How anti-gender and gendered imagery translate the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in online far-right platforms

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How Anti-gender and Gendered Imagery translate the Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory in Online Far-Right Platforms

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Key messages:

We study how far-right activists use gendered storytelling to communicate the Great Replacement theory online.
We demonstrate how visual digital images serve to disseminate conspiratorial ideas in Central Eastern Europe.
We empirically show how unrelated events and characters are translated into the Great Replacement conspiracy narrative.

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Introduction

“In 2016, I ‘supported’ Donald Trump, but again, the support was mostly because the memes were funny, and I liked them” (A Call to Arms manifesto, 2022). These are the words of a nineteen-year-old man who, on Wednesday, October 12, 2022, went to an LGBTQIA+ bar in Bratislava and opened fire on a crowd of people. Two young people, Matúš and Juraj, died instantly. Later, the police found the shooter dead. On his anonymous Twitter account, he left a confession that he regretted nothing, a few hashtags (#hatecrime, #Bratislava and #gaybar) and a 65-page-long manifesto, “A Call to Arms” (the opening quote comes from that manifesto). In this deeply antisemitic, homophobic and transphobic pamphlet, he listed “faggots”, “their activists”, “fag bars”, “their pride parades”, “their families”, “trannies”, “gender conversion clinics”, “groomer gender therapists” and “drag queens” - all of which he categorized as “open out and proud sexual deviants who corrupt our society” – as targets for other potential terrorists who he hoped to inspire (A Call to Arms manifesto, 2022). Just as he was “inspired” by the 2019 Christchurch mosque and Poway synagogue shootings. He further claimed that these attacks motivated him to explore content on the US far-right webpage 8chan, an online image-board website composed of user-created content. By watching visual memes and reading content on 8-chan, in his own words, he “learned so much (...) and it completely changed [his] view of the world”. He explained that these online spaces made him a “red-piller”, a label which, in the language of global and transnational online far-right groups, identifies those who have decided to learn a potentially unsettling or life-changing truth instead of remaining in a state of ignorance (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019). His reference to the perceived “funny” memes as a gateway to the far-right ideological landscape, the result of which was a violent shooting directed against gender-nonconforming and LGBTQIA+ people, implies the need to investigate further how far-right memes and online images can function as a resource for mobilizing hate (Askanius, 2021). Accordingly, our research here focuses on the question of how memes and images convey far-right conspiracy theories. To answer this, we have conducted an empirical study investigating the visual communication of a Czech far-right online platform, with a focus specifically on the role of gender in it.

This article contributes to the literature on gender, conspiracy theories and far-right online visual communication. The central theoretical contribution of our empirical study is the application of a critical perspective to translation as regards conspiracy theories. Further, our analysis contributes to the scholarship on the relationship between gender and far-right politics and social movements as we focus on the online communication of a (supposedly)
women’s far-right group. While existing scholarship has highlighted the role of female far-right politicians and their performance of femininity in institutional, populist-right mobilization (Geva, 2020) as well as investigating the role of women in far-right extremist groups (Blee, 2002), the ideological contribution of women’s far-right online platforms remains underexplored. Aiming to fill this gap, we claim that activists translate and re-narrate political events online through the use of images, evoking emotional responses and instrumentalizing their supposed female identity to mobilize people beyond traditional far-right circles. While the literature on translation and social movements has often focused on progressive, left-wing social movements or the democratic deliberation process (Doerr, 2018), we here follow scholars of gender, translation, and political mobilisation, assuming a critical discursive perspective on far-right movements and their “visual rhetoric” (Richardson and Wodak 2009:55; Doerr and Gardner, 2022).

Defining and theorizing the variety of ideologies comprised in the matrix of far-right political movements and parties, given their time-specific, multi-faceted and continuously changing character, is not a trivial task (Blee and Creasap, 2010; see also Caiani et al. 2012). Blee and Creasap (2010) conceptualize as “right-wing” those social movements “that focus specifically on race/ethnicity” (ibid: 270). Among a broad variety of far-right movements and radical right movement parties, scholars highlight the increasing (converging) focus on anti-genderism and anti-LGBTQI ideologies (Caiani et al, 2012; Sauer, 2019). Our case study is inspired by this research, yet restricted to the empirical analysis of an online platform connecting a variety of far-right movement-actors, which we expect to facilitate the diffusion and translation of far-right political ideologies. For our analysis to categorize the specific group as far right, the key is the element of exclusionary ideology demonstrated through hateful—both explicit and coded—rhetoric directed towards entire groups of marginalized people, including non-white people, immigrants and gender-nonconforming people. Such othering is clearly at the centre of the so-called Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which served as the main narrative in the Bratislava shooter’s manifesto and which is a buzzword on contemporary far-right online platforms (Krouwel and Önnerfors, 2021).

