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Gender and Region

RESISTANCES, STRATEGIES, IMPACTS

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Gender Equality and Its Enemies

We are all familiar with the term *gender*. It appears in theoretical texts within the field of gender studies, in policy documents, legislation, regulatory acts, and institutional bodies that include it in their names, such as the Coordination Body for Gender Equality. For several decades now, we have been talking about gender equality, gender-based violence, gender budgeting, or gender mainstreaming. Truth be told, we have mostly been the ones talking about it, striving to disseminate these ideas within society, political life, and the media, with varying degrees of success.

Serbia is not the only country where the ideas of equality have taken root slowly. Resistance to equality, or to the institutionalization of emancipation, is also characteristic of countries traditionally regarded as bastions of democracy. Processes that once seemed to have irreversibly advanced society have proven to be reversible, even in states known for their iron-clad rule of law. Quite simply, the idea we are advocating – that the patriarchal value system must have an alternative, and that this alternative is better for everyone – has always encountered strong opposition.

It once seemed that such resistance had diminished, or at least would become less intense, as principles of gender equality began to be integrated into national and international policies from the mid-1990s, and especially in the early 21st century. This integration appeared to grant gender equality a legitimacy it previously lacked when championed solely by feminist and LGBT+ movements, which in many countries (including our own) advanced their demands in solidarity. Many international bodies, particularly the United Nations and the European Union, incorporated gender equality into their agendas, requiring structural changes that would gradually enable the equal status of women and men, as well as the legal and social recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals in their struggle for a life free of violence.

However, for at least 10 years, clear signs have emerged that opposition to this idea is growing. Today, it has reached its peak, and the discourse on so-called *gender ideology* is now on the lips of a wide

array of social and political actors. Suddenly, everyone is talking about gender, yet those of us who have long advocated for an emancipated world—one of equality and freedom from patriarchy—are no longer certain we even recognize what they are referring to.

Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Religious leaders, representatives of radical-right political parties, conservative academia, conservative civil society, and European aristocracy have joined forces in condemning *gender ideology*. Gender has begun to function as a *symbolic adhesive*, a unifying point that brings together heterogeneous local and transnational actors. The primary impetus comes from the Roman Catholic Church, which has strongly opposed the very use of the term *gender*, arguing that it obscures the *natural order* in which there exist only women and men—who, while being equal before God, have different and inherently unequal earthly roles. In countries where Catholicism is the dominant faith, this message has resonated particularly strongly in the context of opposition to abortion (Croatia, Poland) and same-sex partnerships (France, Slovenia). Children have emerged as a crucial figure in anti-gender campaigns: sexual education and education on gender-based violence are framed as mechanisms for sexualizing younger generations and as an attack on *our* values. The underlying message seems to be that raising awareness about domestic violence is wrong and that recognizing sexuality as an integral part of human life, acknowledging the existence of different sexual orientations, and providing knowledge on protecting oneself from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases pose a threat to our traditions. All of *this*—now increasingly labeled as *gender ideology*—is framed as an externally imposed agenda. Meanwhile, *our* traditional values are presented as wholesome, centuries-old, and natural—rooted in an order where roles are predefined, where one mows the hay and the other fetches the water, as we say here. In *our* country, equality between women and men is unwanted (feminists are *our* internal enemies); in *our* country, there are no lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals (they are seen as outsiders imposed upon us under the guise of *European values*); in *our* country, sexual relations start within marriage and serve

solely for reproduction, while violence either does not exist or is deemed acceptable as part of traditional values.

The discourse on traditional values has now become commonplace. While there are variations in its articulation between the East and the West, the underlying desire is the same—to return to an imagined past, to an allegedly *better* era (*Make America Great Again* is but one example of this regressive impulse). In the West, which presents itself as more liberal and civilized, this narrative goes hand in hand with anti-migrant politics: foreigners are portrayed as coming to replace the native population, allegedly declining due to insufficient reproduction. In the post-socialist East, the narrative of traditional values is paired with resistance to foreign, decadent policies, which are presented as an assault on national sovereignty and authenticity. At the core of both narratives is *our* family and *our* family values, exposed to attacks from bureaucratic elites in Brussels and Washington, supported by domestic traitors at the local level.

As soon as we hear the word *elite*, the concept of the *ordinary people* is never far behind—powerless in the face of foreign political agendas, yet powerful due to their sheer numbers; neglected, despite constituting the majority. Populist politics have defined the past decade, with parties across the political spectrum embracing them. However, their strongest foothold has been within the increasingly dominant (ultra)right-wing political movements, which have shifted from relatively marginal phenomena to major political forces around the world—from Brazil to Finland to India. These movements are characterized by populist illiberalism (the capture of state institutions through democratic procedures), nativism (the defense of the rights of the dominant ethnic majority), social conservatism, and familism (the preservation of traditional social structures, particularly the family, in opposition to pluralism and equality).

Populism is invariably accompanied by polarization, sometimes framed as a culture war. In the age of social media and influencers, the seeds of polarization are easily sown, and new adherents are cultivated *through the screen* within virtual communities, where a sense of belonging is mixed with real experiences of isolation and loneliness. Moreover, in the post-pandemic era—marked by the proliferation of conspiracy theories and the reinforcement of *social distancing*—a heightened sense

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of individual vulnerability has fostered the development of diverse new narratives of perceived threats. The wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere have further exacerbated global insecurity and deepened polarization. Meanwhile, Trump's ascent to the presidency of the United States fundamentally reshaped the world order, a transformation unfolding before our eyes. Let us not forget that one of Trump's first executive orders issued under his administrations was titled *Protecting Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth in the Federal Government*.

