



Who Cares for Families?

Narrative(s) of Return in Postsocialist Europe

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The introduction to the special section “Who Cares for Families? Narrative(s) of Return in Postsocialist Europe” identifies and analyzes its core concept—the narrative of return. Families of today are talked about differently, and how they are narrativized matters. The narrative that stresses that family is under threat and in need of defense or a special form of care, figuring care as restitution of natural, traditional, or family proper, is termed the narrative of return. The trope of return is strongly normative and non-descriptive, as it relies on mythical temporalities that ought to be restored in our present. The article first defines the choice of concepts—narrative, return, care, and threat. Second, it applies this conceptual frame in the transnational context, particularly within the transnational anti-gender campaigns in the populist moment. Third, it focuses on the postsocialist part of Europe, where, as the entire special section aims to demonstrate, the narrative of return gained particular currency. In Eastern Europe, these narratives are integral to larger projects of restoration of national agenda and serve as a tool of double emancipation: from the Soviet past and from the European Union present. Political actors using narrative(s) of return advocate and successfully push through fundamental changes in the political frameworks and value systems of the postsocialist countries. In sum, the article aims to demonstrate the conceptual background of a political tool.

Keywords: *family; narrative of return; care; postsocialism; anti-gender; Eastern Europe*

Why Family? What Family? Whose Families?

In 2015, Kuhar and Paternotte compiled the report which preceded their groundbreaking *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*, the volume that set the path for all future research into the creation of the “gender monster” phenomenon.¹ The 2015 report merits mentioning because it readily detected the climate of transnational

polarization, illiberalization of human rights, and de-democratization of societies, much before these processes began to have their—now standard—names. Recently, anti-gender mobilizations have been on the rise worldwide, and many relevant studies aiming to better understand them emerged in the field. The field itself is interdisciplinary, mirroring the many spheres in which anti-gender discourses operate.² Our special section complements these efforts, focusing particularly on postsocialist Europe. It aims to scrutinize the figure of the family, possibly the key figure in anti-gender stories, offering to unpack their main narrative—the narrative of return.

The articles gathered in this special section diagnose the emergence and circulation of the narrative of return in specific country-cases—Hungary, Romania, Poland, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, (the East of) Germany, and Slovakia. Our aim in this introductory note is to explain the concept that binds them. The “narrative of return” originated in the interdisciplinary environment of the COST Action *Who Cares in Europe?* focusing on welfare and care, with a particular stress on family. Coming from various parts of the postsocialist East (as well as representing three different disciplines—political science, historical sociology, and gender studies), the three of us began pondering on who cares for the family in our countries today, with what instruments, and under which restrictions. We took off from the assumption that family is a dynamic entity, historically constituted and reconstituted through collaborative links—or the lack thereof—between various actors (family members, states, and civic societies), with the aim of understanding what kind of negotiations characterize the lived lives of families today. Extensive research has been done on different aspects of care for the family in different parts of East-Central and Southeastern Europe,³ which led us to believe that sensible comparisons can be made. At the same time, we were careful not to downplay the differences that marked the specific paths to postsocialism of our respective countries. Thus, in a flurry of questions, we managed to diagnose only one commonality with ease—a commonality that has to do less with the lived realities of families and more with the discourses through which these realities are framed. In the Romanian, Polish, and Serbian public spheres, family is featured as not only in crisis but *under threat*. Our languages differ, but the phrasing is almost verbatim. That is why we decided to focus on how the stories about families are narrated, concentrating on the narrativization of threat and care—which today seem to be tightly knotted.

In configuring our call for contributors, we proposed the following working hypothesis. The form and function of the family as an institution has changed immeasurably over the course of the last hundred years.⁴ The way we apprehend and orient ourselves around what a family is, or ought to be, has also been subject to change. Instead of being organized around a prescriptive master vision, familial practices multiplied and diversified, allowing not only for a valorization of a variety of lived experiences but also for a variety of understandings of what families could be. To capture this diversity in the ways we *apprehend* and *explain* the lived forms of familial practices, we turned to the notion of narrative. Having linked family with the tropes of care and threat, one prominent type of narrative set itself apart—the one

that emphasizes that family is under threat and thus in need of defense or special care. We ventured to term this type of narrative-frame of the *narrative of return*. Literature on anti-gender mobilization demonstrates that family is in the midst of anti-gender debates and that there is a general conservative call for the restoration of the *family proper*. The “family proper” is perceived to have been jeopardized by the pluralization of lived familial forms, as well as by the discursive effects of “political correctness.”⁵ The threat seems to lie in the proliferation and prospective equalization of different narratives on families, and the legitimation (or legalization) of various “improper” families, which may ultimately lead to the blurring and even to the disappearance of the distinction between the proper and the improper. To put a halt to this—in the name of the care for the family—the “family proper” must be restored.