The Great Replacement conspiracy theory was introduced by French ex-socialist, former gay liberation activist and writer Renaud Camus in his 2011 book *Le Grand Replacement*. The main argument is that a powerful elite secretly creates migration flows and reduces the birth-rates of white Europeans, the consequence of which is that non-white people demographically and culturally replace the ethnic French and white European populations through mass migration, the demographic growth of non-Europeans, and a drop
in the birth rate of white Europeans. In other words, it is “a genocide by substitution” (Camus, 2011). The “great replacement” fits the definition of conspiracy, which academic literature describes as a “powerful narrative influencing people’s perception of the world as structured by secret plots and malign manipulation” (Krouwel and Önnerfors, 2021). Since its introduction, the conspiracy has circulated in extremist but also far-right mainstream online platforms run on Facebook or Twitter. These platforms often do not represent typical far-right aesthetics as we know them, that is a subculture inspired by Nazi ideology and Nazi or neo-Nazi symbols. Nevertheless, these online groups are still identified as far right because of their exclusionary ideology, which deems certain groups of people, particularly migrants and LGBTQIA+ people, as outsiders or enemies of the nation (Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017). Instead of identifying with a subculture, the admins and active contributors present themselves as the “ordinary everybody” (cf. Schober, 2019; Richardson and Wodak, 2009), dissatisfied with liberal elites, and in doing so, they attempt to appeal to people beyond traditional far-right circles. For those who struggle and who have lost the ability to shape the circumstances of their own lives in particular, conspiracy theories offer a new safe haven. As James Bridle puts it, “We find our agency once more by finally being the one in possession of the secret truth, the one who is smarter than everyone else, the one who sees through all the lies and knows what’s really going on” (Bridle, 2023). In other words, people find their agency in being “red-pillers”.

Considering that Camus’ *Le Grand Replacement* has not been translated into many languages, images are an important tool for conveying the conspiracy’s message and effectively accelerating the translation and diffusion of conspiracy theories. Not only do the members and followers of the page not have to meet in person to exchange knowledge, they do not even need to understand the mother tongue of their foreign counterparts. However, the process of translating the conspiracy into imagery has not yet been studied. We fill this research gap by shedding light on how far-right platforms translate real-world events as well as fake news into the conspiracy’s narrative. To do this, we analysed the online visual communication of the Czech far-right group Angry Mothers. This group provides an interesting case as it presents itself as a far-right women’s group (despite consisting of both men and women) and its communication attempts to frame the issues of migration, LGBTQIA+ and feminism as “anti-women issues”. Thus, studying the visual communication of Angry Mothers allows us to deepen the understanding of gender aspects of far-right communication and ideology that are deemed deeply misogynist and yet can still be reframed in a way that appeals to women.
We argue that far-right content producers translate and re-narrate political events online through the use of images as a means of visual storytelling. Storytelling is a crucial tool for building new collective identities, linking current actions to heroic pasts and glorious futures (Polletta, 2006). As Polletta (2006) correctly points out, those who want to impact the way things are understandably try to capitalize on familiar conventions of storytelling. Following Jasper (2018), we claim that such storytelling involves multifaceted stock characters, both positive and negative, categorized into “heroes”, “victims” and “villains”. These characters serve as tools for translating complex real-world phenomena into moral struggles between good and evil, which allows political movements to simplify and diffuse abstract ideologies and conspiracies (Miller-Idriss and Graefe-Geusch, 2020; Freistein et al., 2022; Zhukova, 2022). To understand how this is done, we conducted a quantitative visual content analysis of 401 images and, based on the content, created categories that emerged in our dataset. The findings of our empirical investigation show that the images can be divided into four categories: (1) images denigrating LGBTQIA+ and migrant subjectivities as inferior “villains below”, (2) images blaming “liberal elites” as “villains above”, (3) images of “us” as “the victim” and (4) images of Russia as “the martyr”. While the subjects depicted in the studied images might at first be unrelated individual characters and events, we argue that through the process of translation, they became characters in the Great Replacement conspiracy’s narrative.

