Dear readers,

Backsliding from and within internationally recognised norms as well as the organised public backlash against sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as human rights of LGBTIQ* persons is currently a problem across large parts of Europe.

On 30 March 2021, members of the Polish Parliament passed a bill to parliamentary committees that could see Poland withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and draft a new Convention of the Rights of the Family. The name of the proposed Polish law “Yes to Family – no to Gender” reflects well the central tenets of a transnationally organised anti-gender movement in Europe: The Istanbul Convention – an internationally legally binding instrument of the Council of Europe aiming to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence – is taken as an incentive to mobilise against “gender ideology”. “Yes to Family” refers to the traditional or “natural” image of family in which “women/mothers” and “men/fathers” are the two sole reference points in terms of gender. A range of issues follows from this: The arguments of allegedly endangered wellbeing of the child, of the dissolution of the traditional understanding of the family and of the idea of a “natural” order. “No to Gender” is the unifying factor, rejecting the idea of socially constructed gender roles and uniting the various actors and their different lines of argument against the bogeyman of “gender ideology”.

In this newsletter, we pose the question “No to what exactly?” and provide an introduction to the emergence, main lines of argumentation, and actors of the transnational anti-gender movement in Europe. To do so, we also take a look at the specific case of the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, the newsletter provides insights into three focal topics: transnational financing structures of the anti-gender movement, increasing anti-trans attacks and corresponding counterstrategies, as well as gender-based cyber violence.

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1 LGBTIQ* is an abbreviation for the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans *, inter* and queer and thus an abbreviation for sexual orientations and gender identities. We are using “LGBTIQ*” in this newsletter, any deviating spellings are taken over from the original texts and are used in a context-specific way.

2 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).
Introduction: The transnational anti-gender movement in Europe

Marie Wittenius (with contributions from Katrin Lange)

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Right-wing populist and anti-feminist movements mobilising against gender equality as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have gained strength across Europe in recent years. This strengthening also brings to light an increasing-ly transnationally organised and financed independent anti-gender movement that attacks the rights of women and LGBTIQ* persons as well as civil society. This is evident not only at the national (and local) but also at the European level, where alliances are organising transnationally in attempting to undermine the foundations of the European Union and to reverse already existing consensus on European level. The anti-gender movement attacks the basis of human rights in various ways, always united under the common bogeyman concept of a so-called “gender ideology”.

This contribution provides an introduction to the term “gender ideology” and to the emergence as well as central lines of argumentation of the anti-gender movement. Furthermore, the ambivalent relationship of this movement towards the European Union is discussed. The example of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) is used to illustrate how the strengthening of the movement can currently be observed in concrete terms.

“Gender ideology” as projection screen for a common enemy

Gender essentially refers to social gender relations, i.e. the ideas, expectations and norms directed at people within a society. These gender relations are not predetermined by nature, but by society. They include, for instance, assumptions about how women and men should behave according to their gender. Depending on the historical period and different societies, these assumptions may vary and change over time. Gender relations are therefore not unalterable but can in fact be changed and shaped.

There is enormous diversity among the actors of the anti-gender movement in terms of their motivations, their respective lines of argumentation as well as their degree of institutionalisation. Despite national, historical and social differences in the development and shaping of these movements in Europe, there is evidence of a strong transnational strategic and financial networking against a common enemy: “gender ideology”. To summarise the opposition against the concept of “gender”, several terms like anti-genderism, War against Gender, or anti-gender movement are being used. Despite these differences in terminology, there is consensus in the literature that we are dealing with a transnational phenomenon that uses national and local narratives but remains consistent across borders.

3 The right to sexual and reproductive health and rights is enshrined in international and European human rights law. States are obliged to provide access to affordable and high-quality health care and services. These include, for instance, comprehensive sexual education and information, effective and modern contraceptive methods, legal and safe abortions, as well as maternal health care. Find more information from the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe here.


