Evidence Bite - Transgender trouble: The construction of an embodied enemy in anti-gender mobilizations in Belgium and Italy

This article by CCINDLE partners Aurora Perego and Rylan Verlooy explains how anti-gender mobilisations work to centre and demonise transgender people in their campaigns and rhetoric. It examines how anti-gender and anti-trans actors in Belgium and Italy jointly construct trans people as an 'embodied enemy', or a graspable antagonist onto which broader fears about gender, family, identity, and social change are projected. The study shows how these narratives unify diverse anti-gender actors to move beyond the abstract threat of 'gender ideology', positioning trans people as a danger to children, families, free speech, and the social order itself. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Transgender people are constructed as an embodied threat

The article shows that anti-gender actors characterise transgender people as inherently threatening to a perceived 'natural order' of sex differences, family structures, morality, and social stability. Rather than engaging with trans people's experiences, these narratives reduce transness to an embodied problem representing broader anxieties about social change and gender equality. This 'embodied enemy' thus creates boundaries within society that expand and mobilise opposition to gender rights.

2. Anti-trans narratives coalesce diverse political and cultural voices

Belgium is often regarded as an 'LGBT paradise' while legislative protection in Italy is much less developed, yet anti-trans campaigns have proliferated in both contexts over recent years. In Belgium and Italy, anti-gender campaigns involve broad coalitions that include conservative religious groups, right-wing political actors, anti-trans advocacy organisations, media commentators, and online influencers. These actors differ ideologically, but their opposition to trans rights provides a shared focal point that strengthens cooperation and expands these networks.

3. Knowledge production around gender dysphoria, healthcare, and free speech plays a central role

The study highlights how anti-gender mobilisations rely heavily on strategies of knowledge production and repression to spread hateful narratives around trans people and their rights; e.g. by building on pseudo-scientific articles, grey literature, and anecdotal references. Gender dysphoria, for example, is associated with mental illness, and depicted as a social contagion of the youth whipped up by extremists. At the same time, gender-affirming healthcare is framed as harmful and ineffective. These strategies help make anti-trans narratives feel urgent and fundamental, even when they are far from evidence-based.

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The **key takeaway messages** of the article include that:

- **Anti-gender politics personalise anxiety:** Trans people are turned into concrete threats to children, families, and society as a whole.
- **Anti-trans narratives build broad coalitions across socio-political contexts:** Different actors unite around anti-trans narratives even when they differ on other political issues. They adapt to local contexts while reprising familiar, shared tropes around children, healthcare, free speech, overreaching activists, and an endangered cisgender social structure. These messages are disseminated across a sprawling information ecosystem.
- **Knowledge production and repression strategies actively reshape public understandings:** Anti-gender actors are energetic in undermining understandings of trans issues. They frequently centre detransitioned people, rely on anecdotes to back their positions, and cultivate a misleading scientific aura by cherry-picking and misrepresenting scholarship.

This study shows that anti-gender politics in Belgium and Italy increasingly works by constructing transgender people as highly visible, emotionally charged, and dangerous enemies in public discourse. As well as targeting trans communities, these narratives legitimise broader exclusionary politics and reshape democratic debate around fear and threat. Understanding how these enemy-making processes operate is essential for developing more effective strategies to challenge anti-trans rhetoric, as public sentiment and legislative efforts continue to draw on these harmful themes. You can read the article in full here.

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