

Mainstreaming Conservative Ideas Through Media Coverage: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Croatian Online Media Reporting on the “Be Manly” Men’s Rights Movement

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Abstract

This study examines how Croatian online media coverage of the “Be Manly” men’s rights movement contributed to mainstreaming conservative ideas. “Be Manly” emerged in 2022 as a Catholic men’s movement conducting public prayer protests to advocate for male authority and traditional gender roles. Using critical discourse analysis, this research analyzed 72 articles from five major online news outlets (Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr) during the movement’s first year. The findings reveal an ideological divide: Index.hr and Jutarnji.hr demonstrated negative coverage, while 24sata.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr portrayed the movement positively. However, all outlets participated in mainstreaming conservative ideas through three mechanisms: temporal-spatial normalization, agenda setting, and trivialization. This study provides the first systematic analysis of media representation of men’s rights activism in Croatia, revealing how ideological bias in media coverage can facilitate the mainstreaming of conservative ideas.

Keywords: Men’s Rights Activism; Be Manly; Mainstreaming; Critical Discourse Analysis; Croatia; Online Media

Introduction

Gender equality issues in post-Socialist Southeastern European countries remain tethered to their socialist past. While politics, economy, and society have undergone significant modernization, conservative ideas are gaining prominence, particularly pro-life causes in the Balkans (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 10). This study examines Croatia, where conservative causes are heavily influenced by its Catholic heritage and the contemporary institution of the Catholic Church. This influence is a consequence of the Church’s role during the 1990s War of Independence, when it served as a beacon of anti-communism and a builder of collective identity.

Modern-day Croatian conservative movements emerged in the 2000s, opposing the sexual education school curriculum (Petričušić et al. 2017, 67). Since then, these movements

have advocated for anti-abortion policies, opposed same-sex marriages, and promoted a return to traditional societal values rooted in Catholicism.

This trend is not unique to Croatia. Many countries have experienced a similar rise in religious conservatism, with some serving as incubators for these movements. Whenever societies undergo rapid modernization, conservative right-wing movements tend to radicalize (Minkenberg 2018, 524). One such response is men's rights activism (MRA), which emerged as a backlash against feminist efforts to improve gender equality. MRA entered the mainstream discourse in the 2010s, advocating for patriarchal gender roles and claiming that feminist progress threatens traditional masculinity. Although MRA originated in North America, its ideas have spread globally.

In Croatia, the prominent mainstream MRA movement is the "Be Manly" initiative. This group organizes public rosary prayers for causes such as restricting women's autonomy in dressing and abortion rights and promoting a return to Catholicism-based patriarchal values. Since 2022, participants have gathered on the first Saturday of each month, kneeling in prayer at city squares.

The Be Manly movement offers a distinctive case of MRA mobilization, a phenomenon understudied both globally and in Croatia, particularly compared to online MRA communities. Existing studies focus on online MRA communities in Western contexts, leaving a dearth of research on offline mobilizations and their interactions with mainstream media. This study aims to address the gap by examining how Croatian online media portray the "Be Manly" initiative and participate in mainstreaming its conservative ideas.

Media coverage analysis is crucial as media representation and perception reflect what is accepted in the public arena. This guides the research questions:

1. What does the discourse used by Croatian media in reporting about the men's rights activist organization Be Manly say about media attitudes towards radical ideas on the right?
2. Are there mainstreaming mechanisms in Croatian online media reports about the Be Manly organization, and if so, which ones?

Mainstreaming is a key concept in this research because of the media's potential to move topics from the margins to the mainstream. Importantly, recent studies have shown that popular news outlets' coverage of populism has helped normalize far-right ideologies (Brown and Mondon 2021). Brown and Mondon (2021) identify three mechanisms of

mainstreaming—deflection, euphemization and trivialization, and amplification—which provide the analytical framework for this study.

The study uses critical discourse analysis that provides tools to uncover the attitudes embedded in media texts. This method is particularly suited for revealing the implicit and explicit attitudes within media texts, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of bias and ideological leanings. Drawing on Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework, the analysis focuses on how language and grammar choices shape meaning and audience perceptions.

This research emerged from observations of divergent media coverage surrounding Be Manly protests in Croatia. Some outlets characterized participants as “prayers,” while others called them “kneelers.” The protest paradigm theory, which posits that media coverage tends to emphasize protests’ disruptive or negative elements (McCurdy 2012), provided a theoretical framework for analyzing these contrasting portrayals.

The study examines coverage of Be Manly from five mainstream Croatian media outlets representing various ideological perspectives: *Index.hr*, *Jutarnji.hr*, *24sata.hr*, *Večernji.hr*, and *Dnevno.hr*. During the first year of Be Manly’s mobilization, these outlets published 72 articles relevant to the movement.

Through this analysis, the study illuminates the complex relationship between media coverage and conservative movements in contemporary Croatia. Despite the country's modernization efforts, the findings suggest that media framing continues to play a crucial role in shaping public discourse around social movements and traditional values.

Theoretical Background

Men’s Rights Activism: Ideological Foundations and Perspectives

MRA is a contemporary subcategory of men’s groups. In his analysis of US-based men’s groups, Kenneth Clatterbaugh (2018) identified eight distinct perspectives, including conservative, profeminist, men’s rights, mythopoetic, socialist, gay, African American, and evangelical. These groups conceptualize masculinity distinctly based on their sociocultural identities and lived experiences. For this research, I focus specifically on conservative, profeminist, mythopoetic, and evangelical groups, as these align most closely with contemporary MRA movements in Croatian cultural context.