The fight against “gender ideology” serves as a common denominator and projection screen for different political objectives within the movement. Thus, the term functions as a broad projection area for racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and transphobia, ethno-nationalist ideas as well as hostility towards elites. The common enemy unites a multitude of different actors such as right-wing groups, right populist parties, Christian fundamentalist organisations, but also bourgeois conservatives or neoliberal circles.6

The organised opposition to the promotion of gender equality policy as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights – and also the term “gender ideology” itself – is not a new phenomenon in European societies. The discourse has been led since the 1990s by conservative actors, the Catholic Church and right-wing populist parties. However, a political mobilisation of broader parts of society occurred only later.7 The term “gender ideology” in particular found strong resonance in the far-right scene and would not have become as well-known without its inclusion in right-wing populist narratives.8 A new development in the past ten years has been the transnational unification and organised alliance-building between different subgroups of this opposition – all under the narrative of fighting “gender ideology”.9

The first explicit anti-gender campaigns emerged in the mid-2000s in European countries such as Spain, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia. These were directed, for example, against the introduction of same-sex marriage or against sexual education in schools. With more than 120,000 participants, the mass protests of the “Manif pour Tous” movement against a law introducing same-sex marriage in France in 2012 marked a peak of mobilisation and a level of visibility that was unprecedented at that time.10 This momentum is seen in the literature as an incisive turning point and as the beginning of a stronger spread of similar movements in Europe, for instance in countries like Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Slovakia. There followed a surge of movements which took at times current political debates and concrete legislative proposals as an occasion for action, or acted pre-emptively to forestall feared policy changes at other times. Attacks are particularly directed against the rights of LGBTQ+ persons, reproductive rights and medicine, as well as against sexual education and gender equality.11 Progress in these areas is reframed as “propagating homosexuality” or “abolishing the family”.12

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6 Henninger et al. (2021): Einleitung: Mobilisierungen gegen Feminismus und „Gender“. Erscheinungsformen, Erklärungsansätze und Gegenstrategien. Gender: Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft, (Special edition 6), pp 10 ff. For a closer look on this, see Actors and Discourses.
12 See the section on Central lines of argument.
The ambivalent relationship of the anti-gender movement towards the European Union

Despite limited powers in the field of social rights and equality, the European Union influences national policies via ‘soft’ mechanisms – for instance, through common minimum standard setting or strategic direction as provided in the Gender Equality Strategy and the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy. Furthermore, the European Union helps shape national legislation through a strong framework of anti-discrimination directives, including on equal treatment in the labour market, and by means of the European Court of Justice’s case law.

On the one hand, the European Union (often rather abstractly: “Brussels”) as well as other international organisations are seen as a “corrupt elite” that undermines nation states and their national sovereignty and values. As an example: At a large demonstration against sexual education and information in Warsaw in 2015, some protest signs read that gender was “Ebola from Brussels”. The image of colonialist oppression by the European Union, and thus the EU as a source of the evil, is deliberately conveyed.

On the other hand, transnational networking of the actors – up to their representation in the European Parliament – is an important component of the movement. With the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, the proportion of members of the European Parliament who oppose gender equality, women’s sexual and reproductive rights, sexual education, same-sex marriage, and the Istanbul Convention on Combating All Forms of Violence against Women doubled to an estimated 30 per cent. The strengthening and growing representation of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament, but also in the European Council or the Council of the European Union, is leading to their increased influence in gender equality policy debates, for instance when it comes to blocking the term or concept of “gender” in official documents.

Central lines of argument: Glorifying “natural” gender roles and a traditional family image as well as protection of children’s well-being

In addition to the rejection of the concept of “gender”, the anti-gender movement has the following core themes across transnational borders, which can also be used to highlight their major lines of argumentation:

- **Same sex marriage**: This issue often triggers protests and usually goes hand in hand with discussions about adoption rights for same-sex couples, surrogacy, reproductive medicine and access to it for both, individuals and same-sex couples. The rights of LGBTQ+ persons are often at the forefront of attacks by the anti-gender movement.

18 Definition see section “Gender ideology” as a projection screen for a common enemy.
as a gateway for political reforms that specifically aim to abolish the “traditional”, “natural” role of mother and father and, in general, the binary gender concept of women and men as the sole two sexes. The resulting sexual diversity is thus considered an “abolition of the family” (meaning the heteronormative nuclear family).

- **Reproductive rights:** Historically, this is the issue that sparked the movement’s emergence in the 1990s. Abortion, contraception and access to reproductive medicine continue to be central topics to the movement. Abortion is seen as a “culture of death” and is particularly strongly opposed by the Catholic Church and other religious organisations.

- **Sexual education and information in schools:** The teaching of subjects such as gender equality and homosexuality is particularly strongly attacked. The anti-gender movement uses the image of the innocent child who is permanently damaged in his or her development, among other things by the blurring of “natural facts” such as the existence of only two genders/sexes. This confrontation with “excessive” sex education and the promotion of “sexual promiscuity” would allegedly lead to a “hypersexualisation” of children at a young age.