We start this article by situating the phenomenon under study in its Central European cultural and political context and introducing the studied group. We continue by presenting how translation theory can enrich the study of far-right visual storytelling. Later, we discuss our methods of gathering and analysing the data. Following this, we present the data and the findings of our analysis. In the conclusion, we discuss these findings and discuss possibilities for further scrutiny.

**Angry Mothers in the Context of Central Eastern Europe**

Our analysis is informed by the particular cultural and political context in which the analysed group operates. The Bratislava terrorist attack was not the only incident in the region. Over the last decade, there have been other violent attacks on progressive political figures, events or marginalized people, including LGBTQIA+ people and people with a migration background, across the Central Eastern European (CEE) region (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). Despite the initial celebration of this post-socialist region for embracing democracy and a market economy after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it has become
apparent that the successful-transition-to-democracy narrative was an optimistic overstatement, as the region has exhibited undemocratic tendencies over the last decade. Since 2010, there has been growing evidence of democratic backsliding in the region, and local governments, often in coalition with the Catholic Church, have demonstrated tendencies towards human rights violations, particularly in the case of LGBTQIA+ people and migrants (Kováts and Poin, 2015; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Kalmar, 2022; Maďarová and Hardoš, 2022). Furthermore, the political landscape of these countries is marked by the mainstreaming of far-right ideology. Far-right ideas are no longer a subcultural matter but have spilt over and attracted people beyond traditional far-right circles (Charvát et al., 2023).

The group Angry Mothers is part of a Czech movement which grew out of the protests against migration and Islam during the 2015 refugee crisis. At the time, Czechia’s most visible actor in mainstreaming far-right ideology was a grassroots movement called We Don’t Want Islam in the Czech Republic, well-known under the abbreviation IVČRN (Islam v České republice nechceme). The group grew out of a fringe (originally online) discussion group established in 2009. After the refugee crisis began in 2015, it left online spaces and started organizing street protests that opposed the acceptance of refugees and EU refugee quotas (Slačálek and Svobodová, 2018). Angry Mothers emerged as its (supposedly) women’s fraction and promoted itself as the true defenders of women’s rights. After Facebook shut down IVČRN’s page for spreading hate speech, Angry Mothers became the largest public Czech far-right Facebook page, with 45,000 followers.

Despite gaining significance through its anti-Islam activism during the refugee crisis, the group’s Facebook page covers a wide range of topics, including homebirth and alternative medicine. After their official Facebook page was shut down in August 2018, they immediately launched a new one. This time, it was titled “Anti-feminist Strike” (Antifeministická úderka). After their second, less popular Facebook page (they amassed only 10,000 followers) was shut down again (after 10 months of existence), the group focused specifically on the issue of “gender ideology”, which they portrayed as a form of feminism that harms women and white people in general (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). In accordance with the Great Replacement conspiracy, these narratives were further connected to anti-Islam imagery, as Angry Mothers claimed that the European Union purposefully makes Europeans gay to replace them with migrants from the Middle East and Africa. These conspiracy narratives resonated strongly with Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant attitudes in Czech public opinion (Charvát et al., 2023). Unlike subcultural far-right groups, Angry Mothers present themselves as representing ordinary Czech people, particularly women,
whom migrants are threatening. Even though the group consists of both men and women, they claim that the moniker “mothers” refers to the female instinct, the supposedly innate urge of mothers to protect their children when they are in danger. In fact, the group instrumentalizes their supposedly feminine identity to legitimize a misogynist and racist ideology and supposedly represent women’s interests within male-dominated anti-Islam groups.

In the global context, groups like Angry Mothers represent the new face and mainstreamed version of contemporary far-right politics (Kølvraa and Fochtner, 2017). Their significance lies in the fact that they do not resemble old-fashioned far-right groups associated with neo-Nazi aesthetics. Instead, by presenting themselves as ‘ordinary people’ and, in the case of Angry Mothers, as women and mothers, they contribute to softening the public face of the far right and recruiting moderate conservative supporters who would not necessarily support subcultural neo-Nazi groups. Thus, they legitimize and mainstream the far right’s exclusionary views by articulating dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy and unsatisfactory protection and safety of women. This goal is further achieved through the instrumentalization and strategic reframing of the language around liberal values, human rights and, especially in the case of Angry Mothers, women’s rights and safety (Slačálek and Svobodová, 2018). By highlighting their identity as women in danger, they contribute to the portrayal of migrants as fundamentally misogynistic perpetrators of violence. Women’s groups like Angry Mothers are, thus, welcome within the far-right scene as they also make the far right, generally dominated by men, appealing to women and to men who can justify their hateful political views as chivalrous protection of women in danger.