Conservative advocates maintain that gender roles follow a natural binary between men and women, with hardline positions asserting immutable biological differences between sexes. The profeminist movement emerged in the 1970s as a counterpoint to these views (Clatterbaugh 2018, 10). Profeminists conceptualize masculinity as a social construct

maintained through systemic male privilege and women's oppression, while acknowledging that traditional masculine norms can negatively impact men themselves. Some profeminists, concerned for men's endangerment, created the men's rights perspective, concluding that traditional masculinity harms men more than women. However, Clatterbaugh (2018, 11) argues that since male privilege is the backbone of every feminist perspective, men's rights activists are indisputably antifeminist. Their platform reflects what scholars term "new sexism," focusing on perceived discrimination against men in specific domains: divorce proceedings, child custody decisions, domestic violence prosecution, and sexual harassment policies.

Like conservative groups, evangelists advocate for maintaining or returning to traditional gender hierarchies. They focus on family and church as places where men need to take charge once again. Their teaching lies in metaphor: "Men are to women as Jesus was to the Church" (Clatterbaugh 2018, 14). Mythopoetic groups encourage men to strive for a deeper understanding of masculinity through fraternalized, ritualized connections with other men. Emerging from Robert Bly's literary works, these groups posit that while feminism enabled women to reconnect with feminine identity, it simultaneously alienated men from authentic masculinity. Mythopoeists strive to get in touch with their masculinity, while underlyingly antagonizing femininity.

These US ideological frameworks have significantly influenced global discourse on masculinity, though their expression varies considerably across cultural contexts. They are reflected in contemporary movements by implying male dominance and positioning traditional male and female roles (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016).

The concept of "backlash" coined by Susan Faludi in 1991 provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding these movements' emergence and evolution. Dragiewicz (2011, 2) explains, while resistance to feminism has a long history, the strategic adoption of "men's rights" and "fathers' rights" terminology represents a relatively recent development. Consequently, these groups emerged from the tension between feminist efforts to involve men in parenting and antifeminist attempts to reinforce the patriarchal family, repackaging traditional father-rights ideas in both progressive and reactionary ways (Dragiewicz 2011, 13–14).

Current antifeminist mobilization happens on two levels: the political one, where elites, such as political and religious actors, oppose feminism through their right-wing populist discourse, and the civil-society one, where activists resist the progress of the feminist

movement (Eslén-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 213). This level is where MRA groups like “Be Manly” act.

Men’s rights activism is a “backlash movement characterizing a conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or reverse social change (Mottl 1980, as cited in Eslén-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214). It serves the interests of white, heterosexual men by promoting traditional, hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity, and the preservation of patriarchal gender roles. Jonathan A. Allan (2016, 25) characterizes MRA as fundamentally reactive and politically ineffective, noting its distinctive social dynamics. The movement attracts men seeking homosocial bonds while explicitly rejecting homosexuality, positioning feminism and women’s advancement as the primary source of masculine anxiety. Central to MRA discourse is what Allan (2016, 28) identifies as its core narrative: “something has gone horribly wrong, society has failed boys, and men are lacking.”

The movement’s rapid mainstreaming in the mid-2010s marks a crucial historical juncture (O’Donnell 2020), as it established a common rhetorical framework transcending national boundaries. This shared discourse enables the identification of diverse movements like “Be Manly” as part of the broader MRA phenomenon, despite their distinct cultural contexts. The integration of marginal antifeminist ideology into mainstream digital spaces has facilitated its migration from online forums to everyday discourse, both virtual and physical.

The Politics of Masculinity in Right-Wing Ideology

MRA can be considered a subcategory of radical right-wing¹ social movements due to their overlapping ideas and goals. It is framed as a counter movement, a typical approach for radical right-wing movements (Mottl 1980, as cited in Eslén-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214). As shown in Table 1, while MRA emerged specifically as a backlash against feminist progress, it shares key characteristics with broader right-wing movements, including populist rhetoric and an antagonistic view of feminism that frames feminist progress as dangerous and threatening to masculinity.

Empirically, MRA cannot be easily placed in political categories because they often combine “elements of left-wing and right-wing philosophy with populist language and rhetoric” (Caiani and Della Porta 2018, 485). However, their core focus on establishing

¹ The meaning of “radical” shifts with the goals of individual right-wing movements and public acceptance at the time. In the context of MRA as a social countermovement, Eslén-Ziya and Bjørnholt (2023, 214) note that these movements are also called “the new right,” “neo-conservatism,” and “radical right.” The lack of contemporary political science works that would clear boundaries between overlapping ideologies makes categorizing MRA difficult. However, labeling MRA as “radical right-wing” is necessary to distinguish it ideologically from moderate or center-right views.

traditional gender roles and preserving patriarchal values aligns closely with right-wing ideology, which emphasizes traditionally defined masculinity as dominant over femininity.

Radical right-wing research has so far focused on political parties rather than movements. Radical right-wing parties and movements share ethnonationalism rooted in myths about the past, ethnic homogeny, and a return to traditional values (Rydgren 2018, 23). Law, order, and family values lie at the heart of their ideology. During modernization, some people respond to pressures with rigidity and closed-mindedness. While these views are usually in the mainstream, rapid change can radicalize them, leading right-wing movements to propel political philosophies that promise simplified visions of a better society by romanticizing the past (Minkenberg 2018, 524).

Table 1: MRA as a Radically Right Movement

	Radical right-wing movements	Men's rights activism
Focus	Return to traditional values in all political, societal and economical questions	Establishing traditional gender roles, preserving patriarchal values
Strength	Depending on the topic, political strategy and prominence, can become influential or remain weak	Reactive and politically weak
Origin	Roots in ethnonationalism	Backlash against feminist progress
	They grow in response to societal changes	
Rhetoric	Populist	
View on feminism	Antagonistic, framing feminist progress as dangerous and threatening to masculinity	
View on masculinity	Traditionally defined, dominant over femininity	

Source: Author

Gender analysis is crucial for understanding extremist groups since right-wing discourse on male vulnerability is fueling new forms of patriarchy marked by nationalism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and misogyny (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 1). While exploring gender and the global right, Graff et al. (2019) claim that antagonizing feminism is central to right-wing ideology and political strategy. The global right is a wide spectrum of trends whose common denominator is global antifeminism (Graff et al. 2019, 541–42).

Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, warned in 1985 that feminism and its goal of complete gender equality were dangerous. Gergorić (2020, 154) argues that Ratzinger's book marks the beginning of the war against gender. Gender politics is becoming a key point on the right-wing radicals' agenda, while the antigender movement creates its own enemy by coining the term "gender ideology," inducing moral panic amongst the masses and limiting progress (Gergorić 2020, 154).

Antigender movements in Eastern and Southeastern Europe are based on three elements: the Christian doctrine about human nature, a pessimistic narrative describing the degenerated West, and conspiracy theories that frame health and human rights advocacy as a neo-Marxist globalist agenda (Gergorić 2020, 155). Through an alliance of religious institutions and right-wing political actors, activist networks and the Catholic Church have emerged as key opponents of gender reform, advocating instead for traditional gender hierarchies.

Conservative Movements in Croatia

In Communist Croatia, while gender equality held constitutional status, the ruling party's approach was contradictory: promoting equality to mobilize women while simultaneously endorsing traditionalism for social stability (Anić 2015). This historical ambivalence has influenced current gender and sexuality issues (Juroš et al. 2020).

During this period, two influential institutions took opposing yet equally limiting stances on women's rights: the Catholic Church viewed women's rights as a departure from family values, while the Communist Party dismissed feminism as a Western, liberal ideology. True feminist development in Croatia began in late socialism, tied to anti-nationalism and anti-church sentiments (Anić 2015). The 1990s War of Independence marked a turning point, as the Catholic Church gained political and social influence, through collective identity building and anti-communism (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017, 59). This historical moment established the Church as a central force in modern Croatian social movements, particularly in debates over gender equality, which conservative groups now frequently frame as battles against "gender ideology."

Petričušić et al. (2017, 67) pinpoint the onset of conservative mobilization in Croatia to 2006, when the "Voice of Parents for Children" (*Glas roditelja za djecu*, GROZD) launched opposition to sexual education curriculum, advocating for Catholic-rooted abstinence-based teaching. This marked the emergence of religious-political movements that strategically use religious symbols for political ends and espousing a far-right ideology. Such mobilization,

which originated in the United States and spread across Europe as a response to secularization, is guided by three core principles: the preservation of traditional families, the right to life, and religious liberty (Petričušić et al. 2017, 66–67). This pattern aligns with broader Balkan trends of rising pro-life associations (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 10).

Contemporary Croatian religious-political movements promote Catholic values, advocate for pro-life activism, oppose abortion, support marriage exclusively between a man and a woman, and reject the state's autonomy to dictate curricula on sensitive topics like contraception and gender roles (Petričušić et al. 2017, 67). Several factors facilitated these movements' rise in the late 2000s and early 2010s: distrust in mainstream politics and political institutions, economic decline, and widespread corruption (Petričušić et al. 2017, 75). Čepo (2017, 17) contextualizes this conservative surge in Croatia as a response to post-war societal liberalization and political modernization, particularly during European Union accession negotiations and periods of left-wing electoral success. The movements rely on right-wing radical parties and diaspora returnees, implicitly supported by the Catholic Church.

Initiative In the Name of the Family (*U ime obitelji*), led by Željka Markić, pushed for a referendum to constitutionally define marriage as between a man and a woman in 2013, opposing the Civil Partnership Act. Conservative parties and the Church backed the initiative, while the ruling left-wing coalition, liberal organizations, and most media opposed it (Petričušić et al. 2017, 69). The initiative prevailed with 66% support (Petričušić et al. 2017, 62). The Civil Partnership Act was still passed by the government, but this emboldened other conservatives and is still the greatest success a conservative movement achieved in Croatia.

This success helped establish a network of conservative organizations focused on marriage and traditional family values, including the Association for Promoting Family Values (*Udruga za promicanje obiteljskih vrijednosti 'Blaženi Alojzije Stepinac'*), Center for Natural Family Planning (*Centar za prirodno planiranje obitelji*), Family Enrichment (*Obiteljsko obogaćivanje*), Reform – Association for the Promotion of Ethics, Morality, Family Values, and Human Rights (*Reforma-udruga za promicanje etike, morala, obiteljskih vrijednosti i ljudskih prava*), and In the Name of the Family. In the educational sphere, the Association for Comprehensive Sex Education Teen Star (*Udruga za cjeloviti spolni odgoj Teen star*) focuses on youth programs, while the Center for the Renewal of Culture (*Centar za obnovu kulture*) works to develop future conservative leaders. Moreover, a significant number of organizations concentrate on anti-abortion activism, including Voice of Parents for Children (*Glas roditelja za djecu*), Vigilare, and Croatia for Life (*Hrvatska za život*). Many of these groups participate in

larger coalitions such as the Croatian Alliance for Life “CRO-VITA” (*Hrvatski savez za život “CRO-VITA”*) and I Was an Embryo Too (*I ja sam bio embrij*).

During Lent in 2014, members of 40 Days for Life (*40 dana za život*) prayed in front of hospitals that perform abortions, coordinated by the International Ecumenical Prayer Initiative for Unborn Life (*Međunarodna ekumenska molitvena inicijativa za nerođeni život*). The movement found new expression in the annual Walk for Life, initiated in 2016 under Željka Markić's leadership and held each May. Earlier attempts at formal political organization included Catholic NGOs' formation of a political party in 2010, which, though initially unsuccessful, later reorganized into a new, currently active party (Petričušić et al. 2017, 68).

Hodžić and Štulhofer (2017, 71) argue that Church-backed anti-gender mobilization in Croatia has flourished through a combination of factors: rising public religiosity, robust organizational networks, international connections, and effective rhetoric. This success highlights a fundamental tension in Croatian society: while the country maintains strong legal protections for gender equality, its social fabric remains deeply patriarchal (Anić 2015, 21).