- **Democratic rights:** In this context, “gender ideology” is presented as a political project. Often, “corrupt elites” are highlighted, allegedly aiming to enforce “gender ideology” as a new form of totalitarianism against the will of the public/the people. In some cases, “gender ideology” is also presented as a new leftist ideology based on communism, or as a neo-colonialist Western project. In any case, the anti-gender movement presents itself as a defender of democracy against “gender ideology” as a new undemocratic political system. The right to religious freedom is also often mentioned since the political project of “gender ideology” allegedly forces Christian people in particular to act against their own conscience.19

These lines of argumentation are all reliant on mobilising emotions such as fear or anger. “Gender ideology” is presented as a threat to a particular order (e.g. gender roles, family) and the perceived consequences (e.g. endangering the welfare of the child, restricting (religious) freedom) are used to fuel fear and anger towards political correctness, “the elite” or politics in general.20

The focus on “traditional” families, the “natural” (i.e. binary) understanding of gender as well as the linking of these issues with the protection of children from the alleged “propagation of homosexuality” or the “abolition of the family” are the classic lines of argument of the anti-gender movement. However, in addition to religious and conservative patterns of argumentation, the anti-gender movement now often appropriates and reinterprets scientific or human rights approaches. One pattern is the narrative that there are competing legal norms: For instance, the argument that international law protects the right to life before birth is being used as a justification for banning abortion.21

In addition to the Church and conservative actors who may come across as “outdated”, a number of new civil society initiatives have been founded that present themselves

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**Disputes around the term “gender” in official documents**

Polish and Hungarian representatives in particular are waging a struggle in Brussels over the use of the term “gender equality”. Both countries are referring to the wording “equality between women and men” in the Treaty on European Union. Equality between women and men was introduced as early as 1957 with the Treaty of Rome as a fundamental principle of the European Union, based on the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. By omitting the addition “between women and men” and instead using the more current and inclusive wording “gender equality”, opponents of the term see their fears of “gender ideology” confirmed: The perceived dissolution of the two “natural” sexes, i.e. man and woman.1 A concrete example is the Porto Declaration on Social Affairs, adopted by the European Council on 8 May 2021. Several media reported in advance that Poland and Hungary blocked the wording “promote gender equality” in section 10 of this declaration and additionally lobbied for the reference to Principle 2 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which requires that “equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas”. The final version now avoids the term “gender” and includes the wording to “promote equality [...] for every individual in our society”.2

1 EU’s foreign policy gender plan faces resistance from Poland and Hungary (25.11.2020); c.f. also Kováts (2019): Neuen Mut statt neue Tabus – Dilemmata der Genderpolitik in der EU überwinden, Gunda Werner Institut, Heinrich Böll Stiftung (online).
2 EURACTIV: Poland, Hungary block ‘gender equality’ from EU social summit (08.05.2021).

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*[Image of a protest sign that reads: “We demand assisted reproduction for all” LGBT protest in Reims, 2021]*
An example of the anti-gender movement’s surge in Europe: The ‘War on Gender’ against the Istanbul Convention

One example that illustrates well how the anti-gender movement is currently acting against human rights of LGBTIQ* persons and women on different levels (national, European, institutional) and with different narratives (see specific examples from the countries below) is the Istanbul Convention.

The Istanbul Convention was signed in Istanbul in 2011 and entered into force in 2014. It is to date the most far-reaching internationally legally binding instrument to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention is based on a comprehensive and broad concept of violence, which basically encompasses all forms of violence. According to the Convention, violence against women and domestic violence constitute human rights violations. Such violence is an expression of a historically grown unequal power relationship between men and women and is to be seen as a consequence of structural discrimination. In this context, the Convention defines the term “gender” – which was controversially discussed during the drafting of the Convention – as socially shaped roles, behaviours, activities, and characteristics that a particular society considers appropriate for women and men. In this sense, the agreement obliges the signatory parties to eliminate prejudices, customs, and traditions, etc. that are based on the idea of inferiority of women or on specific roles assigned to women and men.

Meanwhile, the rights of LGBTIQ* persons are still not sufficiently recognised in international and national law. Also within the Istanbul Convention, there is no structural recognition of these rights. However, in implementing the Istanbul Convention – and in particular in measures to protect the rights of victims – the signatory parties are obliged not to discriminate against persons affected by violence on the basis of, inter alia, their sexual orientation or gender identity. In this regard, the Council of Europe affirms that lesbian, bisexual and trans* women have access to protection measures in their right to live a life free from violence. With regard to domestic violence, gay men may also be included in the victim protection group.

