsible for the spiritual/private sphere that needs to be preserved by carrying on traditions, which ultimately grants

[1] The new law was passed by the Senate in the second reading on 11 April 2024 and signed by the president on 15 April 2024.

moral superiority over the colonial power. Similarly, Kudaibergenova (2019: 365) writes about the retraditionalisation in the context of Kazakhstan, where control over gender expression and sexualities is expressed by 'rethinking tradition in a more contemporary sense' as part of the nationalising process amidst the context of globalisation and transnationalisation. While there is little doubt about the role of retraditionalisation in nation-building processes, what proves intriguing in the case of anti-gender mobilisation in Kazakhstan is the paradoxical adoption of ideological messages. Despite emphasising the preservation of national identity, both anti-gender groups and the state readily embrace a stance that echoes Russia's promotion of traditional values (Edenborg 2021) – the very same values that are being promoted by Kazakhstan's own former coloniser. This article will attempt to analyse how anti-gender ideology manifests itself in Kazakhstan at the intersection of seemingly conflicting discourses on the revival of traditional values as a form of postcolonial resistance and as a matter of national identity that needs to be preserved from outside forces.

Before proceeding to the conceptual and analytical sections of the paper, it is crucial to highlight the importance of the given article in terms of knowledge production asymmetries when it comes to the study of anti-gender ideology. Despite the well-documented presence of anti-gender movements and a growing body of academic and activist literature on the subject, there exists a significant geographical imbalance in research focus. The Central Asian region remains conspicuously underrepresented, often overshadowed by the European part of the former Soviet Union and the communist bloc. Although there are indeed similarities and shared historical experiences among post-Soviet and post-communist countries, especially between Russia and the countries of Central Asia, it is essential to avoid the assumption that what applies to Russia automatically holds true for its neighbours (Bissenova 2023). This oversimplification risks perpetuating colonial narratives that marginalise Central Asia as a mere adjunct to the larger topic of Russian politics (Arystanbek 2019; Kassymbekova 2022). Thus, one of the goals of this paper is to contribute to the body of scholarly knowledge on anti-gender movements and mobilisation in the geographies that have been overlooked by academic research, such as Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular.

Anti-gender mobilisation in Kazakhstan

In September 2020, the Mazhilis, the lower house of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, took a significant step by approving the draft Bill on Countering Domestic Violence in its first reading. This bill was intended to replace the 2009 Act on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and had garnered strong support from activist groups and experts advocating for a comprehensive legal framework to protect women and minors from physical violence, particularly within the private family domain

or by intimate partners. The initiative for this bill reflected the growing recognition of the urgent need to address the persistently high level of gender-based violence, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the inadequacies of existing legislation (Azhigulova 2021).

The initial approval of the bill's concept in the first reading had raised hopes for its successful adoption by the end of the year following the second reading. However, in the weeks leading up to the second reading, the bill faced staunch opposition from a grassroots movement of parents. These opponents contended that the bill threatened the traditional family structure and claimed it aimed to instil individualistic values that were disrespectful of filial piety in children. They also propagated conspiracy theories, suggesting that the bill would lead to the separation of children from their families for sale in Western countries (Esimkhanov, Bannikov, Zhapisheva 2021). This opposition was not an isolated incident, as the same group had previously succeeded in blocking another bill a few months earlier, which pertained to amendments to the Public Health Code.

The groups actively opposing the draft bill have made extensive use of social media platforms, employing channels such as Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate their message. Despite the various names and organisational affiliations these groups adopt, such as the Movement of the Conscious of Kazakhstan and the Union of Parents of Kazakhstan, they consistently employ the same messages and discourses, and there is significant overlap in membership between them. Investigative journalism conducted by independent media outlets in Kazakhstan, such as Factcheck and Masa Media, has shed light on these groups' activities. Notably, the same groups that vehemently opposed the Bill on Countering Domestic Violence were also found to have disseminated disinformation during the pandemic, including vaccine-related falsehoods and conspiracy theories denying the existence of COVID-19.

What distinguishes these groups is their adoption of a rights-based discourse. Unlike previous waves of conservative resistance to gender equality and sexual diversity in the country, these groups have expanded their activities beyond social media platforms and messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. Anti-gender groups actively engage with the press, interact with state officials through various means, including the initiation of petitions, and present their actions within a rights-based framework. This strategy mirrors the approach employed by anti-gender groups in Russia during mobilisation against a domestic violence law, where nearly 200 civil society organisations across Russia signed an open letter to President Vladimir Putin in 2019 urging him to veto the law (Edenborg 2021).

Furthermore, investigations into the origins of the anti-gender movement have highlighted a lack of transparency regarding the funding sources of these groups. Simultaneously, clear ties have been established between these groups and the Russian

movement known as the International Social Movement of People's Unity. It is worth noting that anti-gender groups of parents in Kazakhstan have previously employed the online petition platform CitizenGo for their activism, the primary platform also used by anti-gender groups in Europe. CitizenGo has received funding from prominent leaders of the anti-gender ideology movement in Russia (Katsiveli, Coimbra-Gomes 2020; Edenborg 2021). This interconnectedness underscores the integration of the local anti-gender movement in Kazakhstan into the broader global network of transnational anti-gender mobilisation.

