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Populist Radical Right Women Leaders and the Framing of LGBTQI+ Issues: Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel

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Abstract

The increasing prominence of women leaders of populist radical right (PRR) parties raises important questions about the relationship between gender, leadership, and ideological discourse. This article examines how three PRR women leaders—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—articulate LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication. Drawing on framing theory, the study analyses a selection of leaders' speeches, complemented by media interviews given by the three leaders, to identify how LGBTQI+ themes are constructed and integrated into broader party-political narratives. Our findings show that LGBTQI+ issues vary in salience and framing across leaders. Le Pen largely avoids the issue, invoking LGBTQI+ rights only within a homonationalist narrative opposing Islamic communitarianism. Meloni adopts a more traditionally conservative frame, grounding her framing in the protection of children and of the “natural family,” while Weidel selectively combines homonationalist and anti-gender discourses. Despite these differences, all three oppose the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights against their own country's status quo, selectively accepting sexual orientation while marginalising gender identity and transgender rights.

Keywords

frame analysis; homonationalism; LGBTQI+ rights; populist radical right; women's leadership

1. Introduction

The increasing prominence of women at the helm of populist radical right (PRR) parties represents one of the most significant transformations in contemporary European politics. Parties traditionally described as *Männerparteien* (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Spierings et al., 2015) have progressively entrusted leadership to women who have not only normalised their public image but also guided them towards unprecedented

electoral success. This development raises important theoretical questions about the relationship between gender, leadership, and ideological discourse within the radical right, particularly in policy areas historically associated with moral conservatism, such as sexuality and family politics.

Among these, LGBTQI+ issues constitute a particularly significant topic. PRR parties have long held socially conservative and anti-egalitarian positions on gender and sexuality. Yet, recent scholarship shows that their discourse on these issues has become increasingly complex and strategically adaptive (Spierings, 2020, 2021; Spierings et al., 2015). While maintaining opposition to the expansion of sexual and gender equality, some radical right actors selectively mobilise LGBTQI+ rights as markers of national modernity and Western identity, especially in opposition to immigration and Islam (Akkerman, 2015; Duina & Carson, 2020; Magni & Reynolds, 2023). Other actors, however, continue to frame sexuality primarily through traditionalist narratives centred on the defence of the heterosexual family and the preservation of the traditional cultural order (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Donà, 2021). These developments suggest that a key analytical question is not simply whether PRR actors support or oppose LGBTQI+ rights, but how these rights are discursively constructed, selectively recognised, and politically instrumentalised.

Within this broader debate, the role of women's leadership remains underexplored. Existing research frequently associates women politicians with more favourable attitudes towards LGBTQI+ rights and inclusive policymaking (Siegel et al., 2022; Wängnerud, 2009). However, political party affiliation remains a central determinant of elite positions on sexuality and gender issues (Siegel et al., 2022), and there is limited evidence that women's leadership alone leads to substantive programmatic moderation within the radical right.

Female PRR leaders therefore occupy a potentially paradoxical position: their presence challenges the traditionally masculine image of radical right politics, yet they operate within party families whose ideological foundations are rooted in nativism, authoritarianism, and cultural conservatism (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2007).

Understanding how these tensions are negotiated discursively is crucial for assessing how the growing feminisation of PRR leadership contributes to a strategic articulation of existing positions on LGBTQI+ rights. This article addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on PRR women leaders' political discourse. It asks the following question: how do women leaders of PRR parties articulate LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication? Rather than examining party manifestos or policy outputs, the study shifts attention to leader-centred discursive practices, analysing how political leaders frame LGBTQI+ issues, assign meaning to them, and integrate them into their broader narratives of nation, identity, family, and social order. Accordingly, this article investigates whether and how these leaders endorse LGBTQI+ rights or reproduce opposition to their expansion and adapt their framing strategies to their overall parties' narrative.

Our empirical approach builds on framing theory (Entman, 1993; Rein & Schön, 1993), which conceptualises political communication as a process by which actors select and emphasise specific interpretations of reality to structure political conflict and shape audience perceptions. The study examines a selection of public speeches by three prominent European PRR leaders—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—who operate within distinct national contexts and embody different trajectories of radical-right leadership. The three cases allow for a theoretically informed comparison because they vary along three dimensions:

the institutionalisation of LGBTQI+ rights in the national context, the party's strategic trajectory, and the leader's public biography.

By comparing how these leaders frame LGBTQI+ rights, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between gendered leadership and PRR discourse in contemporary Europe. It shows that female radical right leaders do not simply offer a uniform anti-LGBTQI+ position. Rather, they adopt different discursive strategies, as they selectively activate, avoid, or rearticulate LGBTQI+ issues in ways that make opposition to the expansion of rights compatible with their broader political positioning.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on PRR parties, sexuality, and gender, with particular attention to the emergence of the homonationalist frame and the role of women's leadership within those parties. The two following sections present the case selection and methodological approach, before moving to the empirical analysis of leaders' framing strategies. The last section discusses our findings and concludes.