Accession of the European Union to the Istanbul Convention

Although the Istanbul Convention was signed on behalf of the European Union on 13 June 2017, it has not yet been ratified as no Council decision to that effect has been taken. The Council has so far made the adoption of such a decision subject to the unanimity of the member states. The Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) issued an opinion on the Istanbul Convention on 6 October, which clarifies that the European Union can accede to the Istanbul Convention without unanimity in the Council. According to the ECJ, the Convention covers both areas of competence of the EU and of the member states, which is why it should be signed by the EU and the individual member states. More specifically, the opinion argues that the Council does not need a unanimous decision by all the member states when adopting a decision on the conclusion of the Convention, since the qualified majority voting procedure already laid down in the Treaties (Article 218 TFEU) cannot be extended to include a new upstream step of unanimity.

24 Istanbul Convention article 4, section 3.
Controversies over the Istanbul Convention’s underlying concepts of gender as a social construct and violence as a comprehensive structural phenomenon have in recent years led to an increasingly strong politicisation of the issue by a transnationally organising anti-gender movement. The Istanbul Convention is demonised as a Trojan horse through which the Council of Europe wants to “sneak in” same-sex marriage and more rights for LGBTIQ* persons. It is argued that the “gender ideology” is a concept imposed from “outside” or “above”, a concept which allegedly devalues prevailing traditional values and ideas within the respective country and threatens, among others, the “natural order of the sexes”. In addition, a lack of demarcation between men and women would only put women at an even greater disadvantage, one argument goes. The anti-gender movement thus does not focus on violence against women, i.e. the core issue of the Convention, but constructs joining the Convention as a “gateway” for the decay of traditional values and guiding principles by the “gender ideology”.26

The anti-gender movement has been increasingly successful with this politicisation of the issue of violence against women, which has ultimately led to observable backsliding tendencies in several countries:

- **Bulgaria** signed the Convention in 2016. In 2018, however, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional. In an eight-to-four ruling, the court declared that the Convention’s use of gender as a social construct violated the Bulgarian Constitution as the latter establishes a binary understanding of gender – male and female.27

- **Poland** has ratified the Convention already in 2015. However, a legislative initiative to withdraw this ratification is currently underway in parliament. On 30 March 2021, the corresponding bill “Yes to Family, No to Gender” was passed by the Polish parliament to the parliamentary committees for further drafting work. The Polish government itself argues that the Istanbul Convention does not respect religion and promotes “gender ideology”. There are concerns that the Convention might be replaced by a new treaty which would ban same-sex marriages, among other issues.28

- **Slovakia** was one of the first countries to sign the Convention in 2011. In 2019, the Slovakian parliament decided not to ratify the Convention, though. Opponents, including representatives of the Catholic Church, have in recent years repeatedly criticised the Convention for propagating so-called ‘gender ideology’ and enabling “gay marriage” under the guise of protecting women’s rights. They argue that the issue of women’s protection was very serious and attempts to foist “gender ideology” within such protection frameworks were thus unacceptable.29

- **Hungary** signed the Convention in 2014; but in 2020, the parliament passed a resolution calling on the government not to ratify it. The reasons given are the definition of gender in the Convention as well as the recognition of gender-based violence as a

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**“LGBT-ideology free zones” in Poland**

In the Rainbow Index – which the umbrella organisation of LGBTIQ* associations in Europe, ILGA-Europe, compiles together with activists – Poland ranks last among the EU member states. The index is a continuously updated comparative tool that rates 49 European states on their LGBTI equality laws and policies. ILGA-Europe has also created a timeline about the rise of anti-LGBT hate in Poland from 2018 to the present.

The national conservative Polish ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) uses the narrative of an attack on the traditional family and of endangering the best interests of children to stir up anti-LGBTIQ* sentiment and to thus support corresponding legislative measures. This goes hand in hand with anti-feminist attacks with regard to sexual and reproductive rights. For example, there is a bill to ban sexual education in schools whose text considers, among other things, the provision of information about LGBTIQ* persons to minors as “propaganda”. The agitation against LGBT persons became particularly strong during the election campaign in the run-up to the 2020 presidential elections: during a campaign event, the then incumbent and subsequently re-elected president Andrzej Duda said that LGBT persons were not people, but a mere ideology. Starting in the summer of 2019, a good third of Polish municipalities, counties and voivodeships had at least temporarily declared themselves “LGBT ideology-free zones”. The original wording of a newspaper that distributed stickers saying “LGBT-free zone” had previously been banned by the courts. LGBT people living in these mainly south-eastern areas report a significant increase in open discrimination.