**Far-Right Images Translating Conspiracy Theories**

It is well known that far right political actors translate their ideology into images which they disseminate globally through digital media (Freistein et al., 2022; Doerr and Gardner, 2022). Previous work on far-right visual rhetoric and online hate speech on gendered themes has relied on narrative approaches (Freistein et al, 2022), on critical discourse analysis (Richardson and Wodak, 2009), and on framing (Caiani et al., 2012). Our study aims to contribute conceptually to this field of research by adding an empirically informed critical research perspective interested in ideology in visual translation. Among other things, visuals serve as communicative tools for mobilization, but they also facilitate knowledge exchange, symbolic bonding and a shared identity in mobilization of the far right (Miller-Idriss, 2017; Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017). This is logical, as previous research has
demonstrated that the process of diffusion through social media becomes significantly easier and faster if visuals are involved (Rodrigues, 2021) as they provide simplifying, hateful and/or sarcastic “visual rhetoric” (Richardson and Wodak, 2009:55). Repeated and condensed into fake visual histories (Zhukova 2022), these facilitate the spread of the message. We argue that this is achieved through two interlinked processes of translation: (1) translating real-world events as well as fictional and fake news into political messages through images; and (2) selecting unrelated real-world events and translating them into a coherent story.

Considering these two processes of translation at play, we distinguish between visual translation and translation into narratives, which are two related processes that reinforce each other. Visual translation, in our broad definition, is a cultural practice of re-narrating political events, debates or ideas into images. It is seen as a specific process of storytelling during which images and memes work as tools for ideological negotiation, emotional expression and community building (Shifman, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018). At the same time, these images do not exist as separate entities. In fact, they function as partial storylines in a broader story (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021) and are able to tell complex stories in a simplified, accessible and engaging way (Campos, 2022). Thus, assembling images that represent different, often unrelated events, legends and even made-up stories in one place – in our case a Facebook page – is a process of translating random, unrelated events in a way that they can be interpreted as related and coherent, obscuring the actual randomness of the data (Hannah, 2021). A crucial aspect in this translation is, thus, arranging a number of actions and events into a sequence and creating a meaningful order out of otherwise disjointed happenings (Ricoeur, 1980).

According to narrative theory (Shahsavari, 2020), three conditions allow such translated narratives to convince others to see the world in a certain way: a shared worldview of the narrator and her audience, a reservoir of existing stories, and a shared understanding of story structures. When these conditions are met, stories acceptable to the chosen target group can be easily generated (Shahsavari, 2020). Since one of the conditions for conspiracies to be successful is the shared worldview among audiences, we argue that groups like Angry Mothers are perfect for spreading conspiracies as they attract like-minded people and, through repetition of the same narratives, further strengthen their worldviews. After the group attracts a significant amount of like-minded people, the events are taken and translated to fit a sane scenario and are repeated in different variations, increasing the perceived truth of conspiracy theories and naturalizing them as common sense (Tsotsou, 2021). The repeated elements, which are also the pillars of all story structures, are standard characters – villains,
heroes, victims. Through these archetypes, real-world events can be translated into a consistent story in which the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Data
The dataset consists of Facebook statuses collected from the Angry Mothers Facebook page using netnographic research methods, that is, non-participant observation of the online space. This approach is suitable for examining groups and collections of people that have amassed via internet connections as it is based on the assumption that “people turn to computer networks to partake in sources of culture and to gain a sense of community” (Kozinets, 2019, p. 7).

In particular, this method consists of “diving” into the studied community, reading messages regularly and in real-time. We started to do so in February 2018. At that point, the page had over 45,000 followers. In August 2018, however, Facebook shut the page down for spreading hate news. The group reacted by launching a new page. The second Facebook page, “Anti-feminist Strike”, was created in October 2018 and was shut down by Facebook in March 2019. The data gathered for this paper were collected from both pages over a one-year period, starting in February 2018 and ending in February 2019. During this time, we manually collected images posted by the group on a daily basis by screenshotting the images together with the text that accompanied them.

In total, we worked with 401 images. Before introducing our method, it is important to note that the group admins did not create all of these images themselves. The majority were shared from other online spaces. Some traces, such as the language of the captions in the images, indicate that the images had travelled from other national far-right media, including the United States, Russia and Hungary. Unfortunately, we lack the tools to scrutinize where the images originally came from and who created them. The multilingual nature of the Czech Facebook page, however, indicates that the visual language we dealt with is not confined to Czechia but is the language of internationally connected far-right groups.