2. Populist Radical Right Parties, LGBTQI+ Rights, and Gendered Leadership

PRR parties' core ideology is commonly defined by nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015), combining strong anti-immigration stances and preferences for "law and order" domestic policies (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2007, 2013) and a broader defence of a culturally homogeneous national community. Similarly, PRR parties have historically maintained deeply conservative and anti-egalitarian positions on gender and LGBTQI+ issues (Spierings, 2020, 2021; Spierings et al., 2015), arguably because the emancipation of women and LGBTQI+ rights threatens what they posit as their understanding of the natural order and the reproduction of an ethnically and culturally homogenous society (Höhne, 2024). Their positioning on gender and LGBTQI+ issues, accordingly, is part of a wider ideological project centred on social order, cultural continuity, demographic reproduction, and the symbolic boundaries of the nation.

Research has shown that PRR parties' narratives frequently connect LGBTQI+ rights, feminism, immigration, and economic struggle in terms of a broader civilisational threat (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). First, family-related LGBTQI+ rights—such as same-sex marriage, adoption rights, and sexual freedom—are often construed as direct attacks on the so-called "traditional family," which PRR actors present as the very foundation of European and Christian societies (Donà, 2021; Lavizzari, 2025; Reinhardt et al., 2024). This opposition is rooted in the belief that gender differences and heterosexuality are natural and immutable, and that attempts to question these categories represent a dangerous ideological indoctrination that threatens social stability and cultural continuity (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Donà, 2021; Lavizzari, 2025).

Secondly, a particularly recurrent element in this discourse is the framing of anti-LGBTQI+ claims through the protection of children. When opposing comprehensive sexuality education in schools, anti-bullying campaigns, or policies concerning gender identity, PRR parties claim they are "protecting children" from the so-called "gender theory" or "gender ideology" (Prearo, 2024; Prearo & Garbagnoli, 2017) that, by allegedly corrupting the innocence of children (Björkdahl & Cognini, 2026), poses a threat to the stability and reproduction of society.

Finally, feminism, LGBTQI+ rights, and the normalisation of non-heterosexual relationships are linked to declining birth rates and contribute to what PRR parties frame as “the great replacement,” whereby the white, native European population will be demographically substituted by non-white, non-Christian immigrants (Ekman, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022).

In this sense, LGBTQI+ issues are not marginal to PRR ideology: they are one of the arenas through which these parties define legitimate forms of family, reproduction, belonging, and national continuity. Yet, PRR positions on LGBTQI+ issues are not uniform. As populism is generally understood as a thin-centred ideology that must be combined with thicker ideological elements, PRR actors retain considerable flexibility in adapting their discourse to different national, cultural, and electoral contexts (Mudde, 2004, 2007). This flexibility helps explain why their positions on gender and sexuality vary across countries and over time. In highly gender-egalitarian contexts, radical right actors may defend the existing status quo and argue that equality has already been achieved, whereas in more traditional contexts they may openly challenge even the limited LGBTQI+ rights that are already in place (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Vossen, 2011).

This strategic adaptability has become particularly visible as PRR parties have expanded their electorates and recalibrated their positions on several issues (Magni & Reynolds, 2023; Rovny, 2013; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Schäfer & Steiner, 2026; Scrinzi, 2026; Spierings, 2020). While these parties generally do not advocate the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights and often actively oppose it (Magni & Reynolds, 2023), some of them have developed more nuanced positions, especially where certain LGBTQI+ rights have become legally institutionalised and socially normalised. In these contexts, openly attacking already established rights might be politically costly, while selectively defending them can help PRR actors to present themselves as modern, secular, and protective of national values. In particular, scholars have noted PRR actors may frame LGBTQI+ rights favourably through neoliberal repertoires, reducing them to private liberties detached from broader equality claims (Boulila et al., 2025; Fenger, 2018).

The concept of homonationalism captures this ambivalence. Originally theorised by Puar (2007, 2013), homonationalism refers to the ways in which gay and lesbian rights can be incorporated into nationalist and racialised projects, producing hierarchies between supposedly modern and backward societies. The concept has since been widely used in the literature on PRR parties to describe how they mobilise LGBTQI+ rights—in parallel to the femonational mobilisation of women’s rights (Farris, 2017)—as symbols of “Western modernity” and civilisational superiority, particularly against Islam, immigration, and multiculturalism (Akkerman, 2015; Boulila et al., 2025; Duina & Carson, 2020; Spierings, 2021).