By now, the number of such “zones” in Poland has been reduced by half. The Polish region of Świętokrzyskie on 22 September annulled a motion against so-called “LGBT ideology” after the European Union threatened to suspend funding under the REACT-EU (Reconstruction Aid for Cohesion and Territories of Europe) programme. Three other regions followed suit and also voted to cancel their regional anti-LGBT resolutions.1

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form of persecution in asylum procedures. Both endanger Hungarian culture, laws, traditions and national values, the parliament argued.30

• Turkey was one of the first states to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2011 and had already passed a law referring to the provisions of the Convention. Ten years later, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree to withdraw from the Convention on 1 July 2021. The reason given was that the Convention normalised homosexuality, which would allegedly contradict Turkey’s traditional social and family values.31

The developments on national levels also led to a blockade by individual member states regarding the accession of the European Union to the Istanbul Convention. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had made this accession one of her Commission’s top priorities.

The Anti-Gender Movement: Actors and Discourses

Damjan Denkovski is Deputy Executive Director at the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) working on issues relating to the anti-gender movement. The CFFP is an international research, advocacy, and consulting organisation aiming to promote an intersectional feminist approach to foreign and security policy. As a non-partisan organisation, CFFP encourages governments to implement feminist values in their policymaking processes and works with a number of Governments, activists and other organisations to advance Feminist Foreign Policy on a global level.

The anti-gender movement is a highly organised (but not centralised), well-funded, transnational movement working to undermine women’s rights, LGBTQI* rights, and civil society.

While these actors nominally oppose “gender ideology”, we must look at their efforts not as a simple pushback, but as being about power and maintaining or promoting social and political hierarchies in the face of their (perceived) decline.

The context of shrinking civil society space and general decline in freedom around the world is therefore crucial in understanding such efforts.

Among the actors that constitute the anti-gender movement, we see significant diversity. One can divide the actors into three groups: the old, the new and the allies.32

The “Old”

This group includes actors such as the Catholic Church, right-wing think tanks and institutions, as well as wealthy individuals / families and their foundations, many from the United States. Certain Russian oligarchs and EU-based family foundations can be included here as well. These actors have established relationships with power centres around the world – either through populating local and national administrations with

30 Index: Hungarian Parliament refuses to ratify the Istanbul Convention for its asylum provisions and inclusion of gender (05.05.2020).
31 More information and news coverage by Deutsche Welle, BBC.
their representatives or surrogates, securing observer status in international fora, or through the investment of large sums of money to advance their political goals.

The “New”

This group mostly includes initiatives specifically created in the last decade to oppose the concept of ‘gender ideology’. Many of them take the form of concerned parents or concerned citizens initiatives which – across the globe – show significant overlap in terms of the visual identity, branding, and message. There is also significant overlap among the individuals featuring in these campaigns, as well as their funders. The group also includes government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) and other institutions advancing anti-equality ideas, as well as political parties around the world who have either been created for this purpose or jumped on the bandwagon for political points (coming ideologically from both the left and right of the political spectrum).

The “Allies”

Allyship in this context manifests in two ways: either as uncritically presenting the ideas of the anti-gender movement as valid movements for rights or as actively promoting their worldview. This group includes academics, politicians, corporations, and journalists / media outlets.

Discourses

All of the discursive framings of the anti-gender movement rely on vagueness and are fear-based. Until the 2010s, much of the rhetoric was focused on the defence of what is perceived to be normal, or natural, often in religious terms. While much of the argumentation of the anti-gender movement has since moved away from naturalistic and religious arguments, the fear for the well-being of children continues to resonate well with the target audience of these movements. The opposition to women’s and LGBTQI* rights is now constructed differently – we find an increasing reliance on secular, scientific or even human rights language to argue against equality.

What unites these actors is the ability to “squeeze different discourses into one big threat”\(^{33}\), and construct ‘gender/gender ideology’ as “an attack on at least one of the three Ns”, which these actors claim to defend: nature, the nation, or normality.\(^{34}\)

These actors do not come from the same ideological matrix, and they often do not share “the same ideological framework”\(^{35}\). They are occasionally even in opposition to each other on specific issue areas, and their motivations to either drive or support anti-gender campaigns vary strongly. However, they have successfully constructed the empty signifier of ‘gender ideology’, which sublimates multiple issues into one threat that is easy to emotionally mobilise against. ‘Gender ideology’ is a politically opportune concept which refers to a set of notions revolving around the idea of radical ‘gender feminists’ and the ‘homosexual agenda’ advancing an idea that dismisses the natural order of things (i.e., the natural

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
hierarchy of men and women, for instance), which in pushing for individual identity over social expectations undermines the anthropological basis of the family and, therefore, society.