Method
Our paper combines theoretical and methodological insights from research on social movements, narrative analysis and multimodal perspectives of visual and discourse analysis (Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Doerr, 2017; Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017; Milman and
Doerr, 2022). To decode the structures of the stories, we use visual content analysis (Bell, 2001) and rely on deductive coding following the theory of narratives, which claims that all narratives consist of centuries-old templates for characters: the “heroes”, represented in a positive light; the “victims”, who needed to be saved by the heroes; and the “villains,” blamed for the victims’ suffering. The goal of our analysis was to identify these characters in our dataset.

The coding procedure consisted of five rounds. During the first round, we coded who was depicted in the images, which resulted in categories of different actors, such as journalists, politicians, feminist activists, ordinary citizens, migrants, political leaders, and so on. In the second stage, we looked at the characteristics of the actors. We were interested in whether they were placed in a symbolic position of power “above the viewer”, “equal to the viewer” or “below the viewer”. In other words, whether they represented “the elite”, “the people” or “the fringes of society”. The aim of this stage was to interpret in which societal position the actors were situated according to the narrative. In the third stage, we looked at how these actors were characterized. Were they portrayed as good or evil? Based on these three stages, we started to develop overarching categories. The aim of the next, fourth stage was to develop an umbrella typology of characters. As a result of this analysis, we suggest the four following categories: the “villains above”, the “villains below”, “us, the underdog” and “Russia, the martyr”. Finally, in the fifth stage, we coded whether the message was communicated in a serious or humorous manner to demonstrate the significant role of humour in far-right communication.

For the presentation of data in this article, we have selected one illustrative image for each of the first three categories, reflecting the broader variety of similar images, which we analyse in depth, considering the context, ideology and historical legacies. We then apply the interdisciplinary methodology of visual iconography, in order to analyse the content’s complex aesthetic (Müller et al., 2009), which we combine with a critical contextual analysis (Richardson and Wodak, 2009).

**Findings**

Our findings show that images representing liberal elites deemed responsible for the hardship of white Czech people was the most frequent theme, occurring in almost half the posts (48.6%) in our dataset. This stereotypically presented group, which we term the “villain above”, consisted of both Czech and internationally known political and cultural elites,
including journalists, politicians, NGOs, artists, activists, educators, and transnational institutions and organizations, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations. These transnational organizations were portrayed as a tool used by Western, progressive elites in order to diffuse their dangerous ideologies. The second largest group of posts consisted of images of people with a migrant background and LGBTQIA+ people, together representing 27% of all collected posts. We call the category the “villains below”. The third category of images, which we term “us, the underdog” and which was represented in 22% of the posts, consisted of white, heterosexual Czechs. Images of Czechs portrayed an ideal of ordinary people living within the context of an unfair corrupted political system and as a group with little power to change the way things are. In accordance with this idealized imagery, the group claimed that ordinary people are the real warriors of democracy and free speech since the Czech political system today “is not a democracy but a dictatorship of liberalism”. A fourth, smaller category of posts (in 2.4% of the images analysed) represented the theme of Russia, where Russia was visualized in memes as a “victim hero” or “the martyr”, bullied by the West and thus serving as a potential role model for far-right voices speaking from a “we” position in posts. These four categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

**Western “Liberal” elites: The villains above**

People categorized as “villains above” were embodied by well-known powerful figures representing the elite and described as working against the interest of the common people (Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Krouwel and Prooijen, 2021, p. 23). According to the Great Replacement conspiracy, the aim of such “liberal” elites is to wipe out European cultures and nations (Krouwel and Önnerfors, 2021). The data representing “villains above” also featured some antisemitic aspects; for instance, frequent references were made to the billionaire and philanthropist George Soros, who is well known for funding liberal institutions focusing on human rights issues in Europe (Krouwel and Prooijen, 2021).

In the studied dataset, images depicting two leaders, in particular, functioned as signifiers for morally corrupted European elites serving as villain figures within an antisemitic narrative: French president Emmanuel Macron and former German chancellor Angela Merkel. Standing symbolically as a placeholder for a corrupted liberal European
Union leadership, Macron and Merkel were often depicted as disgraceful leaders who care more about migrants and LGBTQIA+ people than their own nations. Image 1, in fact, represents a contrast between Western elites and CEE political leaders, here represented by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is portrayed as a “genuine” leader and beloved father of the traditional family and, hence, the entire Hungarian nation (see Image 1). Such imagery is based on the idea that a strong nation is built from traditional nuclear families and should be governed the same way: by a strong male leader (Svatoňová, 2020).