In homonationalist discourse, LGBTQI+ rights are not defended as universal equality claims, nor do they generally serve to support new rights claims. Rather, they are invoked selectively as already achieved liberties that must be protected from external threats, especially from Muslim immigrants who are portrayed as inherently homophobic and misogynistic (Magni & Reynolds, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2024). This allows PRR actors to combine apparent moderation on sexuality with exclusionary politics (Scrinzi, 2026): they can distance themselves from explicit homophobia, appeal to secular or liberal national traditions, and redirect attention towards racialised or religious outsiders. This strategy is particularly relevant in countries such as France and the Netherlands, where secularism and civil liberties, including gay rights, are often considered integral to national identity (Akkerman, 2015; Duina & Carson, 2020).

At the same time, this selective defence of LGBTQI+ rights tends to be narrow. It often concerns gay and lesbian citizens who can be incorporated into national narratives of modernity, while claims related to gender identity, transgender rights, queer politics, sex education, and anti-discrimination policies continue to be framed negatively as expressions of “gender ideology,” “wokism,” or moral disorder.

The growing prominence of women leaders within PRR parties adds a further layer of complexity to this picture. PRR parties have traditionally been described as *Männerparteien*, both because of their predominantly male electorate and because of their masculinised ideological and organisational profiles (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Spierings et al., 2015). However, recent years have seen several women rise to leadership positions in radical right parties, often contributing to their public normalisation and electoral expansion. This development has also been interpreted as part of a broader attempt to renew parties’ image and to reduce the voting gender gap to expand their electoral base (Chueri & Damerow, 2023; Keeling & Ladini, 2025; Weeks et al., 2023).

Existing research often associates women’s political representation with more inclusive attitudes and policies towards gender and sexual equality. At the individual level, women tend to display less negative attitudes towards homosexuality than men (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019). At the elite level, female prospective MPs have been found to be more likely than their male colleagues to reject bans on same-sex unions, while women’s presence in legislatures and cabinets has often been associated with the adoption of more inclusive policies (Siegel et al., 2022; Wängnerud, 2009). These findings suggest that gender may matter for political attitudes and policy agendas concerning LGBTQI+ rights.

However, these expectations cannot be transferred mechanically to PRR leadership. Party affiliation and ideology remain crucial determinants of elite positions on sexuality and gender issues (Siegel et al., 2022). Women leaders may therefore challenge the masculine image of radical right politics without necessarily producing substantive programmatic moderation. Accordingly, this article investigates the communicative strategies through which these leaders construct and take position on LGBTQI+ rights, to clarify how their gendered leadership shapes the discursive repertoires through which LGBTQI+ issues are framed.

3. Case Selection and Methods

Our study focuses on three PRR women leaders: Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel. These three leaders were able to bring their parties to unprecedented electoral success in the three largest countries of the European Union—both in terms of population and GDP. Their selection allows for a theoretically informed comparison, as they combine important similarities with analytically relevant differences, as they operate in national contexts marked by different trajectories of LGBTQI+ rights recognition, belong to parties with distinct strategic profiles, and present different political trajectories and public biographies. Particularly relevant is the variation in the institutional status quo regarding LGBTQI+ rights across the three countries, as the degree to which these rights have been legally recognised and politically normalised may shape both their salience and framing in the three leaders’ rhetoric.

Among the three countries, Germany provides the most extensive legal recognition of LGBTQI+ rights. According to the last report provided by ILGA-Europe (2026), on a score from 0 to 100, France scores 60.25; Germany scores 69.54; and Italy scores 24.11%. Germany recognises full marriage equality, joint and second-parent adoption, and allows individuals to amend their name and gender through a

declaration-based procedure, without medical intervention requirements. France also recognises marriage equality, joint and second-parent adoption, but does not provide a fully self-determination-based procedure for legal gender recognition and still lacks a comprehensive ban on medically unnecessary interventions on intersex minors. Conversely, Italy does not recognise marriage equality, providing only civil unions, and does not guarantee equal access to joint adoption or automatic co-parent recognition, despite recent Constitutional Court rulings expanding the recognition of same-sex parenthood in specific circumstances. Moreover, it remains characterised by a fragmented and largely court-driven framework for LGBTQI+ rights, with weaker protections for trans, non-binary, and intersex people.

To investigate how the three leaders articulate LGBTQI+ rights, this study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in frame analysis. Frame analysis conceptualises political communication as an active process through which leaders select and emphasise certain interpretations of reality while marginalising others (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993).

In political contexts, framing is understood as the way in which actors construct meaning around contested issues, position them within broader ideological narratives and mobilise symbolic resources in ways that shape their public understanding and political conflict in general (Rein & Schön, 1993). Frames are therefore inherently normative and valenced, either explicitly through direct evaluative language or implicitly through selective emphasis and omission (Matthes, 2012). Frame analysis is thus especially well-suited to studying PRR discourse on gender and sexuality, given its emphasis on the strategic articulation of identity boundaries and cultural narratives (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2007) and its reliance on value-based claims to structure political conflict. Operationally, the analysis examines how LGBTQI+ issues are framed in leaders' speeches by identifying recurring interpretive patterns. The goal is to reconstruct the interpretive logics through which these issues are embedded within broader narratives.