This concept provided both a framework for understanding the advances of women’s and LGBTQI* rights in international fora and an umbrella term for the anti-gender movement to mobilise around by framing ‘gender’ as a threat to society.

These approaches rely on establishing hierarchies of rights, i.e., that some rights (in this instance, those rights that are seen to conform with ‘traditional’ values) take precedence over the rights of women and LGBTQI* persons. In this way, all of these ideas are united in their reliance on fear-based reactions, and by their assertion that equality of human rights for all is a radical, destabilising idea. Once this notion is deconstructed, and we observe that there is nothing radical about expanding the concept of human rights to include traditionally marginalised groups, we see that it is, in fact, the anti-gender movement itself which advances radical ideas intending to promote a world order which maintains the dominance of the White Heterosexual Cis-Male from the Global North.

Strategic transnational funding structures


The emergence of the anti-gender movement in Europe was first underestimated, many assuming it to be the well-known relic religious lobby until it started to mobilise popular support, influence policies and shape the political landscape. Since, many actors have been forced to pay greater attention to the emergence of a broader anti-gender movement targeting a range of seemingly unrelated issues ranging from the well-known targets of abortion and LGBTQI rights to encompass challenging aspirations for gender equality among others. A question often raised, and indispensable in understanding the emergence of any new social movement, is how the anti-gender movement financed?

Over the years, a steady trickle of information on the funding sources for European anti-gender actors has emerged. To date, very few attempts have been made to assemble the different existing pieces of information, compare them with each other, across national borders and even regions or issue areas.

The new EPF report “Tip of the Iceberg: Extremist Religious Funding against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproduction in Europe – 2009 to 2018” attempts to fill the gap in understanding the funding system which supports the religious extremists’ efforts to roll back human rights in Europe.
In Part 1: Tip of the iceberg, this report identifies USD 707.2 million in anti-gender funding over the 2009–2018 period originating from a group of 54 organisations, namely NGOs, foundations, religious organisations, and political parties. There are three principal geographic origins for these organisations, namely the United States, the Russian Federation and Europe (excluding Russia).

In Part 2: Beneath the iceberg, the report takes a closer look at the original source of anti-gender funding in Europe. It details four resource mobilisation mechanisms:

1. grass-roots fundraising;
2. support from socio economic elites;
3. public funding;
4. and religious actors.

The report concludes with two illustrative case studies explaining how religious extremists collaborate across borders to generate new anti-gender initiatives and explores the overlapping normative, economic and political motivations which drive various actors towards anti gender activism. The picture that emerges is of a transnational community of likeminded religious extremists and related alt- and far-right actors making strategic funding decisions across international borders.

Responding to anti-trans attacks in Europe

Richard Köhler is Advocacy Director at Transgender Europe (TGEU), a member-based organisation fighting to strengthen the rights and wellbeing of trans people in Europe and Central Asia. With 169 member organisations representing 47 different countries, TGEU strives to represent the diverse needs of their members within human rights mechanisms, build the capacity and skills of their members to meet the needs of local communities, and develop intersectional and decolonised programmes to build more resilient and connected trans movements.

Anti-trans attacks are on the rise in Europe. Often, they go unnoticed in the wider backlash against women, migrants, LGBTIQ and other marginalised groups. This text seeks to show the development thereof within a transnational context and provide some emerging insights on counter-strategies.

Development and trans-national context

In recent decades, the trans rights movement in Europe and globally has secured better rights and increased the visibility of trans people. Rising backlash against trans rights is, in part, a reaction to this success. Today, there is a trend of cross-border anti-equality rhetoric and organising targeting the human rights of trans people. This trend is part of a well organised and broader attack against the achievements of women, human rights, and open societies. Within this context, attacks against LGBTQ and trans people are often seen as entry-points to push societies away from democracy.
Anti-trans attacks

Anti-trans attacks have recently intensified in Europe, resulting in the perilous and concrete removal of rights for trans people, as well as a push back of their societal position. Recent examples include:

- Legislators in Hungary eliminated legal gender recognition for trans people in 2020 on the basis that sex is an immutable category. (Similar anti-trans bills in Russia and Slovakia have been stopped; but could re-surface at any moment.) Hungarian legislators also argued that children had a right to grow up according to their sex assigned at birth, clearly hijacking children rights language.