Without a doubt, to restore and to return are not the same type of actions. Restoration is about re-establishing something now, bringing it back to a former—original, normal, healthy—condition, or relegating it back to its former position or rank. Yet, in any restorative project, there is a time—even if utterly imagined—when there were no “abnormalities,” no “disease” or “disorder,” a time when everyone knew their place—to which it would be *good* to return. Restorations assume certain temporalities which should serve as models or blueprints for us now. These pasts are sometimes detectable as belonging to a historical time, while sometimes they exclusively belong to the realm of fantasy. The mythicized temporalities differ in different countries. So do the languages in which the *good* or *better times* are narrativized. This creates an appearance of uniqueness and of a national specificity, and—since translations from Polish into Serbian or from Bulgarian into Hungarian are too infrequently conducted—these specificities have a tendency to remain understood as peculiar to national contexts. Our claim is, however, that the narrative employed to re-create the previous order of properness is one and the same. The special section aims to test whether this is really the case.

Why Narratives and Where to Return?

For the largest part of human history, the story about family did not seem to be a *story* at all—family seemed to be given, factual, and natural. Women gave birth to children fathered by men. However, when the naturalness of sexual encounter appears in social, legal, and economic terms, stories immediately begin to abound. To claim that family is the main reproductive *social unit*, productive of social *mores*, of *national* continuity, or *economic* wellbeing, is already to denaturalize it. To articulate it as the place of exchange of sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage, name and ancestors, property, rights, and mobility of persons⁶ is to complicate the sheer givenness or naturalness of its frame.

For millennia, family used to be the locus of certain social relationships based on the codified unequal distribution of rights to its members. With the appearance

of other forms of familial life—diversifying sexual access, temporality, and thickness of the bonds; equalizing the relations between family members through redefining their rights; and re-conceptualizing the role of ownership in and of the family—the seemingly given story about family became only one possibility among others. Furthermore, historical reconstructions of the lived familial life showed that other forms of living together existed long before they would become recognized or socially accepted.⁷ Feminist and LGBTIQ+ scholarship challenged traditional family studies to redefine family by un-othering non-conforming families, to bring gender consciousness to family research, to model intersectionality across the structural level, and most importantly, to apply research in order to alter family life.⁸ It can be claimed that such challenges helped what Foucault termed “subjugated knowledges,” locally known and differentially applied practices, incapable of unanimity, unqualified or disqualified by the dominant system of truths,⁹ to gain new ground and become emancipated from their subjugated status. Thus, instead of one given, factual, and natural truth about family, a variety of truths emerged: the regimes that govern the production of truths or, as Foucault would have it, regimes of veridiction,¹⁰ changed. With this change, multiple ways to narrate—explain and apprehend—*families* appeared.

The narratives provide unifying and legitimating power to knowledge or modes of apprehension and clarification of the world around us; they furnish us with a notion of social bond; and they govern our most quotidian practices. Instead of being descriptive or truth-telling, narratives are rather related to the prescriptive regimes productive of truths. For that reason, they are “essentially normative, even when the voice of the narrator is well hidden. By suggesting both what is a norm and what is a departure from the norm, all narratives suggest an interpretation of what the state of the world ought to be.”¹¹ And finally, narratives are performative, reliant on reiteration and recitation which “involves the production of social facts through narrativization and repetition, facts which then appear unconstructed by anyone.”¹²

In defining the narrative of return, we found Somers’s and Gibson’s¹³ differentiation between four kinds of interrelated narratives particularly useful. According to them, *ontological narratives* are those that give us our particular sense of agency as social actors—they are ours and are, at the same time, not entirely ours, as they come to us to form the sphere of the social. Ontological narratives are not self-generative but build on *public narratives*, those of social formations and institutions. Public narratives often rely on *conceptual narratives*, created by theorists and scientists—which is why it is of great importance how, for example, family studies (or, for that matter, social sciences and humanities in general) posit their objects of research, and with what aim, as this may produce effects on how both public and ontological narratives function. Finally, *master or meta-narratives* are the grand narratives of an era, in which we are immersed as private individuals, as public actors, and as scholars. They pretend to be essentially ahistorical, universally valid, and abstractly applicable to anyone and everyone.