The analysis focuses on a corpus of public speeches delivered by Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel during political campaigns. Speeches constitute a particularly appropriate source for studying framing processes, as they represent highly visible moments of political communication in which leaders directly address voters, construct collective identities, and signal ideological positioning. Compared to party manifestos or institutional documents, speeches allow for greater attention to rhetorical strategies, narrative choices, and discursive emphasis, making them especially useful for capturing how LGBTQI+ rights are articulated within broader political narratives.

To create our corpus, we collected and transcribed all the videos of speeches held at rallies that the three leaders' official accounts published on their YouTube channels. This resulted in 50 transcriptions of Le Pen's speeches, ranging from 05/02/2017 to 15/09/2025; 43 transcriptions of Meloni's speeches from 31/05/2021 to 18/11/2025; and 32 transcriptions of Weidel's speeches from 11/08/2021 to 30/05/2025 (detailed information on data collection is available in the Supplementary File). Finally, to select the speeches that mentioned LGBTQI+ issues, we relied on the keyword dictionary developed by Prearo and Scopelliti (2024). The final counts of speeches resulting from this filtering are three for Le Pen, seven for Meloni, and 14 for Weidel.

To understand the framing and rhetorical devices employed to characterise the discourses around LGBTQI+ themes, we carefully read and organized the transcribed speeches and the passages where they were

explicitly mentioned. The analysis proceeds through a qualitative manual coding process to identify recurrent frames and interpretive patterns in leaders' discourse. The coding combined deductive attention to frames identified in the literature—such as “homonationalism,” “gender ideology,” “traditional family,” and “protection of children” (see Section 2)—with inductive observation of patterns emerging from the material, including rhetorical strategies such as issue avoidance and the recurrent reference to own personal experience.

In addition, to further substantiate, interpret, and contextualise the relevant frames and to trace the evolution of the position on LGBTQI+ issues expressed by the three leaders, the analysis of speeches is complemented by the study of a selection of video and print-interview material. A presentation of the selected sources is available in the Supplementary File.

4. Analysis and Results

The way in which Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel frame LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication is analysed by focusing on three dimensions: each of the following subsections first outlines the leader's political trajectory and public positioning on LGBTQI+ issues, then assesses the salience of these issues in their speeches, and finally examines the interpretive frames through which they are articulated. The analysis of the three cases shows that LGBTQI+ themes are not mobilised uniformly by PRR women leaders. Rather, their framing depends on the political function they serve within each leader's broader discourse.

4.1. Marine Le Pen: “Dédiabolisation” by Issue Avoidance

Marine Le Pen has emerged as one of Europe's most prominent PRR political figures, transforming the Front National, later renamed Rassemblement National, from a radical movement into a major electoral force. Under her leadership, the party has achieved unprecedented electoral success, with Le Pen reaching the second round of French presidential elections in both 2017 and 2022. Le Pen benefited from the so-called “legacy advantage” (Baker & Palmieri, 2023), inheriting the leadership of the party from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, but her strategy has been characterised by the attempt at the so-called *dédiabolisation* (in English, de-demonization). This strategy sought to distance the FN from its most extremist positions, especially antisemitism, while moderating its language on the cultural axis (Stockemer, 2017; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017) and repositioning the party on economic issues (Mayer, 2013; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Within the same strategy, Le Pen avoids taking explicit positions on social conservative issues, including feminist and LGBTQ+ themes, same-sex marriage, and abortion.

This ambiguity is calculated: as a divorced mother and political leader who elevated a homosexual man, Florian Philippot, as her “right-hand man,” Le Pen projects a “modern woman” image, combined with performances of hegemonic femininity (Geva, 2020; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026), while maintaining strategic silence on issues that are potentially divisive for her electorate.

As a matter of fact, interviews or direct quotes on LGBTQI+ topics by Le Pen are limited, and her trajectory on LGBTQI+ themes does not seem to represent a genuine ideological evolution, but rather a progressive rhetorical refinement in service of an electoral strategy. After taking over the party leadership from her father, who was openly homophobic, Le Pen introduced a homonationalist frame into the party positioning,

presenting LGBTQI+ people as one of the minorities to be protected against Islamic communitarianism. Indeed, in Le Pen's discourse, "Islamic communitarianism" refers to Muslim collective identity and social organisation framed as incompatible with French republican universalism and *laïcité* because it is portrayed as privileging group-based, cultural, and religious norms over individual citizenship and secular rights. The move was apparently successful: polls show a growth in the gay vote for the FN from 14% in 2007 to 19% in 2012.