Defining anti-gender mobilisation

While anti-gender mobilisation has gained significant momentum in recent years and has become increasingly prominent as a societal phenomenon, it is essential to recognise that it is far from being a novel development and can be traced back to the 1990s (Denkovski, Bernarding, Lunz 2021). This mobilisation can assume a substantial variety of forms and expressions, shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including but not limited to geopolitical circumstances, socio-economic conditions, and the prevailing cultural contexts of individual regions. What is particularly worrisome, however, is the ever-expanding transnational character of anti-gender mobilisation (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). This globalisation of anti-gender sentiments and activities transcends borders, forging connections among disparate regions and societies. As these sentiments cross boundaries, they carry with them not only the potential to influence and shape the discourse on gender and sexuality but also to foster international networks that share common goals and strategies. This growing transnational dimension poses unique challenges and opportunities for addressing and understanding the dynamics of anti-gender mobilisation on a global scale.

In their most recent work, Butler (2024) elucidates the mechanics of this global phenomenon by examining how anti-gender movements exploit the fears around gender diversity to advance reactionary politics. They argue that these movements portray gender as a diabolical threat to societal norms and values, whereby they are able to mobilise support for authoritarian and conservative agendas. This portrayal transforms gender into a phantasm that fuels fears and justifies regressive policies.

It is true that anti-gender campaigns often employ arguments and narratives that are commonly associated with right-wing populist movements and religious fundamentalist discourses, but Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) argue that anti-gender mobilisation should be examined as a distinct phenomenon. What unites anti-gender campaigns worldwide, despite the regional and contextual variations in their manifestations, is their shared opposition to the concept of 'gender ideology.' As scholars have pointed out (Paternotte, Kuhar 2018), the primary purpose of the term 'gender

ideology' is to counter feminist and queer movements and the scholarly endeavours that challenge simplistic and naturalistic notions of gender, sexuality, and the inherent power relations they entail. Within the framework of this concept, gender is depicted as being at the core of contentious and morally objectionable changes to the established order, including the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, comprehensive sexual education, the integration of gender considerations into policy, and efforts to combat gender-based violence, among others (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). Additionally, as Korolczuk explains (2015), a notable feature of anti-gender mobilisations is their dual focus. On one hand, they centre their activism on the concepts of family and children. On the other hand, their anti-gender ideology asserts the extraordinary and all-encompassing nature of the perceived threats emanating from LGBTQ+ individuals and gender-related policies, presenting them as perilous to the very existence of society as a whole.

In their examination of the content of the anti-gender ideology that is central to the mobilisation against gender, Graff and Korolczuk (2022: 17–18) identify three fundamental elements within this ideology: a collection of beliefs concerning human nature and 'natural law'; 'a deeply pessimistic and consistently anti-modernist narrative' about the intellectual, cultural, and social history of the Western world; and an alarmist and conspiratorial vision of the current global distribution of power. It is worth noting that the prevailing view is that anti-gender ideology is closely linked to broader Christian fundamentalist movements. However, looking at the mobilisation around an anti-LGBT+ campaign in Chechnya, a Muslim republic within the Russian Federation, Edenborg (2021) showed how state-sponsored homophobia there was reframed by making reference to 'traditional values' as part of the resurgence of authoritarian Islamic leadership. Edenborg's (2021: 5) analysis revealed how a narrative advocating for the safeguarding of deeply rooted cultural and religious values against external influence aligns neatly with ideological initiatives grounded in the revival of Islamic principles that exist in various Muslim-majority regions within the Russian Federation. Therefore, irrespective of teleological allusions, anti-gender ideology strategically harnesses various discourses rooted in the conviction that there is a predetermined natural order. It is evident, moreover, that gender plays a pivotal role within the anti-gender movement, serving as the 'symbolic glue' (Kováts, Põim 2015; Grzebalska, Kováts, Petö 2017) that effectively binds together disparate and occasionally conflicting notions into a coherent framework.

Gender, modernity, and sexual geographies

When considering the anti-modernist stance that is inherent to anti-gender ideology, it is crucial to discuss how gender and modernity have been shaped in the discourse

to represent mutual signifiers of each other. Moreover, it is no less important to point out how these narratives of modernity have been reproduced in one way or another and not only by anti-gender campaigns, as they have been present in the dominant discourses for a long time, including in academic and activist circles advocating for the wider inclusion of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. As Philips (2018) asserts, while the idea that the West is the beacon of what is considered to be modern has been challenged, and the vast amount of post- and decolonial literature has led to the de-coupling of these concepts from each other, what remains solid is the conflation of gender with modernity. Philips shows how the fight for women's rights, which, crucially, has been limited to a fight for the rights of just one subset of women, has been utilised historically to draw boundaries between the modern West and barbaric and uncivilised others, whose alleged lack of civilisation was then used to justify the colonial projects of the former. Philips contends that this association of modernity with the status of women was not only a feature of the colonial era but continues to exist until now. According to her, in a contemporary setting, modernity is symbolised by gender equality and openness to sexual freedoms, which ultimately serve as boundary-making tools against racialised others by assigning them the label of backwardness.