- It is uncertain how the Constitutional Court in Bulgaria will rule on a request to assess the constitutionality of legal gender recognition. The same court had declared in 2018 the Istanbul Convention was unconstitutional for its usage of the word “gender”.

- In 2020 an anti-gender legislation bill in Romania, which would have banned the right to speak about gender and gender identity in educational settings, was only stopped last-minute.

- In Western Europe, healthcare providers in the UK and Sweden eliminated access to trans-specific healthcare for minors following a controversial UK court decision denying trans children agency over their gender identity.

- Similarly, legal reforms for self-determination in legal gender recognition failed in the UK and Germany and were derailed in Spain.

Public discourse questioning the existence of trans people has created a toxic atmosphere for an already vulnerable community. Increased levels of stress, anxiety, and suicidality amongst trans people are common, and particularly grave amongst trans youth and those affected by intersectional discrimination (e.g., on grounds of migration status, race/ethnicity, HIV-status, poverty, etc.). These effects are further complicated by governmental COVID-19 responses that increase policing and the need to show identity documents. Trans people are in these situations often outed, resulting in social exclusion, discrimination and violence.

Why is this Happening?

Anti-equality forces have identified Europe as a global motor for equality. If this equality-motor stutters, it negatively and globally affects the struggle for a more equal world for all. In this context, anti-trans attacks serve (at least) three aims:

- First, denying trans people’s rights and existence helps to maintain male hegemony. Like a racist narrative that builds on two mutually exclusive categories of “black” and “white”, traditional gender norms drive on “man” and “women” as natural opposites. In this logic, trans people cannot exist.

- Second, it is easier to mobilize a large populace behind simple ‘truths’ of i.e. who is a woman. Anti-trans narratives speak to people who feel left behind and anxious about societal progress. Relatively few people know a trans person in their day-to-day lives, making them vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation.

Trans Pride in London, 2020
• Third, trans people are portrayed by anti-gender actors as a threat to other vulnerable groups, such as women and children. As a result, some historically progressive actors feel they need to choose between supporting women or supporting trans people (even though many trans people are or have been women), serving to divide potential allies who might otherwise be able to defeat gender-based attacks. The consequences run deep for civil society and democracies at large.

Counter-strategies

First, to counter anti-gender attacks, one needs to be able to recognise them. Trans rights groups, such as TGEU, GATE, ILGA-Europe, and others, have developed resources to help identify and respond to anti-trans narratives. Progressive actors and allies should speak up – from a position of solidarity while supporting the voices of trans people whose stories can help debunk anti-gender myths. To this end, it helps if pro-equality actors reach out proactively and establish trustful relationships with trans groups and networks.

Secondly, it is important to remember the human rights framework that includes all people – including trans people – continues to be relevant and more important than ever. Progressive actors need to advocate for equality for everyone, not just the majority. Commonly shared values – such as autonomy, self-determination and the right to safety and freedom from violence – can provide a solid foundation for a more intersectional, cross-movement response to anti-gender rhetoric.

Thirdly, the actors behind anti-trans rhetoric need to be exposed and shown for who they are. Revealing the full agenda of these groups, including their financial and political backers and how unscrupulously they act, make it clear that their attacks on trans people are only one part of a deeper, anti-democracy agenda. It needs to be understood that where trans people are attacked, a broader agenda is at play targeting women’s rights, human rights, and open societies.

Gender-based cyber violence

Marie Wittenius, Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe

The anti-gender movement is very active online and makes significant use of the possibilities offered by information and communication technology. For example, the internet can be used to create a sense of belonging among supporters of the movement, to reach new potential supporters, to build national and international networks, and to plan and organise demonstrations and protests (both online and physical). Mobilisation online includes, among other things, sending protest messages en masse, especially to politicians, producing and distributing content depicted as news, or initiating e-petitions, for instance on the transnational platform CitizenGO.

The platform, run by a right-wing conservative foundation registered in Spain, claims...
to have over 4.5 million followers. CitizenGO is also described as the “spearhead” in the fight against equality for LGBTIQ* persons.39

It is known that women and girls as well as LGBTIQ* persons are particularly affected by this kind of gender-specific cyber violence. However, there is a lack of systematic data collection. According to a study by the Economist40 published in March 2021, 74 per cent of women in Europe have experienced cyber violence online. Globally, the figure is as high as 85 per cent. Hate speech was reported by 65 per cent worldwide. However, the figures are difficult to collect because only one in four women report the incidents. 78 per cent said they did not know that this possibility existed.