However, the opposition to same-sex marriage remained for a long time a coherent trait of Le Pen's program. At the beginning of the 2010s, despite refusing to participate in the demonstrations organised by anti-LGBTQI+ movements that protested the legalisation of same-sex marriage, she harshly condemned the reform that led to the Taubira law of 2013. Moreover, during her second presidential campaign, she promised to repeal same-sex marriage. The RN's 2017 electoral manifesto confirms this without ambiguity: proposal 87 called for replacing the Taubira law with "civil unions (improved PACS [usually PACS grant lower rights and protection compared to civil unions])" without retroactive effect, while maintaining the ban on surrogacy and in vitro fertilisation for lesbian couples.

A second apparent turning point for RN comes in 2022, when Le Pen promised a married lesbian woman that she "will not remove any rights from French citizens," thus abandoning the promise of repealing the Taubira law. Here, Le Pen's ambivalence (Scrinzi, 2026) starts to emerge vividly, as she seeks to appear moderate enough to appeal to the median voter without alienating her more radical electorate. She accepts the preservation of the legal status quo, presenting it as something to be protected from the Islamic threat, while opposing any further expansion of LGBTQI+ rights.

Concerning the framing of LGBTQI+ issues in the speeches delivered during her campaigns, Le Pen confirms her strategy of avoiding taking positions on sensitive topics. Despite being the leader with the highest number of speeches initially collected for our corpus, Le Pen mentions LGBTQI+ themes significantly less often than Meloni and Weidel, with only three speeches flagged by our keyword search. When she does, however, she always invokes the protection of LGBTQI+ rights—together with those of women and of Jewish people—against the threat of Islamic communitarianism that is jeopardising the *laïcité* of the French Republic by questioning its identity and values. For example, in one of the selected speeches, she states:

I was criticised for defending our Jewish compatriots, our homosexual compatriots. They are, however, the first victims of radical Islamism and its political and media complicities. I was criticised for attacking a medieval ideology that destroys lives. [sic!] Who undermine entire sections of society, at the forefront of which are women. (Speech id: lepen_22, 2017)

And, again, we find the same frame:

Today, we allow individuals to expose their anti-Semitic theses, their misogynistic, homophobic, or even Christianophobic theses in public meetings. (Speech id: lepen_19, 2017)

Overall, LGBTQI+ issues appear only rarely in Le Pen's discourse, mainly characterised by what can be labelled an "issue avoidance" strategy, and, when mentioned, are framed in homonationalist terms. As a matter of fact, "Islamism" and "globalism" are the two opposing threats frequently mentioned by Le Pen in her speeches.

Globalism—and the European Union as its main actor—is among the other things responsible for promoting the “woke” culture. However, “wokism,” understood as a catch-all term encapsulating every progressive policy on gender, sexuality, and identity, is only briefly invoked and left deliberately vague, without further explanation or any connection to specific policies or proposals (Speech id: lepen_37, 2024).

4.2. *Giorgia Meloni: A Neo-Traditional PRR Leader*

After an early debut on the political scene and a fast career, Meloni founded her party, Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), in 2013, splitting from the centre-right party, Popolo della Libertà (Pdl). Fratelli d'Italia has been characterised as a populist radical-right party and has since been closely associated with Meloni's leadership (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022). Concerning women's issues, Meloni positions herself as a “neo-traditional” radical right leader who claims to defend women's interests while reducing women primarily to their role as mothers and stressing the nuclear, heterosexual family as the foundational element of society (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

This neo-traditional positioning is also reflected in Meloni's and her party's stance on LGBTQI+ rights. In the famous “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother”—this speech was delivered on 19th October 2019. The excerpt is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Lh9AMSW_JM0—Meloni explicitly attacks existing policies that are inclusive of LGBTQI+ people, such as using the gender neutral “parent” as opposed to the qualification of “father” and “mother” on official documents. Her party, moreover, has proposed a bill to amend the Italian constitution to state that the only “natural” marriage is the one between a man and a woman (De Giorgi et al., 2023). Furthermore, Meloni's party has long supported associations and movements based on explicit anti-LGBTQI+ stances, such as *Family Day*, *Pro Vita & Famiglia*, and *Manif pour tous* (Prearo, 2024).