Similarly, Puar (2007) has delved deeply into the intricate interplay of sexual politics that shape the imagined geographies that distinguish the West from the East. Puar's seminal work reveals a strategic manoeuvre by the Western world: the deliberate leveraging of the recognition of LGBT[2] rights to delineate clear boundaries as a pretext to justify the exclusion of racialised Others. At the core of this paradigm lies the selective allocation of tolerance and rights by the state to a particular segment of the LGBT community. This selective granting of rights serves as a symbol of the West's proclaimed civilisational exceptionalism and provides narrative tools with which to disqualify and deter others from crossing the imaginary boundaries it has meticulously drawn. Puar encapsulates this phenomenon in the term 'homonationalism', which represents the process through which gender and sexuality become instruments for demarcating the West as the exclusive realm of sexual freedom and diversity, while portraying the rest of the world as inherently homophobic. This framework illuminates how sexual politics intricately intersect with broader geopolitical strategies, and this not only influences the discussions surrounding gender and sexuality but also has a profound impact on global power dynamics and territorial delineations.

[2] Use of the acronym LGBT instead of the more inclusive LGBTQ+ indicates that such homonationalist discourses are rooted in the categorisation and policing of sexuality and identities. This ultimately confines these discourses within the boundaries of heteronormative co-optations of sexual and gender diversity. By narrowing the spectrum of recognised identities, these discourses reinforce a limited and controlled acceptance of diversity that aligns with heteronormative frameworks.

The concept of homonationalism has emerged as a pivotal reference point in a large body of scholarship dedicated to unravelling the role that gender and sexuality play in drawing the boundaries between the abstract constructs of the West and the East on the global geopolitical stage. Building upon this concept, Rao (2020) introduces a temporal dimension into the discourse. Rao contends that homonationalism does not just demarcate the spatial boundaries that determine what falls within the purview of the West and what lies beyond it. Rather, beyond that, it also interweaves a notion of belonging with the ideals of modernity and progress. Within this framework, sexual politics become inextricably entwined with the concepts of modernity and progress, where the West is positioned as the fulcrum for these ideals. As a result, this sexual exceptionalism transforms the West into not only a geographical entity but also a temporal one. Anyone excluded from its confines is thus relegated to being perceived as antiquated and underdeveloped. This complex interplay of spatial and temporal dimensions further underscores the profound implications sexual politics have for the perception of progress and backwardness within the global landscape.

Within these imaginary geographies of the West relating to gender and sexual diversity and freedoms, where the symbolic East represents everything that the West is not, i.e. homophobia and a lack of progress, the anti-gender ideology finds a nourishing space to exploit this binary for its own benefit. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) have analysed how existing anti-gender movements mobilise the population through anti-colonialist sentiment combined with an appeal to parents as the main actors in the movement. As the authors argue, anti-gender movements have been successful because their narratives – centred on the exceptionality of the nation under an imminent external threat from malign global forces that are (allegedly) targeting them by undermining the traditional foundations of the society, i.e. the heterosexual family – play on fears and generate a broad emotional response but also a feeling of being connected to larger group and a feeling of hope for a brighter future.

In line with this argument, Arystanbek (2021) illustrates the centring of heteronormative family imagery through the construction of strict gender roles, which are invoked by the concept of traditions. She discusses how the state employs these roles to formulate the cultural and national exceptionality of Kazakhstan. In her analysis of the school curriculum, Arystanbek demonstrates that it promotes heterosexual relationships as the norm, marginalising or completely ignoring non-heteronormative identities and orientations. The official state discourse, channelled through the education system, uses historical and cultural references to reinforce the importance of maintaining so-called traditional structures, which are presented as integral to the nation's cultural heritage and social stability. Thus, at its core, the heteronormative family assumes the position of the main guarantor and the foundation of the nation and its resilience against the outside world.

Moreover, according to Graff and Korolczuk (2022), although the anti-colonial narratives of the anti-gender movement share the same tropes as postcolonial and decolonial theories and might even borrow some of their central ideas and concepts, it can be seen how these ideas have been reframed and distorted in the hands of the former. The anti-colonial outcry of anti-gender movements works with a binary juxtaposition of the innocent indigenous/local group of people bravely standing against the larger powers of the imaginary West, global capitalism, and the erosion of traditional roles in society. Hence, it is not surprising that within this reproduced and perpetuated binary, which postures as standing against Western domination, everything that is discursively constructed to be elements of the West, such as queerness, critical notions of the social construction of the concepts of gender and sexuality, feminism, bodily autonomy, etc., is being vilified and scapegoated as malign imports from the West.