Based on this typology, we may claim that we live in a time when there are multiple, if unequally distributed, public narratives on families—locally, nationally, or regionally. They frame our ontological micro-narratives which help us orient and define our own lived familial practices. Conceptual narratives—which in the 1970s and 1980s allowed for a plurality of subjugated knowledges to appear and emancipate themselves—demonstrated the inherent instability of categories and their openness to contestation, reconfiguration, and renegotiation in social life. Today, conceptual narratives compete for hegemony, by determining not only what is and will be the reigning understanding of family but also to what extent the available conceptions should alter and reorganize the lives of family members. In view of this typology, the narrative of return aims to retrieve (or keep) its position as *the* public narrative, striving at the same time to conflate the public with the master narrative and transforming the scholarly language and the language of human rights through de-emphasizing and suppressing the rival conceptual narratives on families.

In the era of the dissolution of grand or master narratives and an upsurge of dis-sension and “little narratives”¹⁴ which characterize our (post-)postmodern condition, the call for return to a given, factual, natural state of things often figures as a “paradisiac representation of a lost organic society.”¹⁵ There is a paradise lost, and a paradise to be regained. This is why we termed the narrative which organizes itself around care for the family—*where care is figured as restitution of a given, factual, natural family under threat today*—the narrative of return.

What’s the Threat and Who Cares?

It is said that family is imperiled—alternately, by vicious individuals (such as George Soros or domestic traitors), by the weak, self-colonizing, or sold-out state, or the nanny-state, by the immigrants, by the foreign centers of power, global or local elites, international corporations, etc. Those variegated menaces pose a threat not to a cluster of individuals who form families and live in them, but rather to an entity that appears somehow autonomous from them. The family augments itself into something more than the mere sum of the individuals that form it and into something more than the mere locus of attachment, nurturance, and socialization.

Quite often, this entity is narrativized through adjectives that further explain the type and extent of threat. The family in need of care is said to be the proper, natural, or traditional one. In addition to implying that there are people who form improper and unnatural families, who do not deserve to be cared for, and who, helped by the aforementioned concatenation of menaces, imperil those who live properly and naturally, these adjectives reveal one important—temporal—dimension. There was a time when proper family was the only one, when it was *the* family. It existed before: in fact, it existed, it is implied, for millennia and is thus in accordance with nature or with the will of God. It is traditional and, therefore, of necessity, patriarchal (evoking

the good old times when women were subsumed under the person of their husband, treated as legally continual minors, barred from or having restricted rights to their progeny and the products of their labor).

The naturalness or the God-giveness of the family proper rarely receives profound thematization. It seems that we should all know what “nature” is and that we all know it was there before. That we are allowed to speak of an assumed “common knowledge” is corroborated by the fact that, as yet, no novel tracts on family in the state of nature have appeared. Although the religious arguments come in useful, the Scriptures are also not necessary for the description of naturalness, properness, or traditionality. In fact, nature, properness, and tradition often act as the substitutes for the concrete temporalities to be restored.

There is no one universally approved point in time when all was good. Some references, of course, do appear. For example, the household philosophy of the Victorian complementarity of the sexes within separate spheres, in a new religious guise,¹⁶ can be taken as a point of reference. Another pertinent point of return refers to the post-Second World War Western breadwinner/homemaker family,¹⁷ when family was (again) to become a “haven in a heartless world.”¹⁸ Caution is in order here because such a “haven” did not feature in the social reality of socialist countries where after the war, women massively joined the labor force, and the state supported their activization and “productivization.” As some of the cases in our special section show, the point of return precedes this moment, at times uneasily (and un-historically) merging with the subsequently imported model from the West. The return is thus narrativized through the use of ambiguous, shifting, mythical temporality—the return to which would restore the order everyone knew and respected, in the household, but also beyond it.

The circulation of the narrative of return is, as was also emphasized at the beginning, integral to the current anti-gender mobilizations. Many have acknowledged that these mobilizations have a critical importance in the development of right-wing populism, illiberalism, and de-democratization. Moreover, as Graff and Korolczuk claim, anti-gender campaigns “are a part of a broader resurgence of right-wing extremism and religious fundamentalism, a coordinated transnational effort to undermine liberal values by democratic means,”¹⁹ in a new conjecture they call the populist moment. Without denying the specificity of our times, we wish to underscore that the narrative of return has been developing in parallel with the de-subjugation of familial practices (as well as other *known and respected* social hierarchies, equally thought of as “natural”). It functions as a knot between neoconservative and neoliberal rationalities that demonstrate a surprising affinity on the question of family values. Restrictions on redistributive welfare programs (in the West) and social citizenship of the former state-socialist countries (in the East) go hand in hand with the re-strengthening of the private institution of the family, as the only viable alternative to social welfare.²⁰