Meloni's position on LGBTQI+ themes has remained largely consistent over time, in contrast with her stances on other policies, like her most Eurosceptic positions, which evolved. From the beginning, her opposition to the introduction of new policies for the protection of LGBTQI+ rights revolved around three themes: the defence of biological sex, the heteronormative traditional family, and, especially, the protection of children. The defence of children and the “natural” structure of the family have also informed her position on the Italian debate on civil unions, which led to the adoption of the so-called Cirinnà Bill (2016). Meloni presented her opposition to civil unions not as a denial of the individual rights of homosexual people—rights she claims to recognise—but rather as a response to what she viewed as a legislative step towards same-sex marriage and, ultimately, adoption by same-sex couples. Meloni's opposition to egalitarian marriage has since been consistent, as has her opposition to surrogacy and adoption for non-heterosexual couples. The only partial exception is her position on civil unions; despite her harsh opposition in 2016, she has more recently declared that “[the law on Civil Unions] is fine as it is.” During the debate over the Ddl Zan—a bill proposing to amend the already existing law on hate crimes to include homotransphobia—she again framed her opposition as based on the need to defend the traditional family and children.

In our selected corpus, Meloni mentions LGBTQI+ themes more extensively than Le Pen, as they appear in seven of her 43 speeches. Meloni articulates her opposition to LGBTQI+ rights around three main themes: opposition to the dangers of “gender identity” or “gender self-identification”; opposition to the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt; and opposition to surrogacy.

The first is presented both through the lenses of biological essentialism, in terms of the “gender ideology” frame, and as a threat to women’s rights and the well-being of children. She articulates:

Fighting discrimination against homosexuals has nothing to do with denying biological identity, because we are born male or female. Whether we like it or not, we cannot erase it. If we intend to erase it, in the end what we will do is nullify the rights of women that we have won in centuries of battles. (Speech id: meloni_3, 2021)

Meloni’s rhetoric, moreover, introduces a religious justification for the “gender ideology” frame, when condemning gender identity rights: “Our spirituality, the sense of sacred and Christian roots, is being attacked. In the name of an absolute relativism and an aggressive atheism that ultimately paves the way for fundamentalist proselytism” (Speech id: meloni_2, 2021). Likewise, in a later passage of the same speech, she links the supposed degeneration of society and the loss of sacredness to a number of contested policies—surrogacy; gender transition; third-term abortions; assisted suicide for minors—that, in her view, are to be morally condemned. It is worth noting that surrogacy, third-term abortion, and assisted suicide for minors have never been legal in Italy and only the first is subject to public debate. Meloni invokes these examples as a scare tactic to mobilise her electorate.

The importance of Christian values is primarily witnessed by her famous slogan “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian” in which Meloni effectively depicts the way in which she wants her persona to be construed, activating the “traditional family” frame. Moreover, by placing women (as “mothers”) and children at the centre of her discourse, Meloni’s stated objective is to defend the traditional or “natural” family against the supposed threats posed by the so-called “gender ideology” or ideas promoted by the LGBTQI+ community. For example, she argues that:

It is the reason why one of the main points of the Fratelli d’Italia program is the implementation of the largest birth incentive plan that the history of Italy has ever seen, and it is the reason why we continue to defend the natural family from the ideological delirium of those who would like to erase it. (Speech id: Meloni_3, 2021)

Similarly, Meloni expresses her opposition to the possibility of same-sex couples adopting a child, in nearly identical wording in three speeches (Speech id: meloni_1, 2021; meloni_7, 2022; meloni_8, 2022). She states: “the right state takes care of [those who] cannot be defended alone and what cannot be defended is that child” and that: “to a child who has already been unfortunate [i.e., a child placed for adoption], one tends to give their best” (Speech id: meloni_8, 2022). Meloni frames the entire debate as being about the child rather than about the couple, mobilising the “protection of children” frame. She consistently presents her opposition not as a restriction on the rights of gay and lesbian individuals, but as a protective stance on behalf of what she calls the “weakest part” in the adoption equation. This child-centred framing allows her to present her opposition to same-sex couple adoption not as discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, but as a form of institutional and political protection of children. Indeed, she refutes the homophobia accusation by equating it to the legal ban on single people from adopting. For example, she asks:

My friends, they also say that I am homophobic because I am not in favour of adoption by a homosexual. But tell me, what does the phobia have to do with it? In the Italian legal system, a single person cannot adopt a child. So the State is single phobic? [sic!] (Speech id: meloni_7, 2021).

It is interesting to notice that Meloni leverages her personal family history to justify her opposition to same-sex couples' right to adopt. For example, she states that she "spent her entire childhood envying those who had a father, the large families that gathered at Christmas, all around the table" (Speech id: meloni_8, 2022), a direct reference to her father leaving her family when she was a child. And, again, she argues: "my reaction is not to take away from others what I did not have, it is to give to others what I did not have" (Speech id: meloni_23, 2022).

Finally, opposition to surrogacy is also mentioned in at least two of Meloni's speeches. Interestingly, Meloni always frames the debate through the lenses of "gender ideology," implying that it is homosexual men who mainly resort to surrogacy—while estimates suggest that 90% are heterosexual couples (Tebano, 2023). She states: "Because I do not consider modernity men who buy a child from poor women simply because that woman may feel compelled. It is not modernity, it is barbarism" (Speech id: meloni_7, 2022).

