



BEYOND GENDER?

Anti-gender mobilization and the lessons for progressives

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In recent years gender equality and the concept of 'gender' itself have been discredited in several European countries by their opponents as something suspicious, even an enemy. 'Gender' has become a concept used to mobilize the masses against diverse causes, such as gay marriage, school programmes discussing gender equality or the Istanbul Convention.

The roots of the current anti-gender mobilizations run deeper, however. Based on the publication [“Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe”](#), this policy brief will address these root causes and set out the approach that progressives can take to address the debate.

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This policy brief is based on the main statements of the book [“Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe”](#), published by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in May 2015. The title of the book also describes the main thesis of this policy brief: in the mobilization against “gender ideology” or “gender theory” the concept of gender is used by its opponents as an issue symbolically covering and compressing a wide range of issues related to the European project and values.

In the mobilizations of recent years seemingly different issues have been connected and contested under the label “gender ideology” or “gender theory”. As several studies shows, **the Catholic Church plays a crucial role** in creating the discourse as well as in mobilizing networks. The analysis of the political party positions in the five case studies published also shows that anti-gender mobilizations temporarily unite parties who have not cooperated before and who do not necessarily share common ground in many other areas: several **conservative and far right parties** have chosen to align themselves under the “threat” of “gender ideology”.

It is not only issues related to gender equality and LGBTQ equality that are attacked under the “gender” label. The issue runs deeper, as these movements question the post WWII consensus over a political language centred on human rights and disenchantment as well as a neoliberal, policy-based approach to foster political change.

Instead of blaming the others – and falling into a simplistic trap – the progressives should use this momentum. We should take one step back and ask self-critically: what went wrong? What can we do to de-escalate the debates and propose a progressive alternative to this rise of fundamentalism? The objective of this policy brief is to contribute to this reflection.

Anti-gender mobilizations and the European public debate: Examples from the European Parliament

Anti-gender forces were not only successful in stirring the debate at national level. These country-specific initiatives are linked transnationally, they are mutually supportive, and also appear at the European level.

The first controversial debates around “gender ideology” appeared in the European Parliament in 2013, linked with the drafting process and debate on the Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, the so-called **Estrela report**. An important platform for the predominantly online protest was the CitizenGO website, which aims to promote Christian values and which provides a platform for petitions against issues like abortion or same-sex marriage. Another form of protest was the 80.000-100.000 messages sent to MEPs, mainly to Edite Estrela, a member of the S&D Group. The main objective was to make her work impossible, but several of the messages included direct threats.

While the Europe-wide mobilization made extensive use of moral arguments and freedom-fighter rhetoric to gain support, the report itself was rejected on purely legal grounds. Ironically, the basis for refusal was the principle of subsidiarity, which has been used so far to ensure that legislation on gender equality is possible at EU level. Instead of a comprehensive, non-binding document on sexual and reproductive health and rights, a counter report (tabled by the EPP and ECR Groups) was eventually adopted, stating that this issue falls entirely within the competence of Member States. This was celebrated as a victory for a massive popular protest over “the wealthy lobby groups”, as *“citizens in Europe are no longer willing to be dictated an agenda that goes against their profound convictions”*.



Anti-gender mobilization continued against the Report on the EU Roadmap Against Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (**Lunacek report**). The methods and the reasoning were the same as those used against the Estrela report. In this case, their reasoning brought two additional elements: an attempt to re-interpret the scope of fundamental rights so as to exclude LGBTQ rights and a distortion of the use of freedom of speech, with the claim that the opponents allegedly want to ensure special rights for the LGBTQ community. Despite the mobilization, the report still passed.

Attention then turned towards the **annual Report on equality between women and men**. For the first time, the report was accompanied by controversial debates, and in the end, got rejected by 298 against, 289 in favour, and 87 abstentions. Grassroots mobilization continued using previous rhetoric, however, within the EP. The EPP Group rejected the text by labelling it “too ideological”, too much focused on the negative effects of austerity.

This year’s vote on the Report on equality between women and men (**Tarabella report**) was not spared from heated debate either. Anti-gender forces attacked it together with the Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World (**Panzeri report**), on the grounds that both reports allegedly promoted the right to abortion. While amendments were introduced to reaffirm that sexual and reproductive health and rights are within the competences of the Member States, both reports were adopted finally.