Despite the fact that the trope of care is essential for the narrative of return, it is rarely stated who is supposed to care for the family and how. Too often, it appears

that the family ought to care for itself in order for it to be cared for (and by extension, in order for the nation and the individual family members to be cared for). Although this might seem tautological, it is deeply ingrained in the neoliberal understanding of the self-sufficiency of the family,²¹ which, for the last three decades, has become a forcefully dominant reality of the postsocialist landscape (with some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, already reaching a new level in their combining “crony national capitalism with family welfare”²²). The standing neoliberal demand to return to the family, impossible to be executed without a massive re-introduction of various kinds of inequalities, ties well with accelerated neoconservative moral anxieties. The non-conforming familial practices—and all those who supposedly back them, be those feminists, LGBTQ+ groups, “vicious individuals” who fund or allegedly promote their visibility, the states that play according to “dictates from above,” the elites that lobby against majoritarian ways of life, the immigrants that threaten to replace “us”, or the corporations that finance depravity—loom as a far greater danger to society than the lack of systemic support for the betterment of lives and preservation of those equalities already achieved.

The figure of return is largely present in the current populist moment. Inglehart and Norris, for example, claim that the slogan “Make America Great Again,” together with Trump’s fierce rejection of political correctness, appealed to a mythical golden past when “American society was less diverse, U.S. leadership was unrivaled among Western powers during the Cold War era, threats of terrorism pre-9/11 were in distant lands but not at home, and conventional sex roles for women and men reflected patrimonial power relationships within the family and workforce.”²³ The “Take Back Control” campaign was rooted in similar tropes, also appealing to “a fantasy of a prior, simpler existence, a time when . . . truly British subjects . . . had the certainty of employment in good jobs, control over their borders, and access to markets over which they had dominance”—without Brussels to account to and without “foreigners from Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and other parts of eastern Europe, whose ‘whiteness’ became contestable seemingly overnight.”²⁴ What Bhandar calls “possessive nationalism” by definition assumes a return to a time when *only* “we” were *there*, a return to a racially pure, ethnically homogeneous space, and a time when women were *our* women.²⁴ Santos and Roque show how, in Portugal, familial/nativist/racist/demographic nationalism couples with fears of demographic replacement.²⁵ A “Europe of families” is a defense belt against the incursion of the unwanted others, against the “failed multicultural nationality model” imported from other Western European countries. But a “Europe of families” cannot admit the “emasculated (White/majority) male, no longer able to fulfill his function as leader, protector, and breadwinner”, as this figure stands to represent the very crisis of the family of the nation.²⁵ It is ultimately the same figure we find in the opposite part of Europe, in Finland, constructed around the future of the “white nation” and changing gender and sexual relations. Keskinen terms it “white border guard masculinities,” guarding the racial and sexual homeliness of the nation deemed to be under threat and serving as a political vehicle

“to gain hegemony, instead of merely vocalizing passive nostalgia.”²⁶ While “white border guard masculinities” express a longing for the “golden days” predating the 1960s liberationist movements, they also aim to re-enter and reconfigure the present for the sake of the future.²⁷ The narrative of return often addresses the present threats in a future-facing mode, in the name of care for the morrow.

What Ignazi called in 1992 the “silent counter-revolution”, referring to the appearance of extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe, an unwanted offspring of the so-called postmaterialist New Politics (itself a product of the “silent revolution” of the 1960s²⁸), is today—in the West, but more so in the East—loud, popular, and widely narrativized.

Return in the Postsocialist East

The articles gathered in this special section cover the narrative of return articulated in contemporary Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and (the East of) Germany. At first glance, there is little that binds these countries: not all of them are in the EU; not all of them have a predominantly Slavic population; not all of them are either Catholic or Orthodox; they did not have the same historical position behind the Iron Curtain, and, when the curtain fell, not all of them parted with their pre-curtain past peacefully. Germany does not belong to the East, not even metaphorically, despite its own “Ossis”. In addition, it is certainly not part of the periphery, while other listed countries belong to various echelons of the peripheral. What is then the justification of their (re-)unification in this special section?