Be Manly: A Traditionalist Response to Social Change

Be Manly is a part of a global movement in traditionally Catholic countries where secularization and liberal ideas are gaining strength. In June 2022, Be Manly and Croatia for Life initiated rosary prayers outside Zagreb Cathedral (muzevnibudite.com 2023). Their activities gained wider public attention after an October 2022 gathering at Ban Josip Jelačić Square, which evolved into a regular monthly event and has since expanded in both participation and geographic reach.

Men also gather in Dubrovnik, Karlovac, Osijek, Slavonski Brod, Split, Šibenik, Trogir, Vinkovci, Virovitica, and Zadar (muzevnibudite.com 2023). In Zagreb, they are led by the fraternity Knights of Mary's Immaculate Heart. They state that they pray for:

Homeland, peace, and Croatia's people's conversion; men—to become spiritual authorities in the family; premarital chastity; dressing and behavioral chastity; the restoration of Catholic marriages, ending abortions; holy, authentic, and uncompromising church pastors; new spiritual vocations; souls in purgatory and for personal purposes (muzevnibudite.com 2023).

While the movement has drawn counter-protesters, its organizers maintain they are neither anti-women nor politically motivated. They emphasize their spiritual focus and deny receiving external funding or having formal affiliations with Catholic or right-wing groups (muzevnibudite.com 2023).

Since 2022, public prayers have been happening in Australia, with many Croatian diaspora members participating (Kenny 2022), and Ireland (Burger 2022). One of Be Manly's leaders, Krunoslav Puškar, explicitly acknowledged these international influences, claiming that

[Our initiative] was instigated by many photos and videos we saw in recent years, first from Poland², then Australia, and other countries. We saw many men kneelingly praying for the conversion of their people and the whole world, and for a long time we had the incentive in our hearts to start something like that in Croatia. (Duhaček 2022)

While Be Manly claims an apolitical stance, their actions consistently align with MRA principles, as detailed in Table 2. Their approach fits Mottl's definition of a backlash movement (Eslén-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214), as they actively resist feminist and democratic progress in Croatia. They seek a homosocial community rooted in traditional beliefs (Allan 2016, 27), despite denying anti-women sentiment. Their complex relationship with women is evident in excluding women from organizational rituals and advocating for restrictions on women's dress and reproductive rights, while prominently featuring Virgin Mary imagery in their messaging. This paradoxical approach aligns with multiple characteristics identified in Table 2, including the preservation of patriarchal gender roles and traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity.

Be Manly embodies traits from Clatterbaugh's (2018) men's groups, encompassing the men's rights perspective outlined earlier. They engage in mythopoetic practices to explore masculinity and ritually bond with other men. Like evangelists, they emphasize family and religion as domains where men should lead, implying inherent male dominance and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016).

Their ideology aligns with radical right-wing currents emphasizing law, order, and family values (Rydgren 2018), while viewing liberalism and the left-wing as primary adversaries. Be Manly affirm this stance themselves, positioning liberal-left media as enemies (muzevnibudite.com 2023). They recognize the influence of media and social platforms, strategically avoiding certain outlets. To expand their reach, they utilize Instagram, Facebook, and their website to independently share news and ideas. As Betz (2018, 155) suggests, the radical right-wing capitalizes on societal insecurity or boundary-pushing moments. Amid

² The Polish case highlights the success of conservative movements, with public rosary prayers starting a year earlier than in Croatia (Golańska-Bault 2022). With attempts to ban abortion in 2016 and 2018, and the "Rosaries to the Boundaries" initiative in 2017 (Kotwas and Kubik 2019, 435), Poland has seen a decline in liberal democracy and independent institutions (Graff et al. 2019, 550). Grzebalska and Pető (2018, 167) note that viewing activism, gender equality, and minority rights as threats helps radical actors normalize extremist ideas in Poland.

modernization, some people react with rigidity, advocating for a better society through a romanticized vision of the nation (Minkenberg 2018, 254), particularly valuing Croatia's Catholic heritage.

Table 2: Be Manly as a MRA Movement

MRA influence	"Be Manly" characteristic
Mottl's MRA definition	Conscious, collective, organized attempt to reverse social change Traditional femininity and masculinity definitions Patriarchal gender roles preservation
Allan's MRA understanding	Longing for homosocial community Anxiety over feminism
Clatterbaugh's men's rights perspective	Viewing women's rights movements negatively influential on men
Clatterbaugh's mythopoeists	Seeking fraternalized, ritualistic connection with other men
Clatterbaugh's evangelists	Family and Catholic church are places where men should take charge
Radical right-wing movements	Law, order and family values Antagonizing liberal and leftist views Romanticized view of the nation

Source: Author

Media Reporting on Civil Movements

Media frame events through distinct perspectives shaped by varied interests and agendas (Gamson 1989, as cited in McCurdy 2012, 246). News coverage decisions are driven by key factors including geographic proximity, potential for conflict, and opportunities for sensationalism. Since media both shapes and reflects public discourse, understanding these inherent ideological biases is essential for critical media analysis.

Researchers studying media coverage of anti-Vietnam War protests identified the protest paradigm, where the media frequently portrayed protests negatively by focusing on violence, the unconventional appearance of protesters, or disregarding the protesters' goals (McCurdy 2012, 245). Simultaneously, media appearances themselves validate the issue at hand for debate and enhance the influence of protests (McCurdy 2012, 248).

Cultivation theory suggests that sustained media exposure, especially to television, produces a mainstreaming effect that diminishes attitudinal differences between diverse social groups (Morgan et al. 2015, 179). In media-political contexts, mainstreaming describes how media coverage patterns can elevate formerly peripheral ideas into mainstream discourse (Brown and Mondon 2021).

The convergence of radical right movements and evolving mainstream media has profound implications. Media conditions—technological change, market liberalization, audience competition, and infotainment content—create opportunities for populist messaging that radical movements exploit. Through agenda setting, media coverage amplifies radical right issues while raising fundamental questions about democratic tolerance of intolerant ideologies (Ellinas 2019, 390).

