

Right-Wing Populism and Anti-Gender Movements

Contents

I. Context

1. Introduction	3
2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology	
3. Contemporary Interpretations of Right-Wing Populism	4
4. Historical Development of Anti-Gender Movements	
5. Global Trends and Voter Motivation	
6. The Impact of Globalization and Populist Rhetoric	
7. Voter Perceptions	5
8. Response of Progressive Forces	
9. Conclusion	

II. Anti-Gender Movements in Europe: Characteristics, Geography, Feminist Responses, and Strategic Challenges

1. Characteristics of Anti-Gender Movements	6
2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology	7
3. Feminist Responses	
4. Western Balkans: Specificities and Challenges	8
5. Recommendations for Progressive Forces	

III. Recommendations for Advancing Gender Equality and Strengthening Progressive Politics

1. Strengthening Organized Women's Structures within Political Parties	9
2. Cooperation and Networking	
3. Education and Capacity Building	
4. Visibility and Positioning of Women's Forums	10
5. Regional Platform for Social Democracy and Gender Equality	
6. Conclusions	

IV. Strategic Recommendations

11

Right-Wing Populism and Anti-Gender Movements

Contemporary Interpretations, Global Trends, and Challenges for Progressive Forces

Abstract

This article analyzes contemporary interpretations of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements through a review of theoretical approaches, empirical research, and political practices in both European and global contexts. The focus is on the strategies of populist actors, voter motivations, the impact of globalization, and the responses of progressive forces. The aim is to identify key challenges and offer guidelines for effective political action in modern democratic societies.

I. Context

1. Introduction

Right-wing populism, as a political phenomenon, increasingly shapes contemporary democratic systems. Its rhetoric, strategies, and mobilization potential have become subjects of extensive theoretical and empirical analysis. Simultaneously, anti-gender movements—rooted in similar ideological foundations—pose a growing threat to progressive values. This paper explores their interconnections, societal consequences, and the responses of political actors.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The analysis is based on an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating political theory, sociology, gender studies, and communication studies. It draws on data from the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), as well as secondary sources including case studies from various European countries.

3. Contemporary Interpretations of Right-Wing Populism

Right-wing populism is increasingly interpreted as a strategy aimed at transforming democratic norms. Its effectiveness in mobilizing voters has been confirmed in numerous countries, where populist parties have taken power either independently or in coalition with the far right. The FEPS Populism Tracker project provides an analytical framework for understanding these processes and offers counter-strategies for progressive forces.

4. Historical Development of Anti-Gender Movements

In earlier decades, anti-gender movements were considered marginal. However, economic crises, the collapse of welfare states, and the rise of individualism created conditions for their resurgence. Feminist resistance—such as in Poland—relied on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, but was initially slow and defensive.

5. Global Trends and Voter Motivation

Despite contextual differences, voters who support right-wing populism and anti-gender movements exhibit similar behavioral patterns. FEPS identifies four key sentiments:

- Nostalgia for the welfare state
- Rising national identity
- Demand for economic justice
- Desire for security and stability

6. The Impact of Globalization and Populist Rhetoric

Globalization has altered power relations and triggered a sense of lost control among citizens. Populists exploit this insecurity to spread distrust in institutions and fear of migration. Their rhetoric undermines knowledge and encourages depoliticization, further eroding democratic standards.

7. Voter Perceptions

Voters recognize the negative consequences of globalization, including:

- Growing social inequality
- Destruction of local economies
- Employment insecurity, even among the highly educated

These perceptions contribute to increased support for populist movements.

8. Response of Progressive Forces

Progressive parties have failed to adequately respond to challenges such as Brexit. Concrete policies are needed, including:

- Labor market regulation
- Combating worker exploitation
- Supporting the care economy
- Addressing climate challenges

Without a proactive approach, progressive forces risk further marginalization.

9. Conclusion

Right-wing populism and anti-gender movements present a complex challenge to modern democracies. Their success lies in articulating feelings of insecurity and injustice. Progressive forces must develop strategies that respond to these challenges, grounded in inclusive policies, social justice, and democratic values.

II. Anti-Gender Movements in Europe: Characteristics, Geography, Feminist Responses, and Strategic Challenges

1. Characteristics of Anti-Gender Movements

Anti-gender movements represent a transnational phenomenon that has rapidly expanded across Europe and globally over the past two decades. Scholars studying anti-gender mobilization examine its causes, the relationship between institutional regulation and social repercussions, and shifts in attitudes, behaviors, loyalties, and solidarities among individuals and groups across Europe.

Key Characteristics:

- Connection to right-wing populism and neo-conservatism, often described as post-democracy, illiberalism, democratic backsliding, or de-democratization.
- Reaction to neoliberal excesses, with anti-genderism legitimized as a conservative response.
- Mobilization of the “unprivileged” through narratives of dignity, national pride, and resistance to corrupt elites.
- Effective communication via digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Telegram, Discord), spreading populist messages.
- Linked to the crisis of neoliberalism, collapse of welfare states, commercialization, and individualism—especially among the “silent majority.”
- Crisis of truth and trust in science, with widespread disinformation and post-truth dynamics.
- Decline in civic engagement and democratic oversight, with neo-conservative ideologies infiltrating mainstream politics.
- Revival of traditional symbols: God, family, homeland.
- Campaigns funded by conservative Christian groups in the U.S. and oligarchs in Russia, promoting misogyny and masculinity.
- Main actors: politicians, media, academic and religious institutions, influencers, and the manosphere.
- Epistemological crisis: anti-gender movements aim to become alternatives to institutional knowledge, especially in the social sciences and humanities.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Anti-gender movements emerge in diverse political and cultural contexts:

- First wave: Italy, Spain, France, Slovenia.
- Institutionalized movements: Poland, Turkey.
- Developed movements despite differing conditions: Greece, Denmark.
- Western Europe: populists position themselves as defenders of Christianity against Islam (e.g., France, Sweden).