Finally, one can see how this binary of the West and the East and the degree to which the values of modernity and progress can be assigned to each has been preventing activists and academia from fully understanding the phenomenon of anti-gender ideology and mobilisation. It is possible to trace how anti-genderism has come to be framed as a cultural backlash (Cupac, Ebetürk 2020; Kováts 2017), at the core of which is certain geographies' resistance and reluctance to submit to inevitable progress. This discourse has undermined the importance and significance of anti-gender mobilisation, assigning it only temporary importance and seeing it as a self-dissolvable minor stumble on the path of irrevocable and unquestionable progression towards modernity and progress, which encapsulates in itself gender equality and sexual rights and freedoms. Moreover, deeply entrenched in this linear understanding of progress and modernity is a view of anti-genderism as a cultural backlash, which not only perpetuates the dichotomy of the West against the East but also leaves out all the territories that within this matrix have been assigned to the symbolic East. Thus, by this logic, anti-genderism itself becomes the signifier of progress and modernity. If opposition to 'gender ideology' is perceived as going backward, then the starting point for going backward can only be that of modernity and progress. This view of seeing anti-genderism as a cultural backlash creates geographic blind spots, where places not even registered within the category of those impacted by the whims of modernity are entirely overlooked.

As Hovhannisyan (2019) astutely observes, the anti-gender movement is often framed exclusively within the Western context, where it is portrayed as a threat to the progress and modernity upon which Western identity is constructed. She critiques the prevailing literature for characterising anti-gender ideology as a mere setback, perpetuating the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity and progress by labelling it a 'gender backlash'. Hovhannisyan contends that analyses of anti-gender ideolo-

gy tend to depict it as a recent Western phenomenon of regression into traditions through the moral panic surrounding 'gender ideology'. However, she points out that in non-Western contexts, the concept of gender had already challenged many religious, traditionalist, and fundamentalist ideologies long before it resurfaced in Europe as a perceived threat.

Similarly, Paternotte (2020) argues that assigning a linear progressive framework to sexual geopolitics and viewing anti-genderism solely as resistance to this progress oversimplifies the nuanced nature of anti-gender mobilisation. Such an oversimplification obscures how it unites diverse and sometimes opposing ideas into a cohesive whole. On the contrary, this binary perception of anti-genderism relies on a mutual process of 'othering', where both sides tend to group all the dissenters from anti-gender ideology into a single category. Paternotte emphasises that this approach erases the internal power dynamics and imbalances within pro-gender groups. Paradoxically, this simplification benefits anti-gender campaigns worldwide, where anyone who challenges their discourses is reduced to being cultural traitors and supporters of Western imperialism.

Examining the discourse surrounding gender-related concerns provides insights into the role of non-governmental organisations that receive international funding, especially those focusing on gender equality and LGBTQ+ advocacy. These organisations are frequently implicated in broader anti-gender narratives and depicted as agents of cultural imperialism. The post-Soviet Central Asian region, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, offers a compelling example of how gender concepts were introduced primarily through international development agencies such as the UN and USAID. This introduction was facilitated by gender mainstreaming policies and associated funding initiatives (Kamp 2016). For many former Soviet Union countries, including Kazakhstan, integration into the global development sphere meant adopting a neoliberal market economy. Simultaneously, they pursued political liberalisation and democratisation as prerequisites for a Western-defined model of development and modernity. Thus, in juxtaposition to this model of NGO-led gender equality attempts, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) highlight how the proponents of anti-gender ideology brand themselves as the representatives of the true and authentic civil society, the ones who truly represent the will of the common people, and the ones who have not been corrupted by the malice of foreign and supranational actors that are alien to the interests of people on the ground. As the authors argue (ibid.: 93), this scepticism and demonisation of the civil society structures in place are especially salient in the countries of the former Soviet Union, where the discourse of development and progress has been established through Western donor support in the wake of their independence in the 1990s.

Methodology

In order to analyse how anti-gender mobilisation operates in Kazakhstan, this paper utilises a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD). While CDA offers a framework for examining power relations within discourse and understanding how language constructs social reality (Wodak 2018), SKAD provides insight into the agency of the social actors involved in the production and reception of a discourse (Keller 2011). By integrating these approaches, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the discursive dynamics surrounding anti-gender ideology in Kazakhstan and considers both the production of discourse by state actors and its further reproduction and legitimation by anti-gender groups.

CDA focuses on the ways in which language is used to 'enact, confirm, legitimise, reproduce, or challenge relations of power' in society (Van Dijk 2015: 467). It emphasises the intrinsic connection between discourse and social context, highlighting how discourses are shaped by and shape broader social structures. CDA views discourses as intrinsically embedded in a social context, centring the concept of power in discourse production and articulation. Language, within the framework of CDA (Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 271), is understood as a social practice, and power relations are seen as products of discourses as social practices. This dialectical relationship between society and discourse underscores how culture and society are formed by discourses, which serve ideological purposes.