Media's agenda-setting and framing capabilities shape civil movements' coverage and mobilization strategies, with institutional response coverage either catalyzing or inhibiting further activism (Ellinas 2019, 393). At the party level, media coverage can destigmatize extremism and legitimize radical right-wing groups, though these groups often claim misrepresentation while critics argue coverage enables radicalism without accountability.

As a case in point, Brown and Mondon's (2021) analysis reveals three mainstreaming mechanisms. First, extensive coverage demonstrates agenda setting's power, with reporting deflecting accountability from elites to the white working class, perpetuating racial divisions. Second, euphemisation and trivialization normalize radical ideas by softening terminology and trivializing populism's significance. Third, amplification occurs through legitimizing coverage of figures like Steve Bannon, validating associated radical ideologies. Moreover, Mudde (2022, 104) argues that structural changes and crises (9/11, Great Recession, refugee crisis) have normalized far-right positions, allowing extreme ideologies to enter mainstream discourse as radical groups push further right.

These mainstreaming processes illuminate how media coverage of Be Manly could potentially normalize radical right messaging through similar mechanisms—extensive coverage that deflects deeper scrutiny, euphemistic framing that softens radical positions, and amplification that legitimizes extreme viewpoints under the guise of balanced reporting.

Research Design

Data Collection

The analysis examines articles from five major online news outlets: Index.hr, 24sata.hr, Jutarnji.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr. These outlets rank among Croatia's ten

most-read news sources (Peruško 2022, 71) and represent diverse ideological perspectives: Index and Jutarnji attract left-leaning readers, 24sata appeals to centrists, Večernji leans right, and Dnevno serves a predominantly right-wing audience (Peruško and Vozab 2021, 22).

The study covers June 2022 to June 2023, spanning from Be Manly's inaugural public prayer through its first year of activity. Data collection uses TakeLab Retriever, a specialized Croatian media search tool, using the terms "kneelers" and "prayers" which provided the most comprehensive results. While the software's ongoing development may affect complete article retrieval, it provided sufficient data for analysis. Manual filtering refined the dataset by excluding duplicates, reiterations, peripheral coverage, commentaries, and premium content, resulting in 72 articles across the outlets: 16 from Index.hr, 15 each from Jutarnji.hr and 24sata.hr, 19 from Večernji.hr, and seven from Dnevno.hr³.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), established by Norman Fairclough (1993, 5), examines how language evolves with society and reveals power dynamics and ideologies in discourse. Van Dijk (2011, 394) emphasizes that discursive strategies reflect group ideologies, though contextual limitations mean ideologies often appear abstract. The analysis thus focuses on attitudes, defined as "ideologically-based belief clusters about specific social issues" (Van Dijk 2011, 389).

Machin and Mayr (2012) provide essential analytical tools for examining how media language constructs meaning and influences audiences. Their framework examines verb usage in quotations, character descriptions (or their absence), sentence structure, passive voice, generalizations, and nominalizations that obscure circumstances. They also consider rhetorical devices and hedging techniques that shape audience perception.

This study applies Machin and Mayr's guidelines to analyse media coverage of Be Manly, examining descriptive language, participant naming conventions, temporal and spatial markers, verb choices, and topic emphasis patterns. While CDA faces criticism for its interpretive nature and limited scope, its focus on linguistic value reproduction makes it suitable for analysing how media discourse potentially mainstreams radical ideas. The methodology's adaptation from English to Croatian contexts requires using source examples as structural guidelines rather than direct equivalents.

³ The dataset for this study is available in Hanzek_Dataset.xlsx, containing all 72 articles analyzed. For each article, the dataset includes publication date, media outlet, URL, headline, article text, word count, presence of key terms (for example, "prayers," "kneelers"), identified mainstreaming mechanisms, and overall article stance toward the movement. This structured documentation enables transparent replication of the critical discourse analysis findings.

Analysis

Index.hr

Index addressed the Be Manly June event after it faced online backlash, using quotation marks around “catholic men” to question participants’ identity. In December, *Index* adopted the derogatory term “kneelers” and labeled the event a “controversial Catholic initiative.” By January, they began framing activists as “extreme Catholics” and focused on growing counter-protests. In March, they employed sarcastic language such as “kneeling on their little sponges” and “invoke God’s blessing.” While acknowledging the event’s normalization in April, *Index* continued to emphasize counter-protesters. In May, they highlighted verbal conflicts, depicting a prayer supporter as aggressive. In June, they criticized “kneelers” for “occupying” city squares, and published another article using the prayer as a backdrop for a citizen taking pictures nearby.

Jutarnji

During the early coverage, *Jutarnji* neutrally describes participants as “groups of men” praying at the square. Their December coverage contrasted the prayers with the counter-protest Silent Mass in an atmospheric report. The outlet’s focus shifted in February toward the anti-prayer gathering, juxtaposing the “two sides of the square.” Throughout March and April, *Jutarnji* characterized the event as a “repeated gathering,” focusing on counter-protests and maintaining distance from MRA’s statements. The outlet adopted the term “kneelers” by May and began describing the event as customary, while maintaining its emphasis on counter-protests. In June, stated that the prayers had “occupied” the Square, continuing its focus on ongoing counter-protests.

24sata

In December, *24sata* reported that the “prayers” were relocated within the square due to the Christmas fair,” and separately covered covered the “anti-kneeling.” In February, they reported several hundred prayers and opponents, including around 50 women supporting the men’s prayer. The outlet relied on unnamed sources and gave prominent coverage to the MRA’s messages. In March, *24sata* described “prayers kneeling again” as a tradition, emphasizing patriotic goals over anti-women-centered ones. The April coverage noted police presence for safety, characterized counter-protesters as “distracting”, and documented messages MRA posted on social media. During May and June, *24sata* presented the event as “regular” and “traditional,” covering protests across multiple cities.