Thus, unlike Le Pen, Meloni engages openly with LGBTQI+ issues. Moreover, whereas Le Pen tends to mention them only within frames that invoke the protection of LGBTQI+ rights (exclusively) from a homonationalist stance, Meloni openly states and justifies her opposition to the promotion of specific LGBTQI+ rights. Meloni's framing of LGBTQI+ issues is grounded in a traditionalist, conservative ideological framework, where LGBTQI+ issues are mostly presented as threatening to the integrity of the traditional family, and in particular to the rights of women and children.

4.3. Alice Weidel: Homonationalist Leader

Compared to Le Pen's legacy political career and Meloni's *cursus honorum* typical of professional politicians, Weidel worked extensively in research and the private sector before joining the AfD in 2012. While initially drawn to the party due to her strong opposition to the euro and the EU, she quickly climbed to the very leadership of the party, which she took on formally in 2022 (Roch, 2024). Weidel has often been described as presenting a more "bourgeois" and "moderate" image for the AfD due to her professional and academic background (Vorländer, 2017), the fact that she is a woman (Casullo, 2025), and her personal life, specifically, being openly homosexual and in a long-term relation with a Swiss national of Sri Lankan descent with whom she has two children. While she identifies as a liberal conservative, her political platform centres on hard-line stances against immigration—including calls for "remigration" of all foreigners—and Euroscepticism (De Smedt & Jaki, 2017).

Over the course of her political career, Weidel has rhetorically exploited her own identity and personal experience—being a woman in a homosexual relationship with children—to promote the AfD's homonationalist anti-immigration position. For instance, she declared during an interview that "as a lesbian woman I do not want to be thrown off a roof under the sharia law" (Schuler, 2023). By instrumentalising her identity, she has been able to deflect the accusation of homophobia and to present the AfD as "the true and only" party protecting gays and lesbians, while signalling that it welcomes LGBTQI+ voters. On the other hand, she has consistently refuted the definition of "queer"; thus, while being open about her sexual orientation, she does not identify as part of the LGBTQI+ community. This ambiguity allows her to advance AfD's stances that are in contradiction with her personal history, such as opposition to same-sex marriage, adoption for same sex couples, and surrogacy.

In Weidel's rhetoric, homonationalism is also mobilised to defend the status quo and dismiss possible enlargement of LGBTQI+ rights, maintaining her party line. She states: "the gays and lesbians in this country will not care at the end of the day whether their relationship is a 'registered life partnership' or 'marriage' when they do not dare to go out on the street, arm in arm." When Germany legalized same-sex marriage, she tweeted that a "'marriage for all' debate while millions of Muslims illegally immigrate to Germany is a joke" (Germany legalized same-sex marriage, known as "Ehe für alle" on October 1, 2017, allowing same-sex couples full marriage rights, including adoption).

Of the three leaders, Weidel is the one who mentions LGBTQI+ related topics the most, both in absolute (15 speeches out of 32) and in relative terms (47% of the total speeches). She frames LGBTQI+ themes with two—apparently contradicting—objectives. On the one hand, she weaponised the "homonationalist frame" to justify her anti-immigration and pro-remigration stances, also leveraging her own experience of being an openly gay, married woman with two children. On the other hand, she mobilises the "gender ideology" frame to criticise harshly what she calls "gender madness" (*Genderwahn*) and to adopt gender-critical and anti-trans positions.

Weidel's homonationalism is almost textbook and is repeated practically verbatim across different speeches: "There are areas [...], where I would advise people who wear a kippah or are openly gay or lesbian to be more cautious" (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025; weidel_26, 2025; weidel_28). According to Weidel, this explicit threat to Jews and homosexuals has a clear origin:

It is the [sic!] imported. Muslim anti-Semitism....The people come from a cultural region where homosexuals are killed, hanged from a crane, and pushed off the roof with a sack over their heads. (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025; weidel_26, 2025; weidel_28)

Weidel also stresses her personal experience as a lesbian, which makes her particularly sensitive to the threats posed by Muslim immigrants:

And that is also the reason why I, as a woman who is in a relationship with another woman, raising children, am politically opposed to exactly that, because I do not want my freedom to be dictated and restricted by these people.....It is high time for the turnaround. Time to deport the illegals. Time for secure borders. Time for our safety. Time for Germany. (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025)

Thus, LGBTQI+ rights and freedom—together with her own lived experience—are weaponised in hard anti-immigration stances. At the same time, however, it is implied that such rights are to be preserved and defended, not expanded: even when adopting a homonationalist stance, the primary goal remains the preservation of the status quo rather than the expansion of rights and protections. For example, Weidel takes a gender critical position, promising that her government would pursue the abolition of the so-called gender ideology: "We reject gender ideology. Only women can be mothers, and men cannot become women" (Speech id: weidel_18, weidel_27, 2024–5).