The spotlight has mainly been on the debates on these reports, but since 2013 anti-gender MEPs have also submitted several written questions in order **to undermine the use of the word ‘gender’** within the EU institutions. The recurrent reasoning is that this word is absent from the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, hence there is no legal basis for any kind of activity on gender. Amongst others, questions were raised by Anna Zaborska (EPP), Beatrix von Storch (ECR), Ryszard Antoni Legutko (ECR), Cristiana Muscardini (ECR), Zbigniew Ziobro (EFD), making the ECR Group the most concerned about the “promotion of gender ideology” at European level.

European Citizens’ Initiative: A tool for anti-gender mobilization?

The entry into force of the **European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) provided a new mobilization tool** for anti-gender groups. One of the first successfully registered initiatives was “One of us”, requesting that the EU research budget would not be used to finance research projects that involve or presuppose the destruction of human embryos. This would have meant that the Commission cut off all funding for research on human embryonic stem cells, as well as all funding for any organizations that are involved in the provision of indirect or direct abortion or pro-choice services in low and middle-income countries.

The highly emotional public hearing in the European Parliament was followed by the rejection of the ECI. However, the initiative brought together and strengthened several anti-gender entities, which – after the negative answer from the Commission – turned “One of Us” into a European Federation continuing its actions under this form. In the meantime, the organizers of the ECI have kept the issue on the table as well, having brought a formal action against the European Commission before the European Court of Justice. They request the annulment of the Commission’s reply to the ECI and seek



for a “more appropriate reply”. The decision will be taken later, but “One of Us” claim the process has so far been a “moral victory” for them.

Main lessons from the case studies and the European level

Anti-gender mobilizations were prompted by different triggers in the different countries (reproductive rights, education reforms aimed at introducing gender sensitive content in schools, gay marriage, gender studies etc.). The triggers are related to **issues of gender equality or LGBTQ rights. In the attack on “gender ideology” both concerns are united.** However, the studies in the book show that the triggers are not the final targets of these movements.

Framing anti-gender mobilizations as a “backlash” is a mistake, which can lead to inappropriate strategies. As the country cases in the book show, however these mobilizations can nonetheless lead to a backlash in gender and LGBTQ issues. The French movement succeeded in removing in-vitro-fertilization for lesbian couples from the “Marriage for All” bill; a progressive family law in France and a human rights’ strategy in Slovakia were postponed (and have not re-appeared on the agenda since), schoolbooks with gender equality content were banned in several countries, while even progressive governments have begun to avoid using the word ‘gender’ so as to not to fuel the debate.

The crucial test will be to what extent feminist and LGBTQ activists can stand in solidarity with each other, especially given that in some cases their goals are contradictory – the issue of surrogacy for example.

Anti-gender mobilizations have had the capacity to create synergies between some political movements in different countries with different political cultures and gender policies. The fact that the mobilization takes place in parallel proves that this cannot be explained in terms of national circumstances or exceptionalism. **We are up against a new European, global phenomenon,** a new framework for all of us. One major factor these mobilizations have in common is that that they are **built on fear** to mobilize people.

The movements **have a transnational character.** Not only do they refer to the same texts, on which they base their ideology, but they are connected. Persons, ideas and practices travel, they take inspiration from each other, they work together, they mobilize for each other and use this to show: “there is a momentum, many of us are concerned, let us unite.” However, this does not mean that there is an antifeminist or anti-LGBTQ conspiracy. In order to be able to formulate non-defensive strategies **we shouldn’t be taken hostage by the besieged fortress syndrome,** the feeling of being attacked by some coordinated forces.

“Gender ideology” debates: a potential for progressive renewal?

As argued before, these anti-gender movements do not only target gender equality and LGBTQ rights, they point to a broader crisis. This crisis is linked to the neoliberal consensus, which is a challenge for the Left. Mainstream neoliberal discourse hinders the recognition of structural inequalities and the necessity of special measures, such as quotas for instance, in order to reduce social inequalities and achieve an equal starting point for diverse groups, including minorities. This has made it more difficult for the progressives to advocate our agenda, since structural inequalities continue to be invisible or overshadowed by fairy tales of personal freedom and choice. **These neoconservative movements can**



be interpreted as an anti-modernist and fundamentalist answer to the neoliberal consensus and to technocratic, policy-centred political language.