This paper adopts the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to CDA suggested by Wodak (2001). Wodak situates discourses as social practices in a socio-historical context and highlights the dialectic relationship between the two. Within this framework (ibid.: 66), discourse and social context are mutually constitutive, and thus it is crucial to analyse discursive texts not only as individual and isolated linguistic utterances but also on the macro level of the socio-historical contexts that are defined both by discourses and by institutional and social structures. Thus, Wodak pays close attention to the situational contexts in which discourses occur, the relationship between different discourses and texts, and how these discourses are embedded in socio-historical structures. The DHA in CDA in this paper specifically applies to its analysis of how anti-gender rhetoric has been produced discursively and to its study of the interdiscursive (Reisigl, Wodak 2015: 90) nature of the anti-gender ideology promoted by the state in conflation with other discourses on modernity and nation-building, which are dictated by the socio-historical context of Kazakhstan.

At the same time, while acknowledging the role of the state as one of the main discourse-producing actors in regard to national identity, gender, and sexuality reflected in anti-gender discourses in the country, this paper also aims to trace how

these state-produced discourses have been defining the social reality in Kazakhstan. For this purpose, the article uses the SKAD methodology developed by Keller (2011). Based on Foucauldian notions of discourse as the axis of power/knowledge (1972), the SKAD defines discourse as a 'regulated practice of statement formation responding to some problem, urgency or need of action, including knowing something, defining a situation and perpetuating or transforming a given order as such problems of action' (Keller 2018: 20). Similar to Wodak's approach to CDA, SKAD also emphasises the interrelationship between discourses and social realities, underscoring how they mutually reproduce each other. At the same time, what distinguishes SKAD from CDA, and can be considered a meaningful addition to the analysis, is SKAD's significant consideration of the agency of the social actors involved in discourses. Thus, it does not confine the social world to the agency of the power-holding elites who produce discourses but demonstrates that the social reality constituted by discourses depends on both how discourses are produced by elites and how they are accepted by the addressees of such discourses. As Keller writes (2011: 54), 'social actors are not only the empty addressees of knowledge supplies and the value assessments embedded therein, but are socially configured incarnations of agency standing in the crossfire of multiple and heterogeneous, maybe even contradicting discourses, trying to handle the situations they meet'. Thus, SKAD is used in this paper to analyse the relationship between the state discourse on anti-gender ideology and the discourses promoted by anti-gender groups in the country. With the help of SKAD analysis, this paper looks at the problematisation of gender by these groups, how they legitimise their claims, and what they discursively construct as the appropriate solutions to gender as a problem.

Based on a textual analysis using CDA and SKAD, the article identifies the main discursive themes inherent to the anti-gender mobilisation in Kazakhstan, such as the role of the family and children, the use of anti-colonial discourse, nation-building, and a rights-based approach as a legitimation strategy. The discursive texts for the article were selected using the method of theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014), where each piece of data informed the collection of the next piece of data. Thus, I started the data collection with the initial coding of the messages produced by groups in the anti-gender movement in Kazakhstan, which were heavily clustered around the themes of family and children and destructive Western forces as a threat to the nation. This, in turn, led me to add state discourses on the nation and national identity and the role of the West in the discursive messages produced by the state. The sampling size of the texts was not based on the quantitative measures but rather on the theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2014) of the themes mentioned in the texts.

Between the West and Islam: nation-building in Kazakhstan

To grasp the manifestations of anti-gender ideology in Kazakhstan, it is essential to delve into its contextual intricacies, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary dynamics. As highlighted by Tlostanova (2015), the dissolution of the Soviet Union plunged Central Asian countries into a state of what she terms 'double coloniality'. This concept encapsulates the complex interplay between historical subjugation and modern power dynamics. On one hand, these nations grapple with the lingering influence of their former coloniser, Russia, which imposes civilisational imperatives and modernisation agendas. At the same time, Russia itself occupies a subordinate position within the framework of Western coloniality. This intricate web of historical baggage and contemporary power structures profoundly influences the socio-political landscape, setting the stage for the emergence and perpetuation of anti-gender ideologies.

Discourses regarding Russia's colonial past in Kazakhstan are longstanding and have remained central to various political factions since independence (Kudaibergenova 2016). It is worth noting the dual ways in which these discourses circulate and are utilised. On one hand, there is a growing grassroots interest in decolonial thought concerning history and identity formation, as evidenced in artworks and activist initiatives (Smagulova 2023). On the other hand, as Kudaibergenova (2016) contends, postcolonial discourse serves as a tool for contesting political power among diverse groups, including the political establishment, opposition factions, and Kazakh-national patriots. While the bottom-up application and re-production of decolonial thought is on the rise, especially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Arystanbek, Schenk 2022; Kassymbekova, Marat 2022), and deserves all academic attention, this paper will focus on how postcolonial sentiments have been appropriated by the official state discourse and how this aligns with anti-gender rhetoric in the case of Kazakhstan. This appropriative use of political postcolonial discourse, according to Kudaibergenova (2019: 918), is driven by nationalising projects and the 'inability of both the regime and other Kazakh political actors to acquire clear positionality vis-a-vis former oppressors, including the Russian tsarist empire and the Soviet Union'. Each of these political actors has been instrumentalising this ambiguity of positionality to reach their own goals. In the case of the political regime, political postcolonialism has been used as one of the main instruments of regime legitimation through the intentionally inconsistent nation-building discourses of 'Kazakh ethno-nationalism, the developmental idea of modernising the state-nation, equal rights and welfare for all Kazakhstani citizens' (Kudaibergenova 2019: 921).