Večernji

In November, *Večernji* reported men “kneeled and prayed again” with women “standing aside,” categorizing Be Manly as a “project.” Their coverage before the third prayer focused on Veseljko Kralj’s SMS invites that resulted in his number being shut down. They estimated 300-350 men and 50 women attended, noting “slight turbulence” from a counter-protest. The January coverage highlighted the organizers’ distancing from Ustaša features and included their Facebook post, while another article focused on a dog present at the event. February’s report emphasized police security and briefly mentioned counter-protests. In April, *Večernji*’s survey showed “mostly negative” attitudes towards the prayers, though they noted growing support from the Church and participants, and highlighted the prayers’ persistence despite distractions. Their May and June coverage described the prayer as routine, noted growing female support, provided negative portrayals of counter-protesters, and announced July’s prayer.

Dnevno

Dnevno covered the June 2022 prayer at Zagreb Cathedral, reporting on the start of public prayers with hundreds participating and connecting the event to global context. In November, *Dnevno* reported on the “powerful sights” of men praying in Zagreb, publishing full texts from Be Manly and presenting their goals as “conversion” and “opposition to fornication.” They interviewed organizer dr.sc. Krunoslav Puškar. They labeled counter-protesters as “competition” in December. In March, *Dnevno* covered both prayers and counter-protesters, emphasizing the organizers’ distancing from “unwanted features.” Their April article contrasted Silent Mass with Be Manly, noting about 300 men in Zagreb. In May, *Dnevno* reported on “first disorders,” describing “sudden chaos” and suggesting deep societal divisions in Croatia over gender roles and women’s rights.

Results and Discussion

Croatian Online Media Attitudes toward MRA

Index systematically labels prayer participants connected to the Be Manly group as “kneelers,” a term gaining significance solely within this context. Despite its literal meaning of kneeling, in this context and form, it carries a negative connotation, reflecting *Index*’s disapproval of the MRA movement. This is evident in their descriptions of Be Manly as a “controversial Catholic organization” or “fanatic Catholics,” indicating *Index*’s estrangement from the group.

Index employs religious terms like “apparition” ironically to mock participants, while their mention of “little sponges” to kneel on implies disdain for the activists. Their

reference to MRA's prayers as "as they call them, intentions" suggests skepticism and disagreement. *Index* connects an anti-Istanbul Convention protester with the men's rights movement ideologically, writing "of course" he is here too. The outlet portrays a female supporter with negative, emotional language during a quarrel.

Index minimizes coverage of how present female supporters and the police actually were. Their limited presence is only noticeable in comparison to other media that emphasize their involvement. The outlet also avoids describing the size of the protests. The use of negative descriptions and sparse or ironic listing of the movement's goals aligns with the protest paradigm, demonstrating *Index*'s overall negative portrayal of Be Manly.

During the latter months, both *Index* and *Jutarnji* began using military language like "occupying" or "taking over" to describe activists in public squares. However, *Jutarnji* uses neutral terms such as "groups of men," "praying," "Catholic," or "kneeling men," maintaining a mild and neutral tone towards the activists.

Jutarnji's coverage increasingly centers on counter-protests, regularly publishing their complete press releases. This editorial choice to amplify opposition voices signals disapproval of the men's rights movement, though *Jutarnji* avoids direct criticism or ironic commentary.

24sata mostly refers to activists as "prayers" and uses neutral verbs to describe their activities, also indicating neutrality. The single exception is an article about protests in Split that uses the term "occupy." Overall, the outlet portrays the movement sympathetically by characterizing counter-protesters as disruptive to peaceful prayer gatherings. *24sata* also regularly republishes content from Be Manly's Facebook page.

From its initial coverage, *24sata* works to soften the movement's image by consistently highlighting the presence of "wives and mothers," reporting approximately 50 women at events, and emphasizing police maintaining order. However, the outlet's practice of attributing quotes to unnamed groups of women and men, rather than specific individuals, raises questions about journalistic rigor. While *24sata* appears to view the movement favorably, its support is more restrained compared to other media outlets.

Večernji's coverage frames the movement through religious terms, labeling participants as "prayers" and describing Be Manly as a "project" to emphasize its peaceful nature. The outlet elevates the religious legitimacy of the movement by highlighting Priest Božidar Nagy's blessing of participants. In contrast, counter-protesters are characterized as disruptive and confrontational. When describing interactions between the groups, *Večernji*'s

language choices heighten tension. Notably, the term “protesters” is exclusively applied to those opposing the movement, never to the movement's participants themselves.

Following patterns similar to *24sata*, *Večernji* emphasizes both women’s involvement and police presence—using female supporters to moderate the movement’s image and police presence to underscore public safety. After conducting their own survey revealing public opposition to the movement, *Večernji* suggested potential Church support for the group. The outlet regularly amplifies Be Manly’s message by sharing their Facebook posts. Despite the organization’s stated policy against media engagement, *Večernji* notably secured an interview with a member involved in the so-called “SMS incident.”

Večernji’s coverage of MRA movement breaks from traditional protest paradigm reporting by legitimizing and moderating the group’s goals and actions. This supportive stance stands in direct contrast to their coverage of counter-protests, which exhibits typical protest paradigm elements emphasizing negativity and social disruption. The outlet further demonstrates its favorable position by publishing the movement's prayer announcements alongside news reports.

Dnevno is another outlet that uses neutral terminology in their coverage, referring to activists as “men,” “Be Manly” as a “project,” and protest prayers as “prayer events.” The outlet’s emotional investment becomes apparent in their October 2022 coverage, marked by the enthusiastic declaration “it started.” They attempt to build credibility for the movement by emphasizing one organizer’s academic credentials (“dr.sc.”), though they fail to establish the relevance of this academic title to the subject matter.

In their framing of events, *Dnevno* creates explicit opposition through headlines like “Silent Mass vs. Be Manly,” consistently distinguishing between “prayers” and “protesters.” The outlet portrays counter-protesters negatively, characterizing them as “competition” intent on disrupting “prayer plans,” while suggesting potential for violence. Most notably, *Dnevno* published an article describing “chaos” at an event they did not attend, relying on unnamed sources for their account.