The anti-gender rhetoric also encompasses an **anti-EU rhetoric** which should be recognized and addressed. As the publication shows, there is a transnational discourse of “orders coming from Brussels” and “well-paid lobby groups” forming the core of the conspiracy theory of the so-called “gender ideology”.

As argued in the publication, ‘gender’ has been identified as the common ground, a label amidst diverse political cultures, different party structures and a variety of mobilizing tactics – also, it’s not the only possible label. Islamophobia acts in a similar manner, compressing different fears and values. Hence, **there can be other issues with a similar capacity for mobilization**.

If the Left is to de-escalate the debates based on fear, it needs to **understand the deeper roots of the appeal of these anti-gender movements** to broad masses. We need to address the roots of the fear, not just say “there is no need to fear.” It is not about better communication, it is about better understanding. Building up walls, fuelling the us/them divide, and demonization of the other side is not a sustainable strategy.

Broad alliances, search for dialogue

It is not the extreme right parties that hold the potential to mobilize the masses, it is the conservative ones, the political mainstream, that choose to add components from the extreme right to their agenda, especially at the local level, as the publication indicates. Hence, **facilitating discussion** by learning more about the conservative agenda and by including conservatives in the conversations can be a more viable strategy for de-escalation (or prevention of escalation). It can also prevent pushing the conservatives (further) to the far right when it comes to gender issues.

Therefore, creating **broad and strategic dialogue for example with progressive Christians, with moderate or anti-neoliberal conservatives**, would be an option to consider. Obviously this dialogue does not mean that progressives should give in to their ideas. On the contrary, it should serve to motivate progressives to **re-formulate our agenda in a new language** and to possibly find new consensus and new cleavages.

The language of disenchantment, value-based politics implemented with policies

The studies show that opponents of “gender” managed to make the term ‘gender’ suspicious. Ignoring it did not succeed, neither did explaining “what gender really is”, or giving in to opponents. The Left has to take the challenge seriously and seek comprehensive and **pro-active, independent strategies** in line with its own values, where **gender equality and inclusion of sexual minorities** have to be at the core of the progressive renewal.

The anti-gender mobilizations do not simply attack women’s or LGBTQ rights, more profoundly they question the post WWII consensus over a political language centred on human rights and **disenchantment** as well as a **neoliberal, policy-based approach** to foster political change.



Fundamentalist claims related to the so-called “gender ideology” are therefore a symptom for a broader crisis in Europe which is related to the crisis of the Left.

The challenge we face will be to retain our commitment to human rights, but go beyond the language that addresses the issues of marginalized social groups within this framework alone. We need to take the challenge seriously for several reasons. The appeal of these movements to broad masses is reason enough. Beyond “gender”, gender equality or LGBTQ rights, they are explicitly or implicitly critical of neoliberalism and the neoliberal consensus, as well as refusing to subscribe to technocratic policy. And they give fundamentalist answers to these problems.

Hence, the crucial question for progressive actors, in order to regain cultural hegemony, is not how to better explain gender equality and LGBTQ rights, but whether they are capable of **finding a new, more emotional language to address the new situation and of reformulating traditional leftist values** and their positions on modernity, equality, emancipation, justice and solidarity.

Using European norms as a basis for progressive arguments aimed at the national level can be counter-productive and further fuel anti-EU sentiments and freedom-fighter rhetoric. The progressives have to **find strategies that are rooted in the local and national context and life experience of the people**, and at the same time take into account the global context.

The Left not only needs to better connect to the local level; it needs to **better connect its policies to a political vision** which questions neoliberal citizenship and the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups of society.

Conclusion

In order to tackle and to move beyond the circumstances that have given rise to the current mobilizations against “gender ideology”, the progressives should consider the following five points:

1. Developing independent, pro-active strategies, which include the language of re-enchantment;
2. Value-based politics implemented with policies;
3. Enhancing local embeddedness;
4. Considering broad or new alliances;
5. Developing a vision based on inclusion and on questioning the neoliberal consensus.