Women are affected by hate speech online, often by the mere fact “that they are visible on the net”.41 When it comes to the issue of cyber violence and gender-based violence, the focus is often exclusively on the social group “women”. This disregards the intersectional perspective: that different types of discrimination reinforce and intersect each other. In fact, women – being a social, non-homogeneous group – are already exposed to very different experiences of discrimination (age, disabilities, migration background etc.). In addition to this, gender-based violence also targets changing or queer gender identities.42 Amnesty International observes in 2018 that women of colour, women of religious or ethnic minorities, lesbian, bisexual, trans or intersex women, women with disabilities or non-binary persons not meeting the traditional gender norms of men and women face online violence that affects them in particular.43

Recently, on 16 September 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the European Commission to list gender-based violence as a new cross-border area of crime under Article 83(1) TFEU.44 The article grants the EU far-reaching possibilities to harmonise criminal law. The European Parliament and the Council can thus adopt minimum rules establishing criminal offences and penalties in the national criminal law of the member states in areas of particularly serious crime. Areas of crime already recognised are, among others, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, or money laundering. Depending on the development of crime, further areas of crime can be designated.45 In its work programme for 2022, the European Commission announced a possible revision of the victims’ rights Directive or another legislative instrument may be proposed by the end of 2022. The aim is to improve access to justice and compensation, including for victims of gender-based violence.46

Female politicians, especially when representing gender equality, reproductive and sexual rights and LGBTIQ* rights, are in particular attacked with hate speech. For example, a 2018 regional survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that 58 per cent of MPs or their staff surveyed had been sexually attacked on social media, and almost 47 per cent had received death or rape threats. The attacks are mostly perpetrated on social media platforms, such as twitter.47 In the following, Dr Hannah Neumann, Member of the European Parliament, responds to the question of whether and how the rise of the anti-gender movement specifically affects her work as a politician at the European level.

Dr Hannah Neumann holds a PhD in peace and conflict studies and is a politician for the German Green Party (Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen). Since 2019, she has been an elected Member of the European Parliament (MEP) as part of the Green / EFA group. In the context of her parliamenta-

1 The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), signed in Istanbul in 2011 and entering into force in 2014, is to date the most far-reaching internationally legally binding instrument to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence.
3 State of the Union address by President von der Leyen of 15 September 2021.
ry work – for instance by means of parliamentary questions, plenary speeches and co-submitted resolutions – she publicly advocates for human rights issues, in particular for a feminist EU foreign policy that promotes gender equality and combats violence against women.

Appearing in public as a woman means being confronted with hatred early on: For me, it started when I was hanging up posters for the Bundestag elections in Berlin-Lichtenberg. If I was mobbed there, it was by men – and that is still the case today. It continues online: In 2018, when I pointed out on Twitter the lack of diversity in the leadership team of Horst Seehofer’s Ministry of the Interior, I became the target of a wave of hate comments for the first time, including threats of murder and rape.

Through my work as an MEP, I now have even greater visibility, and so the attacks are increasing, too. Most recently, I was targeted by the AfD when I called for ISIS supporters with European citizenship to be brought back from Kurdish prison camps to be tried here. The AfD group in the European Parliament created an inflammatory meme, and a flood of hate comments erupted.

However, the anti-gender movement does not only affect me personally, it also affects the content of my work: Hungary and Poland are constantly trying to erase the term “gender” from EU documents.48 The European “Gender Action Plan III”, which sets the framework for promoting gender equality in the EU’s external action, was actually supposed to be adopted by the Council of the EU; but this was prevented by those two countries. Likewise, Hungary refuses to provide data for the #SHecurity index which I launched and which maps the development of the proportion of women in different countries in areas such as diplomacy, the military, or the police forces.

Targeting female politicians is a popular tactic to silence women. Sexual innuendo and rape threats are almost exclusively directed against women. This is exacerbated for people with a migrant background or people from the LGBTQIA+ community.

In reaction to the attacks, I contacted HateAid, a digital violence counselling service. HateAid screens hate comments and takes legal action if necessary. The proceeds from this benefit the organisation. It is important to me to be a member of a party that clearly positions itself for women’s rights and demands women’s quotas, for example. The more women demand positions of power, the more “normal” it becomes to see women in positions of power.

The anti-gender movement relies on women being deterred by hatred, and unfortunately this works to some extent. However, problems arise for our democracy if not everyone has the same opportunities for political participation. For me, therefore, the following rule applies: I do not want the haters to win. That is why I keep going – and I am happy to do so even louder.

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48 See Infobox: Disputes around the term “gender” in official documents.

Project Design

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