Unlike *24sata* and *Večernji*, which portrayed female supporters in close proximity to the praying men, *Dnevno* specifically noted that women were separated from male participants by a fence. Like other outlets, *Dnevno* regularly shares Be Manly’s Facebook content. However, their coverage demonstrates an even more favorable stance toward the men’s rights movement than *24sata* and *Večernji*, actively promoting and legitimizing the group’s objectives through their prayer coverage. This approach represents a complete departure from traditional protest paradigm reporting. As the summary in Table 3

demonstrates, the five Croatian media outlets showed a spectrum of attitudes toward the MRA movement, ranging from *Index*'s negative coverage marked by irony and protest paradigm elements, through *Jutarnji*'s moderate criticism and *24sata*'s balanced reporting, to *Večernji*'s supportive stance and *Dnevno*'s overtly positive portrayal emphasizing religious legitimacy and activist goals.

Table 3: Croatian Online Media Attitudes about MRA

Media	Event and actions description	Participants description	Emphasized	Avoided/missing	Attitude
<i>Index</i>	Increasingly tumultuous praying Men appeared Sponges they kneel on They take over and occupy the squares	Kneelers Controversial catholic organization Extreme Catholics	Protesters aggression	Women supporters Number of activists Size of the protest	Negative - irony in reporting, vague goal listings, reporting in line with the protest paradigm
<i>Jutarnji</i>	They take over and occupy the squares Two sides of the square (protesters and counter-protesters)	Groups of men Prayers Catholic men Men that kneel/pray	Counter-protesters and their actions, press releases from the counter-protest organizers	Size of the protest	Moderately negative - mostly neutral reports on the activists, while putting the focus on counter-protesters
<i>24sata</i>	They kneel/pray They took over the square Dedicate Saturday to kneeling Heated debate	Prayers Men that kneel	50ish wives and mothers Direct embedding of activists' Facebook posts	Source on the relationship between women supporters and men Cite sources (group citation sources)	Moderately positive - great importance is given to activist goals
<i>Večernji</i>	Slight turbulence (in ref. counter-protest) The prayer and the protest Protesters disturb prayers	Prayers Prayer gathering Catholic organization Project Male rosary	300 men; 50 women, wives and mothers Police Organizer interviews Church speculation Facebook posts	Data source Source on the relationship between women supporters and men Avoiding using the term protest for prayers	Positive - publishing event announcements, interviewing organizers, reporting in line with the protest paradigm when talking about the counter-protesters
<i>Dnevno</i>	It started Mighty sights Competition (in ref. counter-protest) Silent Mass vs. Be Manly	Men Their supporters Project Prayer event Dr.sc. K. Puškar Postulator B. Nagy	Women outside the fence Hundreds of men (300) Similar sights from other countries First disturbances, worldviews clash	Data sources Several sources told them about the conflict - who?	Extremely positive - prayers were seemingly anticipated, activist goals are greatly important and framed as admirable

Source: Author

Mainstreaming Mechanisms in MRA Reporting

All media outlets contributed to mainstreaming Be Manly's ideas, though to varying degrees. The movement's prayer protests, occurring on the first Saturday of each month, became a regular media focus with coverage before, during, and after each event. The primary mainstreaming mechanisms included specific writing patterns, adverbial markers indicating protest time and location, agenda-setting of MRA topics, and protest trivialization.

The protests' temporal and spatial framing emerged as a key mainstreaming strategy. The June 2022 public prayer received coverage from only two outlets: *Index*, responding to social media criticism, and *Dnevno*, which suggested anticipated continuation with the phrase "it started." However, by June 2023, media outlets consistently highlighted the event's recurring. *Index* described how "kneelers occupy Croatian squares every first Saturday," while *Jutarnji* described each first Saturday as "traditionally reserved for prayers." *24sata* referred to the "kneeling practice" as "already traditional," and *Večernji* noted men had been praying "every first Saturday at Ban Jelačić Square." *Dnevno* used a similar approach, mentioning that "as before, many men gathered on the first Saturday on Zagreb's main square" in May. These standardized expressions in coverage of MRA movement signal its normalization and firmly linking Be Manly to first Saturdays and prominent locations like Ban Jelačić Square. The extent of this normalization was evident as *Jutarnji*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno* began publishing advance announcements of the prayers.

The second mainstreaming mechanism was agenda-setting through selective topic emphasis. Three outlets—*24sata*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno*—employed this strategy by highlighting activists and amplifying their messages. These outlets regularly published complete texts from Be Manly's social media and website, potentially increasing the movement's visibility and accessibility to a broader audience. Beyond integrating social media posts directly into articles, they also quoted protesters despite the group's stated policy against media engagement.

Večernji and *Dnevno* further amplified the movement's message by featuring organizers in their coverage. Key examples included reporting on the "SMS scandal" and conveying activists' statements distancing themselves from Ustaša symbols. *Večernji's* coverage additionally emphasized growing participation, female support, and the church's silence—even after their own survey revealed public opposition to the prayers.

In contrast, *Jutarnji's* coverage centers on counter-protesters and their messaging, while *Index* employs the protest paradigm to portray the men's rights movement negatively.

Index uses descriptors like “extreme,” “controversial,” and “fanatic,” alongside the term “kneelers” to emphasize the movement’s perceived oddity. The outlet also minimizes coverage of the movement’s goals while emphasizing negative aspects.

The third mainstreaming mechanism—trivialization—appears in both *Index* and *Večernji*’s coverage. *Index* consistently diminishes the significance of activist goals through implicit trivialization. Their articles follow the protest paradigm pattern, using phrases like “pray, for, as they call them, intentions” to subtly mock these objectives. This trivialization became more overt in June, when an article gave equal weight to a passerby taking photos in the prayer area. *Večernji* engaged in similar trivialization with a January article about a dog “joining” the event. Such trivialization strategies can significantly impact how seriously readers perceive the movement, particularly given the gravity of the events being covered.