*Image 1 about here*


Image 1 is a typical example of how “villains above” in the data set were often visually represented through the use of implicitly anti-LGBTQIA+ visuals. On the left side of the image, we see French president Emmanuel Macron dressed in a suit. He is accompanied by his wife Brigitte and a dance group consisting of four black men whose visual performance of gender transcends traditional rules for performing masculinity. On the opposite side of the image is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, “the hero”, accompanied by his wife and five children. Behind them, a Christian icon hangs on the wall, highlighting Orbán’s rather recent and increasingly more frequent performance of a leader who supports traditional, conservative Christian family values (Walker, 2019; Szalo, 2022).

This image features the typical narrative of a Western, morally corrupted elite that promotes values fundamentally incompatible with the culture and conservative values of CEE countries. In fact, through its text slogan, highlighted in a flashy red, this image symbolically locates Czechia at a crossroads, where the Czech people must choose the path they wish to follow. According to the image, their options are the conservative, Christian East or the morally degraded West. Unlike Macron, Orbán is shown as a leader who respects the rules of the “natural order of things” and a modest Christian family man with a feminine spouse.

The well-known background of Macron’s marriage\(^1\) serves here to represent the supposed Western individualism in which one’s sexual desires take precedence over traditional family values. In the image, this childless couple is further accompanied by queer

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\(^1\) Macron’s wife, who is 24 years older than him and who was his former drama teacher, left her husband with whom she had children to live with Macron.
people instead of their own children. As characters of a gendered narrative of the Great Replacement, they are portrayed as liberal elites who support LGBTQIA+ people, promote multiculturalism and do not contribute to the reproduction of the white race. Macron’s figure represents a political leader, and his company represents the change in the contemporary demographic composition of French society. He is portrayed as the engineer of the social change French society is witnessing. As Krouwel and Prooijen (2021) point out, Macron as a political figure is often featured as a part of the antisemically coded narrative of the Great Replacement conspiracy. As he used to work at the bank Rothschild and Co before he became president, it reinforces the old antisemitic narrative that political leaders serve Jewish financial interests (Krouwel and Prooijen, 2021). In contrast to Macron, the queer people accompanying his persona are depicted as the agentless objects of liberal elite propaganda.

The Villains Below

Unlike the images in the category “villains above” (see Image 1), villains held responsible for the hardship of ordinary white people, migrants and LGBTQIA+ subjectivities were portrayed as symptoms of the irresponsible policies of the former, as the “villains below” (see Image 2). Migrants, represented mainly by Muslims, were most frequently portrayed in memes or caricatures as terrorists, oppressors of women and strangers who cannot assimilate into European culture. LGBTQIA+ people were primarily portrayed as perverts and as a laughing stock. To illustrate how both villain types complement each other, we present Image 2, which depicts both the “villain above” and the “villain below” (see Image 2).

Image 2 about here


In terms of visual content, Image 2 is divided into two halves. On the left side is a black background with a racist joke containing three lines. Each line is written in a different colour: white, red, and yellow, representing the German flag (three horizontal stripes of black, red, and gold). The caption tells a joke in which a Muslim migrant is portrayed as a rapist: “A migrant goes to a German doctor and complains that his eyes always hurt after he has sex. The doctor replies, ‘It’s the effect of the pepper spray’”. Migrants are clearly being
described here in a femonationalist manner, as people who do not respect women’s rights and as perpetrators of sexual violence. The right side of the image shows Angela Merkel, the former German Chancellor, in front of the Reichstag, the seat of the German Bundestag. Her hair is covered with a veil; an ambivalent symbol featuring everyday female Muslim hair cover as well as forced dress code by some Islamic countries’ oppressive regimes. Merkel’s facial expression is serious and indicates negative emotions.