The justification of the rejection of what Weidel calls the "queer-woke madness" (Speech id: weidel_23, 2025) also lies in the "protection of children" frame. On the one hand, gender ideology is construed as dangerous because of "early sexualisation." For example, she states:

Children are primarily to [be] protected against early sexualisation. Early sexualisation is, among other things, an instrument of gender ideology and begins in some places in Germany already in kindergarten, and has already made headlines with the establishment of relaxation rooms for body exploration and sexual education. Such projects have no place in kindergarten. (Speech id: weidel_17, 2024)

On the other hand, gender ideology is presented as a waste of time, at the expense of what is actually important for children and their education:

To land a great job, to be qualified, that is what we want as AfD. And I can tell you, I can promise you, we will clean up this whole gender madness and this gender ideology. Everything will be shut down. [sic!]....All gender chairs. We need math. We need German. We need foreign languages. We need intelligent people. (Speech id: weidel_27, 2025)

It is worth noticing that Weidel's discussion of LGBTQI+ issues combines elements present in the rhetoric of the other two leaders. Although the protection of LGBTQI+ people is framed in homonationalist terms, she simultaneously invokes secular conservative arguments, especially those based on the protection of children and against "gender ideology," to resist further expansions of rights, particularly in the area of gender identity.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has examined how three women leaders of PRR parties—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—frame LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication. The analysis has shown that all three leaders reproduce opposition to the further expansion of LGBTQI+ rights, while adapting their discourse to different national contexts, party strategies, and public biographies. The main difference in their discursive strategies lies in how opposition to the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights is made politically acceptable: LGBTQI+ issues are avoided by Le Pen, openly mobilised by Meloni, and selectively appropriated by Weidel, but in all three cases they remain embedded in broader PRR narratives of national identity, social order, and cultural threat. These differences reflect the political function that LGBTQI+ issues serve within each leader's broader discourse. Yet, despite this variation, the three leaders converge in resisting the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights and in narrowing the meaning of LGBTQI+ equality. In particular, they tend to reduce the LGBTQI+ spectrum to questions of sexual orientation, while marginalising or openly opposing claims related to gender identity, transgender rights, and queer politics.

However, salience and framing vary in the way the three leaders weaponise LGBTQI+ issues. Regarding the first, LGBTQI+ issues are not equally visible in the three leaders' speeches, nor does their visibility simply reflect the intensity of ideological opposition. Rather, salience depends on the political usefulness of LGBTQI+ issues within each national and party context. In France, where marriage equality and adoption rights are already institutionalised, Le Pen has little incentive to foreground explicit opposition to LGBTQI+ rights, as doing so would undermine her broader strategy of *dédiabolisation*. In Italy, the more limited and contested status of lesbian and gay rights makes opposition to same-sex marriage, adoption, surrogacy, and gender identity claims a more salient resource for conservative mobilisation. In Germany, where basic lesbian and gay rights are more consolidated, Weidel can invoke these rights as evidence of Western modernity and national tolerance, while redirecting opposition towards immigration, Islam, and gender identity claims.

Second, the three leaders do not rely on the same combination of frames. Le Pen's strategy of issue avoidance is accompanied by rare homonationalist references, through which homosexual citizens are presented as members of the national community threatened by Islamic communitarianism. Meloni's open mobilisation of LGBTQI+ issues relies instead on frames centred on the traditional family, the protection of children, and gender ideology, through which LGBTQI+ rights are represented as threats to biological sex, motherhood, children, and the "natural" family. Weidel's selective appropriation combines the homonationalist frame with the gender ideology and protection-of-children frames: gay and lesbian rights are invoked as national liberties to be defended from Muslim immigration, while gender identity and queer claims are rejected as expressions of gender ideology. This selectivity is particularly important because it allows PRR leaders—in particular, Le Pen and Weidel—to distance themselves from explicit homophobia while continuing to resist the broader transformation of gender and sexual norms. Overall, the same general opposition to rights expansion is therefore articulated through different combinations of frames, depending on whether LGBTQI+ issues serve a strategy of normalisation, conservative mobilisation, or nationalist exclusion.

Taken together, these findings suggest that female radical right leaders' engagement with LGBTQI+ themes, despite some similarities, is neither monolithic nor discursively uniform. Rather, it is shaped by the specific national context, party positioning, and informed by the personal experience of the leader. What unites Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel is rather a strategic, instrumental use of LGBTQI+ themes, selectively embraced.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs were used to transcribe and translate the speeches analysed in this study, specifically through the Clip.to platform. All translations were subsequently revised and verified by a native speaker who is also fluent in English. Additionally, LLMs were employed to check spelling, grammar, and syntax to improve overall readability.

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