As shown in Table 4, these mainstreaming mechanisms aligned with each outlet’s overall stance toward the movement, summarized in Table 3. *Index*, which demonstrated the most negative attitude, used temporal markers while emphasizing opposition and employing trivialization. *Jutarnji* maintained its moderate criticism through balanced temporal coverage and counter-protest focus. The more supportive outlets—*24sata*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno*—used temporal markers while amplifying the movement’s message through extensive coverage of their social media content and organizer perspectives, though *Večernji* occasionally engaged in trivialization despite its generally positive stance.

Table 4: Mainstreaming Mechanisms in MRA Reporting

Media	Time and space markers	Agenda setting and attention diverting	Trivialization
Index	Kneelers take over city squares each first Saturday of the month in Croatia	NA	Banalizing activist goals Protest paradigm reports Giving the same value to the protest and a passerby
Intarnii	The first Saturday of the month is traditionally reserved for prayers	NA	NA
24sata	Kneeling practice is already traditional and regular	“Be Manly” social media and web posts	NA
Vecernii	The first Saturday of the month is approaching, and by now it is well known that it is the day on which men gather in the early hours of the morning in the centers of a dozen Croatian cities to pray	“Be Manly” social media and web posts Emphasize on activist messages The survey report	Dog joining the protest - attempting to make the protest look less serious
Dnevno	As before, on the first Saturday of the month, more men gathered in the main square in Zagreb to pray for their goals	“Be Manly” social media and web posts Emphasize on activist messages	NA

Source: Author

Conclusion

The Be Manly movement represents a distinctive shift in Croatian conservative activism, focusing specifically on men's issues while advocating for male authority in religious and family spheres. The movement simultaneously seeks to restrict women's autonomy in areas such as personal dress and reproductive rights. Aligning with broader MRA, Be Manly emerged as a counterforce to feminist advances, promoting traditional patriarchal values (Elsen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214).

The movement strategically leverages Croatia's strong Catholic identity through public prayer events, effectively engaging the country's Catholic majority and attracting media coverage. Given right-wing populists' success in advancing radical ideologies in other regions, the emergence of Croatian MRA warrants careful attention.

This study therefore examines how Croatian media discourse surrounding Be Manly reflects radical right-wing ideologies and evaluates whether media coverage has contributed to normalizing these perspectives in mainstream discourse. CDA of 72 articles from five online media outlets reveals distinct editorial approaches to Be Manly coverage (Table 3). In reporting on MRA, Croatian online media contributed to the mainstreaming of radical ideas through three mechanisms: time and space markers, agenda setting and attention diversion, and trivialization (Table 4).

MRA's persistence, evolving forms, and rapid spread through online communities indicate its enduring relevance. The Be Manly case has introduced MRA discourse into Croatian public debate, with sympathetic media outlets particularly quick to normalize it as part of everyday life. They brought their readers into direct contact with the source of radical ideas. This normalization is problematic because the activists conflate general peace prayers with anti-abortion advocacy (muzevnibudite.com, 2023). Given similar causes promoted by other Croatian conservative groups (Petričušić et al. 2017), this mainstreaming raises concerns about the potential acceptance of increasingly radical ideas.

The media's editorial choices appear largely intentional, reflecting a broader tendency toward mainstreaming radical ideas. While all media exhibited some level of mainstreaming, exceptions should be highlighted. Notably, *Jutarnji* reduced Be Manly coverage in favor of highlighting counter-protests. Such an approach can effectively counter the MRA agenda by focusing attention on those affected by the movement rather than amplifying its message. However, other potential counter-approaches—such as critical analysis, expert perspectives, avoiding trivialization, or explicitly identifying the movement's nature—remained unused. Though news coverage serves an important function, outlets could have minimized event announcements to avoid contributing to normalization.

Media outlets are not solely responsible for legitimizing radical ideas. Discourses both reflect and shape social reality, creating a circular relationship between societal norms and media representation. The examined outlets' widespread participation in mainstreaming radical ideas, with minimal resistance, suggests an existing predisposition within Croatian society to accept MRA ideology into mainstream discourse. This underscores the importance of continuously scrutinizing media practices, as they hold the power to either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies.

The potential broader socio-political impact of Be Manly warrants serious consideration. Croatia's 2013 marriage referendum demonstrated how regressive initiatives can successfully influence policy-making, resulting in the implementation of restrictive

legislation. In this case, a conservative campaign led to a constitutional amendment defining marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman, effectively banning same-sex marriage. Similar outcomes from Be Manly's activism remain a distinct possibility.

The movement poses a significant challenge to social progress and threatens gender equality achievements. The mainstreaming of their ideology risks not only undermining existing advances but also impeding future progress. While Be Manly currently lacks overt political power and maintains no public party affiliations, the consistent strength of conservative political forces in Croatia suggests this dynamic requires vigilant monitoring.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The sample size and article selection, while informative, cannot be considered fully representative of Croatian media coverage. Despite efforts to provide accurate translations, the analysis of Croatian-language articles may not fully capture linguistic nuances, cultural references, and contextual subtleties. Additionally, CDA as a methodology presents inherent challenges, offering broad interpretative possibilities where researcher bias may influence analysis. While the focus on Croatian media provides valuable context, these findings cannot be generalized to MRA movements in other countries. Rather, this research should serve as a model for country-specific studies or broader cross-cultural comparative analyses.

This study highlights several promising directions for future research on MRA movements. The phenomenon of public prayers as a form of conservative mobilization remains understudied globally, offering numerous avenues for investigation. Future media research could expand both temporally and across a wider range of outlets. Audience research presents another crucial direction, particularly examining how different ideologically-aligned audiences respond to MRA coverage and messaging. The correlation between media representation and audience attitudes warrants specific attention. Beyond media analysis, future research should explore the social and sociological dimensions of the movement, including participants' experiences and motivations. This broader scope of investigation would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary MRA movements and their societal impact.

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