The topic of nation-building and the themes of national unity have been prominent in recent presidential addresses and official speeches. Thus, for example, in his most

recent address at the third meeting of the National *kurultai*[3] President Tokaev dedicated his speech to the importance of national unity. An analysis of his speech reveals the conflation of different discourses around nation-building and national identity. It starts by emphasising the importance of national identity and traditional values. Tokaev invokes historical references, such as the significance of the place where the Kurultai is taking place, to underscore the deep-rootedness of Kazakh culture and heritage. This framing serves to strengthen the legitimacy of his message by connecting it to revered aspects of Kazakh history. While acknowledging the importance of tradition, the speech also employs the notions of progress and modernisation. By highlighting initiatives aimed at economic development and novelties in government policy, this discursive emphasis on progress reflects a desire to position Kazakhstan as a forward-looking nation while balancing the preservation of cultural heritage. The speech then proceeds to a discussion of ideological shifts, where Tokaev pays attention to the influence of the increased Islamisation in society. It is interesting to trace how he discursively juxtaposes the notions of modernity and progress against forms of Islam, claiming that its 'radicalised' forms are alien to the traditions of Kazakhstan and impose 'archaic' ways of life. Furthermore, immediately after rejecting the 'radicalised' versions of Islam as alien to Kazakh culture and traditions, Tokaev outlines another element alien to Kazakh identity:

> 'We cannot and will not go along with those who, under the influence of Western and other trends, promote values alien to our culture and, moreover, contrary to the [binary] basis of the world. Our children are involved in this destructive propaganda, so the price of the issue is greater than ever – it is the spiritual health of the younger generation. (…) Our position on this issue will not be influenced by either political conjuncture or newfangled world trends. We must firmly and consistently cultivate traditional family values' (Tokaev 2024).

This speech in itself is significant, as it is one of the first times that the head of state in Kazakhstan has on the discursive level of an official text presented the image of the West in opposition to traditional values and the role of the child. It is important to point out how the matter of gender and sexuality remains deliberately implicit and disguised by the reference to the binary foundation of the world. The intentional omission of a definition of 'destructive propaganda' and what constitutes such propaganda further amplifies the moral panic and urgency surrounding the matter of saving the

[3] The National kurultai is a consultative and advisory body under the president, which serves the purpose of developing ideas and steps for the further advancement of social consolidation (from the official *Akorda* website).

'younger generation'. Additionally, what is remarkable is that the affective appeal to save the children on the grounds of an entrenched notion of heteronormativity seems to have played the role of a unifying discourse both to legitimise the state's authority in a society divided along ethno-linguistic lines and to redirect anti-colonial sentiments towards the West and not the former colonial centre.

Furthermore, while relegating both Islam and the West as alien influences jeopardising the prosperity and the integrity of the nation, Tokaev, having just reasserted traditional family values as the core tenets of the national identity, proceeds to discuss the issue of domestic violence. Here, he contends that the issue of 'discrimination and even oppression of women' is inherent to 'families where Islamic canons are perceived in an extremely distorted, dogmatic form'. The speech concludes by setting out the national path that is left after rejecting Western and Islamic influences. While extensively referencing the pre-Soviet ideals of the Kazakh nation through various historical references, Tokaev makes statements that seemingly conflict with his own attempts at historical revivalism and to summon the supposed greatness of the Kazakh nation and with his calls to leave the past behind while also warning that 'digging too much into the past can cause more harm than good'. He remarks that 'no one can change the past' and concludes his words by citing a Kazakh poet, 'If you do not see a friend in your neighbour, all your deeds are useless' (Tokaev 2024).

It is crucial to highlight how this entire discourse of referring to the West as the source of imported values that are destructive and in conflict with traditional family values and, at the same time, of portraying the issue of violence against women as being brought by Islam reproduces the discursive constructions of the racialised territories delineated by the instrumentalisation of gender and sexuality. It would be too simplistic and reductionist to claim that this is merely a show of resistance to Western dominance (Suchland 2018). Instead, this in itself could be interpreted as an aspiration for whiteness, but the morally 'proper' one, while at the same time distancing oneself from the racialised Muslims and thus locating oneself along the geopolitical imaginary of modernity, but with traditional values as the core of such a modernity. Such a discursive construction inevitably relies on the invention of both an external and internal Other, and it is possible to see how in the state discourse the image of the internal Other has been crafted using notions of gender and sexuality, where anyone who does not conform to the heteronormative projects of nationalism is deemed to be a Western element, whereas violence against women is rejected through the creation of an image of an 'Islamised' person, who is portrayed as an agent of backwardness, ironically echoing the Western Orientalising discourses (Said 1978) on gender in non-Western, specifically Muslim geographies.