What we believe all these countries share is their socialist legacy and their post-socialist present, together with the promise that breaking up with their legacy would have led them from the *East* to the *West*. What is peculiarly postsocialist in all these countries, including the eastern regions of present-day Germany, is that, despite the aforementioned promise, they still belong to the East. This is what prompted a specific framing of the Eastern European narrative of return. The “return to Europe”,²⁹ hailed as the ultimate transitional and reintegrational end of the journey commenced in 1989, deviated into a narrative on “return from Europe”. It is, so to speak, a double-return, a simultaneous return *from* Europe and return *to* our own imaginary good national selves.

It may be claimed that the narrative(s) of return in the East are based on a rejection of “westernism-by-design”.³⁰ By all means, westernism has many faces. *To be the West* primarily necessitated cutting ties with the “communist” past—and with the social citizenship that the former regime enabled and provided—embracing shock therapy and militant neoliberal capitalism as the economic rationality portrayed as having no alternative. This, especially at the level of individual family lives, involved sweeping transformation of living and working environments.³¹ The price paid for

liberal democracy was ruthless precarization.³² If there were many losers of globalization in the West, in the East—on its way to becoming the West—these losses were doubled: losers of globalization were at the same time losers of transition. The unique phenomenon of “postsocialist capitalism”—characterized by the “*simultaneity and rapidity* of privatization, deregulation, democratization, and neoliberal globalization” and imbued by an understanding of capitalism as a cultural phenomenon and a moral project³³—assumed that the previous “lacks” would be patched and ameliorated by “losses.” And since the execution of “the end of history” was a moral and cultural project as much as it was an economic one, losses needed to be near total. To become Western thus also assumed willed and complacent erasures of (self-)devalued life histories. Embracing the proverbial backwardness, which needed to be overcome, meant consenting to the annulment of the whole lifeworlds of individuals, families, and communities people formed while they were “Eastern”.

If so much had to be lost, the implementation of westernism-by-design must have also brought something. Political freedom, human rights, and gradual equality among the European nations that were, one after the other, joining the European family, in addition to the mobility of goods, capital, and people, were surely a gain—at least for a time. However, after the initial enthusiasm, the “return from Europe” slowly began to replace the grand process of erasure. With the appearance of the “Polish Plumber,” the global Eastern signifier for cheap labor threatening the class stability of the West, it became clear that the boundaries did not, and should not, blur. “Eastern Europeanism”—a post-Cold War form of racism³⁴—stood in the way of becoming Western, that is, as Kalmar explains, a way of possessing a distinctly Western white privilege. The whiteness of postsocialist Europe had to be confirmed, and the confirmation could have been obtained through a “healthy” disdain and outright rejection of the *true foreigners*, the migrants, the Muslims.³⁵ A post-integration “Eastern European bogey” which scared the civilized West³⁶ began to build the self-image of a paradigmatic keeper of Europe’s core, protecting the fortress from its peripheral trenches. The role of the protector has been modeled on the reconstituted natural order of things, “one that starts from the protection of kith and kin and proceeds to love of country and culture”.³⁷ Refusing to be cheap, backwards, only suspiciously white, immature, and intrusive, the former East rather turned to its own romanticization of regained national grandeur,³⁸ in due course becoming emblematic for the populist strongholds.

Remaining Eastern despite the promise of westernization and the European home of equals produced a variety of effects. Romanticized grandeur and excessive national pride went hand in hand with the notion of being wronged in the past; both the very recent one and the one before that needed to be fully erased. The recent past of the immature imitators and mature models³⁹ effected not only the repudiation of the model—the West—but also the vehement moral panicking around the West’s proclaimed *normalcy*. National grandeur demanded a romanticization of our own distinct normalcy, of how we treat our kith and kin differently from both the true

intruders and from the failed models. With this, however, our recent histories did not provide us with ease. For example, to counter the image of Western family of today, we could not return to the idyllic 1950s. Simply, at that time—precisely due to the now despised “communism”—the family model was socialist, and women were encouraged to become active in the labour market (although double-burdened), having abortion as a legal option two decades before it became legalized in the West.⁴⁰ In a search for its own narrative of return, the postsocialist East had to reject both imposed “communism” and imported Western individualism: both domination without hegemony (excluding Yugoslavia, although its successor states have done their best to level up their revisionist discourses with their postsocialist peers)⁴¹ and hegemony without domination, the willed process of self-colonization and succumbing to the cultural power of the West.⁴²

Therefore, if the ordinary Joe is threatened by various loud minorities that silence him through the imposition of political correctness, the ordinary Aleksandr/Alexandru/Aleksandar/Sándor is under threat by these same minorities (apparently created by the West) and the West itself. Revival of grandeur is figured as a form of decolonization, double in kind: from Soviet Moscow and from today’s Brussels.⁴³ The narrative(s) of return are integral to the larger political projects of restoration of the paradise lost—of a community of Romanian/Polish/Croatian/Serbian/Bulgarian/Slovak/Hungarian families, of a strong state that is no one’s colony and bows to no foreign center of power, of masculine men who are their own masters, and of a capitalist society in which everyone is a capitalist.