Image 2, narrating a racialized, gendered, anti-immigrant story, suggests that Germany is facing a high level of sexual violence perpetrated by migrants. Since Merkel’s outfit references the practices of some Muslim women, the image suggests that the migrants originally come from the Middle East. The image narrative relies on a background story. As a political leader, Angela Merkel played an important role in the story of the 2015 refugee crisis. At that time, liberal media often portrayed her as one of the kindest of the European leaders opening their countries to refugees fleeing from war zones. Back then, her famous speech “Wir schaffen das” (“We can handle this”) was portrayed as a symbol of European humanism and solidarity. For the European far right, including the Czech far right, Merkel represented an irresponsible leader who put German/European citizens in danger in the name of empty gestures and so-called European values. Accordingly, the platform Angry Mothers portrayed her only in a negative light, mainly as a dictator. The symbol of the veil suggests that she serves Islamic ideology rather than her own people. Furthermore, despite being a woman political leader herself, the image suggests that Merkel supports the alleged Muslim view on the subjugation of women. As German Chancellor, she is blamed for the alleged violence male Muslim migrants are going to perpetrate, including sexual violence and rape.

In summary, the image depicts Muslim migrants as dangerous and deeply misogynistic. They are portrayed as the main, if not only, perpetrators of rape in Europe. In fact, the image is highly manipulative, as the statistics on sexual violence clearly show that the majority of rape cases take place at home, and the perpetrators are very often people who are close to the victims, that is, their partners or family members. Ignoring this fact, this narrative implicitly claims that there would be no violence against women if we lived in a 100%-white Europe. The image further suggests that the migrants are not individual people but part of an organized societal change. Just like Macron in image 1, Merkel is presented here as the engineer controlling this societal change. She is shown as the leader responsible for the “Islamization of Germany”. The emphasis on Germany is important, as it serves again

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as a warning against the liberal politics of the West. The aim of the image is to warn Czech people, who can still save themselves by not repeating the same mistakes and by opposing migration. As Ayoub (2014) pointed out, in CEE the values of multiculturalism and LGBTQIA+ rights are portrayed as something coming from the West.

**Us, the underdog**

The third largest type of visual group portrayals carrying and translating the narrative of the Great Replacement conspiracy was a group describing “genuine, authentic Czech people” who represented “us”, the ordinary citizens relying on common sense. Represented in 22% of the visual posts, the most frequent people in this category were an ordinary “everybody” depicted as victim (see Image 3 below).

*Image 3 about here*


In terms of visual content, Image 3 illustrates the method of portraying ordinary people with conservative views as tortured prisoners. The body posture is reminiscent of a crucified Jesus Christ, and their hands are shackled. The left shackle carries the Facebook logo, the right one carries the Twitter logo. The sign above the prisoner says “Goolag”, a tongue-in-cheek reference to both the Google Search engine and the Gulags, the Soviet Union’s forced labour camps for political prisoners. The misspelling clearly links the “liberal dictatorship” to the former Soviet Union – the “G” in the sign is designed as a hammer and sickle, an official symbol of the Soviet Union. Whereas the two previous images depicted real-world people, the person depicted in the picture is an anonymous white man with conservative views representing the “everybody”. They are presented as truthful, authentic, critical, patriotic citizens who can see “the truth”, that is, as “red-pillers” (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019). According to the Angry Mothers’ official narrative, these are the chosen few who understand that mainstream media are deceitful and, thus, look for alternatives to find and produce the information elites try to hide. In this “liberal dictatorship”, they are the ones deprived of their rights, since elites care only about minorities (of all sorts) while ignoring ordinary citizens.

The iconography of the tortured prisoner juxtaposes religious and anti-Western symbolism – all featured companies have their headquarters in the United States. The cross
shape of the prisoner’s body represents the traditional Christian symbolism of martyrdom as a moral form of suffering. Thus, Image 3 is in dialogue with the religious iconography of Image 1 and Image 2 by contrasting Christian morality and the suffering of Christian people, who are, according to the narrative, marginalized and put in danger by the liberal elites supporting migration. Moreover, the Great Replacement conspiracy claims that fundamentally anti-Christian neo-Marxist cultural theories fuel international liberalism (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). This narrative draws on the language of human rights and discrimination and exploits the past injustice Christians experienced under communist rule. Referring to this past, far-right leaders claim that Christians are a religious minority being discriminated against by the liberal elites because of their faith (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