This speech is an exemplary discursive text that demonstrates how anti-gender rhetoric in alliance with nation-building is a result of multiple discourses that are of-

ten conflicting and competing with each other. Thus, while the speech might seem inconsistent with the President's own messages in which he selectively makes use of historical events and images, deeming some of these historical events and images as the subject for glorification and an active reference for national identity and others as the elements that need to be forgotten, such a contradiction aligns with Kudaibergenova's argument (2019), presented above, on the opportunistic use of postcolonial discourses by the official political regime. In this case, it is possible to see how the nation-building demonstrated by this speech has been discursively redirected towards an alignment with Russia, invoking futuristic notions of abandoning postcolonial resentment towards Russia for the sake of greater progress and modernisation, based on embracing the traditional values of the heterosexual family and the exclusion of Islamic radicalisation.

The Holy Trinity: parent, child, nation

Returning to the discourses employed and reproduced by Kazakh anti-gender groups in their messaging, we can see how the politicisation of parenthood is a recurring theme in their mobilisation rhetoric. One of the most striking examples of this politicisation is provided by the recent petitions organised by anti-gender groups calling for the shutting down of an online platform called *Selftanu*[4] dedicated to queer youth in Kazakhstan, and by a recent petition calling for the banning of 'overt and covert propaganda of LGBT' in the country.[5] The authors of the petitions and social media posts claim that it is crucially important to stop the dissemination of non-heteronormative relations, which represent a threat to the well-being of children and, by extension, to the entire nation:

> *I call for* the protection, the shielding*, of our teenagers and children from such big mistakes, the protection of our future generation from wrong relations and the replaced ideas! The sexual life of adults is their private business, but I am against the propaganda and cultivation of non-traditional sexual relationships in the open in front of the whole audience, where the viewers and listeners are also children! (emphasis added)*

[4] O Blokirovke i Zaprete Saita po Propogande LGBT selftanu.kz, accessed 15 April 2024 https://otinish.kz/ru/petition/104/.

[5] The petition, initiated by Bagila Balgabayeva, a prominent figure in the anti-gender movement, was launched on 29 May 2024. It rapidly gained traction, amassing 50,000 signatures in under two weeks. This significant support qualified the petition for formal consideration by the Ministry of Culture and Information.

In a social media post,[6] Bagila Balgabayeva, the petition's author, expressed gratitude to all the signatories while cautioning that the battle is far from over. She warned that if the 'spread of LGBT' is not halted, Kazakhstan could face the dire consequences of moral and spiritual deterioration within the next 10–15 years, similar to what she perceives the West is currently experiencing. Balgabayeva emphasised that standing against Western values is a shared fight that transcends social status and affects everyone equally. She highlighted that this issue is fundamentally about the well-being of children and the nation's sovereignty.

Some authors (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017) have noted the universal nature of this kind of imagery where children are depicted as vulnerable to the perceived dangers of gender-related issues, such as the unfounded fear of them becoming LGBTQ+. Discussing this phenomenon, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) also noted how anti-gender movements appeal to the idea that protecting children is the moral and sacred duty of parents. Combined with the aforementioned discourse of anti-colonialism inherent to the anti-gender movement, the mobilisation of parents amplifies the emotional support for the anti-gender movement within the population. By astutely manipulating the dichotomy between an ordinary, disenfranchised group of people disconnected from global capital and political decision-making on one side and a movement standing against broader global ills on the other, the anti-gender movement empowers its followers with a sense of self that not only allows them to regain control over their own lives and families but also contributes dutifully to the protection and future of the entire nation.

The campaigns by Kazakh anti-gender groups manipulate the population by evoking what is presented as the imminent threat facing the traditional heterosexual family, which is regarded as the cornerstone of society. These campaigns skilfully employ the symbolic image of a child being deprived of their natural protectors – their parents. Phrases such as 'encroaching on the most sacred thing of all – FAMILY', 'discrimination of the natural rights of parents', and 'the destruction of our traditional family and moral values' (loosely translated, emphasis in the original text) are wielded by these groups to evoke a moral panic and frame the sanctity of the family's privacy as under siege from external forces. The petition against the Bill on Countering Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan that circulated in 2020 claims that these legal initiatives are driven by organisations and groups purportedly linked to international bodies (Saderdinova 2020). It accuses these entities of 'lobbying' for foreign and destructive values that are in conflict with the 'true and local' values of Kazakhstan. The document strategically invokes international human rights law and domestic family regulations, citing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant

[6] Instagram page of Bagila Balgabayeva, accessed 12 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8Bvo5pN9mm/?igsh=MTMzcXNzanhwZnl5ZA==.

on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to support the argument for family autonomy in making decisions about children's well-being. It is imperative to highlight how this selective use of references to international human rights law distorts the core principles of these laws and lends an air of credibility and rights-based legitimacy to the anti-gender mobilisation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) indeed underscores the role of legal parents/custodians as agents capable of acting in the child's best interests. Simultaneously, the Convention does not absolve parents and guardians of their responsibilities; rather, it places them on equal footing with the state as duty-bearers ensuring the rights of children. Furthermore, the document emphasises that if legal guardians fail in their duties, it becomes the state's obligation to intervene and act in the child's best interests.