Overview of the Special Section

The articles gathered in this special section speak through different disciplines, ranging from sociology, gender studies, and anthropology to political science and social theory, which is why they use different methodologies to reach their conclusions. All of them, however, take stock of the interconnections between anti-gender mobilizations and the discourse on “traditional family”, “natural family”, or “family proper”. The intensity and depth of anti-gender mobilization differ in the countries under study. This is important to underline because the articles reflect these variations on two levels. On the one hand, the countries in which anti-gender politics secured a hegemonic position—where it has already been legislated into policies and laws—are comparatively well researched. Some, like Hungary and Poland, have been written about abundantly, while others have been met with less interest, at least in English language literature. This discrepancy is somewhat reflected in the articles, especially in how they aim to contribute to the growing field of scholarship on anti-gender mobilization. On the other hand, the articles show what the struggle for hegemonic legitimation looks like, whether they focus on the parliamentary debates, the legal arena, the mediatized political message during the pandemic, or

party programs. These are important findings as they bring the *process* to the fore: the legislation of the conservative measures takes place only *after* the struggles around legitimation have been—at least partially—won. But, as suggested by the Hungarian case, even in the most prominent instances of illiberal legislation, relying exclusively on it is not enough: the legitimation message needs to be constantly rearticulated and siphoned through all available societal channels.

Anikó Gregor's and Ingrid Verebes's article "Restoring What Never Existed: The Role of Familism in the Narratives of Return in Hungary" opens the special section with an insightful take on how familism has been instilled into all levels of state and societal functioning. Familism is defined as the constitutive element of the narrative of return, itself based on the idealization of certain family formations, safety, security, protection, care, and the restoration of the glorious past. Firmly positioned as antagonistic to "gender", depicted as something subversive and dangerous, family becomes the seat of safety and predictability. The "return" to it symbolizes the inherited stability from the past which spills over to the present and the future. Unlike most other cases in which churches have a decisive function in the articulation of the narratives of return, the role of religious actors in Hungary is relatively moderate. The narrativization—legitimation and legislation—of return is produced at the highest levels of the state, but, as Gregor and Verebes show, civil society and academia are also used for the purpose of promoting and disseminating the narratives of return, in the guise of "NGO-familism" and "academic familism".

In the article "Preaching the 'Traditional Family' in the Romanian Parliament: The Political Stakes and Meanings of a Hegemonic Narrative," Ionela Băluță and Claudiu Tufiş show how the struggle for the status of master narrative develops in the political field and what are its rhetorical strategies. Analyzing a decade of parliamentary debates that preceded and followed the referendum on the family (2018) regarding the changes of the definition of family in the Romanian Constitution, the authors identify four argumentative pillars of the narrative of return: (1) national identity, (2) naturalized religious identity, (3) heteronormativity as the foundation of the procreative function of the family, and (4) the protection of children against the alleged dangers of gender ideology and LGBTIQ+ movements. Traditional family turns into a hegemonic signifier that, in effect, traverses political programs. The narrative of return is presented as a strategic tool in the articulation of the illiberal and anti-democratic politics, professedly based on peculiarly Romanian, Christian, and ancestral values. The struggle against the alleged supremacy of Western relativism paints a black-and-white picture organized around the tropes of (our) normalcy, (their) degeneracy, nativist patriotism versus Western/colonial politics, perpetuity of the Romanian people versus the extinction of Romanianism, and natural Romanian Christianity versus a relativist and abusive neo-Marxist cultural project.

In their article "Narrative(s) of Return and the Gendered Memory Politics of post-1989 Transformation: Populist Familism, Catholic Fundamentalism and Liberal Feminism in Poland," Joanna Wawrzyniak and Małgorzata Sikorska bring to the fore

the ideological differences between the populists, Catholic fundamentalists, and liberal-left over the meanings of family, protection of children, and women's reproductive rights in Poland. To this end, they examine the narratives framing the money transfers for families with children (the flagship reform of the governing Law and Justice), the attempts to enforce the prolife and anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation by Catholic fundamentalists, and the efforts to protect women's reproductive rights by the liberal feminists. Sikorska and Wawrzyniak argue that all three political camps draw on Polish collective memory and, specifically, on the politics of memory of post-1989 transformation, and the variations in understanding the family between them are crucial to understanding the developments in Polish politics of the last decade.

Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš provide a comparative analysis in "From Gender Re-Traditionalizations to Anti-Gender Mobilizations: Care for Family in Serbia and Croatia". Their article is guided by two key questions: what are the continuities in legal framework and narratives on family in postsocialist Croatia and Serbia compared to the period of socialist Yugoslavia? Who are the creators of the narratives of return and how do they define family and care for the family? Čeriman and Vučković Juroš distinguish three stages of articulation of the narrative of return to an idealized "natural" family that never existed: first, the symbolic return to tradition in the 1990s; second, the contradictory trends of the next decade witnessing the struggle for the protection of the rights of sexual minorities, prompted by the requirements of the EU harmonization process; and third, the "full anti-gender mobilization", fueled by the controversies over the new policy proposals on gender equality. As in all other Eastern European countries, the post-Yugoslav case shows that the narrative of return has been intertwined with the anti-EU rhetoric. However, the authors persuasively demonstrate that the narrative privileging traditional family is a point of conservative continuity between the demographic and war-related death-of-the-nation discourses and the new discourses foregrounded by the contemporary anti-gender mobilization.

All contributions to this special section demonstrate the centrality of care for children within the frame of the narrative of return, but Gergana Nenova, Ana Luleva, and Tatyana Kotzeva put it in the focus of their analysis. The article "Caring for the Child, Caring for the Family—the Clash Over the National Strategy for the Child (2019–2030) in Bulgaria" concentrates on a document that caused a major public uproar around the role of the state in family affairs. The authors analyze the discourses articulated by the vocal right-wing NGOs as a response to the Strategy, but also, importantly, how they were rearticulated by ordinary citizens. Proposed by the government in order to comply with the international standards of protecting children's rights, the Strategy was attacked as threatening the Bulgarian family—which needs protection by ordinary Bulgarian people from the "liberal policies" of the Bulgarian state. The protection narrative was framed by the double rejection of Brussels-made liberalism on the one hand and the country's socialist past on the other. The model Bulgarian family, similarly to the Romanian one, is to be found in pre-socialist times, where it blends with a *longue durée* conception of the national past in which family was sacred, natural, and free from external encroachments.

The protection of children has the most politically salient position in the narrative of return, as it is the children that the natural or family proper needs to take care of. However, what happens with older people? Do they also belong to the family or are they conspicuously absent from the contemporary framings of the proper and the natural? Maren Hachmeister's contribution to this special section, "Overlooked and Undeserved: Older People in Narratives of Return in Post-1989 East Germany", shows that there is no place for seniors as acting individuals in the narrative of return, scrutinized through the program of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the "family party" which gained a particular following in Eastern Germany. The article combines an analysis of the political agenda, capitalizing on right-wing family populism, and the autobiographical narratives of the members of the oldest East German generation. AfD's family policy builds on the annulment of the state-socialist experiences, still vivid among the East German elders, fueling disappointment among the undervalued postsocialist population of the region and enhancing it through the creation of a climate harboring a growing number of threats. In such a frame, the old people appear as an anonymous group of "undeserving retirees", who benefit from society without a clear function in it. The family, as argued by Hachmeister, should be the institution with a decisive influence on how people grow old, instead of functioning as a smokescreen for the simplified framework of the narrative of return.

The last article, "Families in Times of Crisis: Narratives of Family and Care During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Slovakia", discusses the resonances of the narrative of return in the current moment of pandemic. Soňa G. Lutherová and Ľubica Voľanská examine the narrativization of family lives during the Covid-19 pandemic, managed by the conservatives in the Slovakian government. The outbreak of the pandemic was a moment of peculiar crisis that affected families not only by confining them to their homes but also by placing them at the center of the public discourse. As such, the pandemic revealed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the narrative of return as a political tool. On the one hand, the politicians of the governing party seized the moment to push through their anti-gender rhetoric, fantasizing about an upsurge of procreation during lockdown, and re-describing the hopes of "getting back to normal" as getting back to the traditional, ancestral, national, and heterosexual bond of a man and a woman united by marriage and children. On the other hand, the pandemic itself showed how this traditional and paternalistic view of the family has been intellectually incapable of grasping the actual diversity of familial forms of life, care, and division of labor in the modern Slovakian household. The pandemic revealed one of the biggest fallacies of the narrative of return, underscored by the German case as well. Constantly referring to an allegedly *traditional*, *proper*, or *natural* family, narratives of return overlook the position and the wellbeing of the extended family members, especially the grandparents' generation, which has, both traditionally and contemporarily, played a significant role in Eastern European

families. By cutting off familial multigenerational networks of support, the pandemic made nuclear families especially vulnerable to various pressures, in effect delaying rather than influencing their decisions on procreation.