The fact that the logos of the most used social media are featured as part of the prison system also visually translates the narrative that ordinary, white, Christian, Czech people live in a totality ruled by the people who run these platforms and who allegedly censor those who speak publicly about how things really are. Since there have been rules concerning what is and is not acceptable on these platforms, their owners are portrayed as dictators who violate freedom of speech and promote censorship. In fact, far-right members often represent themselves as “freedom of speech warriors” within this liberal, neo-Marxist totality. As such, they portray themselves as victims of the Great Replacement; they can see what is happening but are not allowed to raise their concerns in the public sphere. According to this narrative, anytime they address their worries in public, they are censored and labelled racist or homophobic. In short, pure, innocent Christian people are portrayed as silenced victims of a “neo-Marxist” dictatorship. As such, they have appropriated the liberal-left strategy and drawn upon a narrative of victimhood and the struggle for fundamental human rights. The fact that the person depicted in the picture is a man further reflects how the far right portrays white, heterosexual men as victims of liberal policies that, according to the narrative, promote the positive discrimination of women, non-white people and LGBTQIA+ people.
Conclusion

In this article we critically studied far right visual mobilization channeled through supposed “women’s online platforms” spreading a conspiracy theory promoting anti-genderism and hatred toward LGBTQIA+ people in Central Eastern Europe. Our conceptual contribution is to infuse research on gender and far right political mobilization with an empirically informed, critical translational perspective. We combined translation and visual narrative theories to investigate how the Czech far-right women’s group Angry Mothers translates the Great Replacement conspiracy through the use of images in their online communication. By focusing on the visual translation of characters into political storytelling, we were able to show how memes and images stigmatizing gender-nonconforming people, LGBTQIA+ people and other minorities serve the spread of far-right conspiracy narratives.

The combination of gender, narrative and translation theories proved fruitful in showing how far-right platforms can use images to overcome linguistic barriers (cf. Müller et al., 2009). We would even argue that memes can serve as a tool for mobilization, including violent terrorist attacks, as apparent in the case of the 2022 Bratislava attack. Despite the fact that key ideological texts of the far right, such as Camus’ book Le Grand Replacement, have not as yet been translated into Czech, Czech far-right online platforms like Angry Mothers have popularized their ideas, translating abstract ideas through story structures that consist of typical characters. Our case study reveals how images, functioning as visual narratives, effectively accelerate the translation and diffusion of conspiracy theories. In particular, we discovered that the group worked specifically with four types of characters who played a role in the conspiracy. “Villains above” engineering the societal change; “villains below” – white LGBTQIA+ people who do not reproduce the Czech white nation, and Muslim and black people who are “invading” Europe; “Us, the underdog”, representing white, Czech people, who are being systematically replaced; and, finally, Russia “the martyr” (which occurred only a few times). By focusing on ideology in far-right translation strategies (Doerr and Gardner, 2022), we were able to show empirically how the group constantly translated real-world political events as well as fake news. By placing simplifying, hateful images of “villains” in the context of other events, these typical characters functioned as the carriers of a storyline that fits the conspiracy theory narrative.

Not only do the members and followers of the page not have to meet in person to exchange knowledge, they do not even need to understand the mother tongue of their foreign counterparts. Thus, we argued that the admins of the Angry Mothers’ Facebook page acted, essentially, as producers and cultural translators of alternative or fake news. First, they
selected relevant images from media and social media they follow or created their own
memes and images. Second, they contextualized the images in the greater story of a
conspiracy. The analysed data translated events, actions and ideas into images, and the
admins translated these images in the local context. Finally, the images were arranged in a
sequence so that they could narrate the Great Replacement conspiracy. In the first case, well-
known antisemitic stereotypes and symbols were at play in order to convey the message. In
the second case, the admins commented on the images in Czech, translating them for local
audiences. Finally, the frequent repetition of the typical characters, underpinning the
conspiracy’s structure, translated the unrelated images into a coherent narrative that
constructs “a meaningful, even heroic, narrative about our own disempowerment” (Bridle,
2023).

The findings of our analysis confirmed our initial research assumption that hateful,
gendered visual representations serve far-right actors to translate, share and further popularise
the bigger story of the Great Replacement conspiracy. However, our analysis focused on how
the story is translated into the Czech context. To understand what the general strategies of the
far right are globally, a more comparative research design is needed. Further research into the
perception of the images and the factors that contribute to acceptance of the conspiracy
theory as a valid description of the world would also be welcome. Given our findings on the
nuanced translation of the Great Replacement conspiracy through a whole stock of varying
visual, digital character narratives, more research on the mainstreaming and transnational
diffusion of violence and anti-democratic political ideologies through affective images is
needed (cf. Freistein et al., 2022). Furthermore, the difference between how the perception of
far-right messages differs when they are diffused through text-based translations and visual-
based translation should be examined.
References


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