Despite the distortion and misuse of the core concepts of international human rights documents, this example of the utilisation of rights-based discourse to justify anti-gender messages is very illustrative of a larger trend. These appeals to comply with international human rights law by the state can be indicative of the welfare demands of citizens. As Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022) argue, the contentious politics in Kazakhstan, illustrated by the January 2022 events, stem from a crisis of the legitimacy of the political elite in the country, where the regime has failed to provide the promised social and economic welfare while it has promoted further neoliberal policies. Similarly, Ukhova (2018) emphasises the importance of considering class-related issues when explaining the appeal of anti-gender movements, which have been conditioned by neoliberal systems. In a study she found that for many respondents the emphasis on 'traditional values', particularly centred on heteronormative gender roles, serves as a justification for existing inequalities and the failures of neoliberalism to fulfil its promises.

At the same time, it is also possible to trace how this rights-based discourse aligns with the nation-building projects of the state, which ostensibly promises equal rights for every citizen. Yet, this seemingly universal provision of rights relies heavily on the discursive exclusion of internal others. Thus, in conformity with the state discourse on traditional family values, the anti-gender mobilisation of both government officials and grassroots anti-gender groups vilifies LGBTQ+ people as an internal threat beholden to the alien destructive Western values of homosexuality and gender self-determination. Within their ideas of national identity and the future of the nation, the heteronormative family is the sole form of social unit that guarantees the existence of the nation.

This reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004) leveraged by anti-gender movements upholds these heteronormative values by emphasising the child as the symbol of the future. Anti-gender activists argue that non-traditional gender identities and sexual

orientations threaten the moral fabric and continuity of society. This rhetoric portrays LGBTQ+ rights and comprehensive sexual education (Arystanbek 2021) as harmful influences that jeopardise the well-being and proper upbringing of children. By focusing on the protection of children, anti-gender activists frame their opposition to gender equality as a defence of societal values and the nation's future, thereby garnering broader public support. This strategic use of reproductive futurism not only marginalises LGBTQ+ individuals but also strengthens the discourse around traditional family structures as essential for national survival and prosperity.

Within this paradigm, the symbolic image of the child serves as the guarantee of the nation's continuity, which needs to be protected at all costs. However, as Levitanus (2023: 183) points out, these discourses about protection rule out queer childhood as an 'impossibility', making the queer child – who might otherwise trouble the assumption of a heteronormative future – unthinkable. In essence, the confluence of state-driven nation-building agendas and anti-gender mobilisation perpetuates a discourse that valorises the heteronormative family unit while marginalising LGBTQ+ individuals, thus reinforcing exclusionary narratives within the framework of national identity and endangering the recognition of queer childhood experiences.

Conclusion

In an effort to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse, this paper seeks to contextualise the extensive body of work on anti-gender politics and ideology within the specific context of Kazakhstan. Despite the sustained academic attention devoted to anti-gender mobilisation over the past decade, it has predominantly bypassed the geographies of the former Soviet Union, particularly the Central Asian nations. This oversight reflects the enduring coloniality of knowledge production, where Central Asia has been primarily regarded through the lens of Russian politics and its geopolitical influence. Furthermore, even within the realm of gender studies, prevailing notions of progress and modernity have adhered to a linear temporal framework, with the West serving as the benchmark of modernity, and the rest of the world viewed as catching up.

In this context, opposition to gender is often viewed as a sign of regression on the trajectory to modernity, and this explains the region's invisibility in gender and sexuality studies. Consequently, this implies that the region was initially devoid of concepts of gender and sexuality, rendering the phenomenon of anti-gender movements inconceivable in the absence of these constructs. In response to this scholarly oversight and the consequential erasure of an entire region from the global discussions on anti-gender mobilisation, this paper sought to contextualise current developments in Kazakhstan.

Drawing upon the foundational works on anti-gender mobilisation and the discursive construction of anti-gender movements, this study also endeavoured to critique unchallenged notions of modernity in the analysis put forward in those foundational works. Through a critical examination of the anti-gender movement in Kazakhstan, this paper asserts that the success of anti-gender ideology in the country can be attributed to the intersection of anti-colonial discourses, the politicisation of parenthood, and the instrumentalisation of the image of the child. At the same time, the central messages in these discourses – centred on resisting Western cultural hegemony by empowering parents with autonomy over their children and positioning them as defenders not only of their offspring but also of the entire nation – have been harnessed by the government to legitimise its authority and bolster its image on the domestic, regional, and international fronts.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the urgent need to broaden the scope of research in the field of anti-gender politics, transcending conventional Western-centric narratives and acknowledging the complexities of diverse regional contexts such as Kazakhstan. By challenging the prevailing paradigms of modernity and offering critical insights into the dynamics of anti-gender movements, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of this global phenomenon.

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