By putting together different levels of analysis, this collection of articles identifies the variety of ways in which the narrative(s) of return struggles for hegemony in postsocialist Europe. It shows a dynamic picture, involving the historical perspective on the development of the narrative of return; its reliance on the nationalist, religious, and anti-gender themes circulating globally; its anti-EU components; its crystallization around various legal initiatives; and finally, its ability to mobilize bottom-up activism. The collection also reveals the narrative of return's major weakness, namely blurring the picture of actual family practices that are too complex to fit the mantra of the family as a heterosexual union of man and woman and their children. The collection shows that the mythicized notion of *return*, central to this political project, is incapable of fulfilling its main, restorative promise simply because the family constructed through such narratives never really existed. Ultimately, with its focus on family, especially in postsocialist capitalism, the notion of the narrative of return proves particularly useful for two reasons. First, since family is not an exclusively *cultural* unit, the trope of the narrative of return helps to de-culturalize the debates on gender and avoid a widely culturalization, if wrongly, accepted culturalization of gender issues. Return not only assumes restoration of untainted traditionalism but is also always embedded in the political and economic restructuring of society.⁴⁴ Second, it provides us with a valuable analytic tool which demonstrates why gender indeed functions as a symbolic glue. Moving from the polarizing culturalist depiction of gender, nested in the global culture wars, to family—normativized as its counter-figure—gives us a perspective on how anti-gender arguments serve “as a cover up for fostering a deeper and profound change in the European political and value system”,⁴⁵ through the use of local and regional invention of threat and counter-care.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, and publication of this article: This article is based on the work from COST Action “Who Cares in Europe,” CA 11819, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology, www.cost.eu).

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Notes

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Our understanding of family as an institution is in line with the cultural institutional approach developed by Monique Kremer who reminds us that "institutions not only include formal rules, procedures, or norms, but also the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the frames of meaning guiding human action." Kremer, *How Welfare States Care*, 78.

5. Here, we reapplied Eva von Redecker's elegant definition of Anti-Genderismus, as "the resentful mobilization against pluralism and 'political correctness,' which are perceived as instituted by 'gender ideologues.'" E. von Redecker, "Anti-Genderismus and Right-Wing Hegemony," *Radical Philosophy* 198 (2016): 2.

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11. M. Patterson and K. Renwick Monroe, "Narratives in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 321.

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15. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

16. J. Tosh, *A Man's Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); M. McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On how the Catholic church uses the complementarity paradigm in its own versions of Christian anthropology against gender, cf. M. A. Case, "The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender" (Public Law & Legal Theory Working Paper No. 565, The University of Chicago, 2016); A. Zaharijević, "Spaljivanje u 21. veku: Šta stoji iza 'rodne ideologije'?" *Kultura* 163 (2019): 28–45.

17. In a number of her publications, Irène Théry has drawn attention to the seemingly general confusion between the idea of the "traditional family" and the ideal of the "nuclear family," prevalent during the baby boom period specific to Western societies after the Second World War. The latter was demographically "exceptional," characterized by high fertility rates, high marriage rates, and also as the prevalent ideal of women taking care of their families and households without any other investment in paid activities. I. Théry, *Couple, filiation et parenté aujourd'hui. Le droit face aux mutations de la famille et de la vie privée* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob/la Documentation française, 1998); I. Théry, *La Distinction de sexe. Une nouvelle approche de l'égalité* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008). For an analysis of the "traditional family" in Western societies, cf. J.-L. Flandrin, *Families in Former Times. Kinship, Household and Sexuality* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

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20. M. Cooper, *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2017).

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40. G. Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu’s Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Corina Doboș (ed. with Luciana Jinga and Florin Soare), *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu*, vol. I (Bucharest: Polirom, 2010). Doboș reminds us that there is not only a temporal difference between the entering into force of abortion regulations and policies in Eastern and Western Europe but also a difference in terms of financial incentives for families: “Through paternalist governmental measures, most communist states in Eastern Europe were more generous than the democratic ones in Western Europe in financially supporting families” (p. 43). Doboș often cites H. David, ed., *From Abortion to Contraception: A Resource to Public Policies and Reproductive Behavior in Central and Eastern Europe from 1917 to the Present* (Westpoint: Greenwood Press, 1999).

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