In Eastern Europe, these movements arise from disappointment with the EU and unmet promises of economic development. Examples include:

- Poland: near-total ban on reproductive rights.
- Croatia: legislation on marriage and same-sex partnerships, followed by regression after EU accession.
- Bulgaria: Constitutional Court rejected the concept of gender.
- Hungary: gender studies abolished.

3. Feminist Responses

Feminist movements adopt varied strategies depending on local context:

- Italy: confrontational and non-confrontational tactics—education, reporting threats, demonstrations, and cultural initiatives. Not affiliated with political parties.
- Latin America: mass mobilization against gender-based violence and austerity measures.
- Spain: shifting perception of feminism among youth—51% believe feminism has “gone too far.”
- Strong mobilization in Italy, Brazil, Argentina, Poland, and Spain in response to femicides and regressive policies.

Some feminist actors critique gender identity, aligning ideologically with the far right, which further complicates the political landscape.

4. Western Balkans: Specificities and Challenges

In post-socialist countries of the former Yugoslavia, gender equality was once part of the ideological framework, but since the 1990s, nationalism and chauvinism have led to regression.

Key Challenges:

- Re-traditionalization, strong patriarchy, conservatism, and clericalism.
- Lack of innovative policies, political will, and ideological clarity.
- Example: Serbia—autocratic regime, cultural wars, “gender washing” through the appointment of a female prime minister, democratic decline since 2012.

5. Recommendations for Progressive Forces

A shift from reactive to proactive political engagement is essential:

- Strengthen networking, advocacy, and digital activism.
- Analyze local issues within a global framework.
- Develop inclusive feminist responses addressing economic and social factors.
- Revise the 2014 Foreign Feminist Policy platform in light of current global crises.
- Adopt a coherent internal and external EU strategy (GAP III), including gender analyses and integration of gender issues into trade agreements.
- Promote strategic communication, youth engagement, and use of artificial intelligence.
- Consolidate CEEGN recommendations and build a socio-political-economic model for the 21st century aligned with PES documents.

III. Recommendations for Advancing Gender Equality and Strengthening Progressive Politics

1. Strengthening Organized Women's Structures within Political Parties

- Revise the structure, content, and operational methods of women's forums in line with their capacities and needs, recognizing that without institutional support, they lack recognizable influence.
- In most political organizations across the region, women's forums formally exist but remain ineffective, especially due to the lack of young women, activism, knowledge, resources, and organizational capacity.
- It is essential to create space for young women through training, mentorship, and political education.

2. Cooperation and Networking

- Intensify collaboration with civil society, academia, progressive professionals, and citizens.
- Encourage local, regional, and international networking, particularly through joint campaigns and the exchange of best practices.

3. Education and Capacity Building

- Advocacy must be politically and ideologically structured—not merely technical—through curricula that include topics such as women's health, just transition, green economy, and artificial intelligence.
- Provide ICT training for new modes of communication and digital activism.
- Ensure continuous education for both men and women on gender equality, class issues, and the feminist contribution to social development.

4. Visibility and Positioning of Women's Forums

- Secure dedicated budgets for education, campaigns, and communication via social media.
- Promote new vocabulary and narratives (e.g., “crime of passion” instead of “femicide”) to raise awareness of gender issues.
- Foster collaboration with feminist organizations and open dialogue on the role of women in society.

5. Regional Platform for Social Democracy and Gender Equality

- Promote the CEEGNetwork as a tool for political dialogue and party capacity building.
- Recognize the contribution of feminist movements to preserving and democratizing liberal democracy through strategies such as watchdogging, strategic communication, and advocacy.
- Incorporate findings from projects like FIERCE (Srnđelj & Kuhar) into the development of tactics to counter anti-gender narratives.

6. Conclusions

- Gender equality must be an integral part of the political context, with attention to structural factors such as regional devastation, age, class, and social status.
- Although formal progress exists, women still face limited opportunities for political participation due to a lack of political, financial, and media power.
- Key challenges include re-traditionalization, strong influence of the church, poor implementation of laws, low political and media literacy, digital illiteracy, and pervasive violence across all social spheres.
- Manipulation by authoritarian regimes—especially in Serbia and Hungary—further undermines institutional frameworks and the rule of law.
- Low citizen participation in political life, except in cases of civic protest (e.g., Serbia 2025), demands an urgent response from progressive forces.
- Young people are exposed to conservative narratives through provocative content, often unaware of its origins—strategic communication with youth via familiar channels is essential.

IV. Strategic Recommendations

1. Improving the Context: A long-term process of shifting attitudes through argumentation, gender analysis, and professionally crafted messaging.
2. Engaging Relevant Stakeholders: Intellectuals, civil society organizations, trade unions, and others should be involved in mapping strategic directions.
3. Organizing Public Debates: Focus on local challenges such as labor market dynamics, workplace culture, inequality, security, and the rule of law.
4. Researching the Local Context: Analyze the views and needs of women and young voters.
5. Ongoing Work with Women and Youth: Provide education, political empowerment, and targeted communication.
6. Strengthening Political Organizations: Foster collaboration with diverse actors and ensure strategic positioning.
7. Contextualizing Theoretical Approaches: Emphasize the practical application of research in shaping public policy.

30



With support of