Anti-gender mobilizations take various forms. In some countries, such campaigns remain limited in scope, while in others, they have become an integral part of ruling party agendas. In certain contexts, anti-gender campaigns have evolved into mass social movements with strong public resonance, while elsewhere, they are enforced from above. In some countries, the church plays a negligible role in shaping traditional values; in others, it holds a central position. What we are seeing is a transnational mobilization that adapts to local contexts yet follows recognizable patterns and discursive frameworks. At this moment, four key elements define this new transnational politics, articulated across all continents: Christian identity, *natural* conservative values and the traditions of a given *people*, a familist emphasis on the heteronormative marital union of a man and a woman, and opposition to *gender ideology*.

Serbia and Gender Ideology

The term *gender ideology* entered Serbian discourse in the spring of 2017. This does not mean, of course, that our society had been progressive or open to emancipatory politics until that point. Thus, we cannot claim that Serbia – and, more broadly, the post-Yugoslav space – is experiencing a *backlash*, which would imply that a steady progress toward equality had been suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted. Nevertheless, despite the deeply rooted resistance to feminist politics and overt homophobia, the introduction of the term *gender ideology* marked a new development.

It started with a swift reaction against the *Educational Packages on the Prevention of Violence Against Children*, developed by one of the

country's oldest women's organizations, the *Incest Trauma Center*, in cooperation with teachers, international experts, and representatives of the Ministry of Education. The goal of these materials was to equip educators—preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and professors—with the necessary information on how to respond if a child is subjected to violence: whom to contact, how to identify a trusted adult for the child, and what steps to take in cases of sexual or gender-based violence. Within just two weeks, articles published in *Sputnik* and *Politika* demonized both the materials and their authors, accusing them of sexualizing children and directly attacking *our* family, allegedly imposed under foreign dictates and through state complicity. In this narrative, foreign centers of power were waging a war against our family values, and *gender ideology* was held responsible. The newly appointed minister of education promptly withdrew the materials, admitted that *Europe* had pressured Serbia into adopting them, and promised that the country would develop its own, more appropriate versions. To this day, that has not happened.

Just a few months later, Ana Brnabić assumed the position of Prime Minister. Today, it is evident that this appointment did not advance the rights of the LGBT+ community, nor did it strengthen gender equality in Serbia in any meaningful way. However, the fact that she was framed as the *gay prime minister*—a move that was likely a strategic decision by the ruling establishment (a form of *tactical Europeanization*)—helped to slow the spread of *gender ideology* discourse in Serbia. Until 2021, when the *Same-Sex Partnership Act* and the *Gender Equality Act* were introduced in parliamentary debates, *gender ideology* remained largely a topic of concern for conservative intellectuals, particularly those who had led the charge against the *Educational Packages*. In political discourse, it was articulated—albeit with little success—almost exclusively by the party *Dveri*. The adoption of the *Same-Sex Partnership Act* was ultimately blocked by the president due to its alleged unconstitutionality, while the *Gender Equality Act* was passed with little resistance, apart from objections from a small but vocal group of Serbian language purists who opposed provisions on gender-sensitive language.

By 2022, tactical Europeanization had lost its political significance. The *gender ideology* discourse surged. The Church, which had previously maintained its distance from these debates, became the most active

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force in fueling its dissemination. That summer, *EuroPride*, which had been scheduled years in advance for September, was banned. Religious processions (*litije*) were organized, and both the Patriarch and the state leadership contributed to the escalation of confusion and hostility. *Gender ideology* became a unifying term, bringing together different actors—those in power as well as those in opposition—under a shared belief that a minority was *abusing the state* and *abusing the language*, seeking to contaminate and colonize our family values.

The Patriarch's message about *gender ideology* in primary school biology textbooks, delivered during one of the *litije* against *EuroPride*, quickly gained traction within professional associations and educational bodies before spilling into the broader public sphere. As in 2017, a small group of the same or similar actors managed—virtually overnight—to secure the withdrawal of these textbooks from circulation, using the same arguments. However, by 2022, the virus of *gender ideology* had spread further, and debates over *gender*, *genders*, and *gender ideology* flooded Serbian media. Suddenly, and seemingly overnight, the public sphere became consumed with discussions on sex and gender, the biological essence of humanity, the pseudo-scientific nature of *gender ideology*, gender equality as a soft form of occupation imposed by Brussels and Washington, the destruction of the nation, state, language, and family at the hands of lethal gender weapons, the 153 *genders*, and so on, ad infinitum. *Gender ideology* successfully united various strands of conservatism while simultaneously reinforcing older forms of nationalism. Foreign agents and domestic traitors made their grand return to the national discourse.

The suspension of the *Gender Equality Act* in June 2024 marked the most significant victory for anti-gender mobilizations in Serbia. Gender-sensitive language—though not a new topic in Serbian public discourse—became the central battleground, bringing together the Church, conservative intellectuals, conservative media, and government representatives. The official justification for the suspension was the declaration of gender as an unconstitutional category. The feminist movement failed to recognize the significance of this event and its broader implications, responding too late.

Gender Ideology in Our Neighborhood

Serbia is by no means an isolated case in this regard. Across the region, we can observe strikingly similar stories. What sets Serbia apart, however, is the instrumentalization of (the Serbian) language itself to suspend an entire law on gender equality—creating the illusion that female professors, activists, pilots, and architects had somehow become the greatest threat to Serbian identity. Examples from neighboring countries demonstrate that while the specific motifs and themes may vary slightly, their overall effect remains the same: the goal is to dismantle *gender ideology* (a term increasingly replaced by *woke* and, more recently, *DEI*) within educational institutions, to attack gender studies in universities, and to repeal or block the adoption of gender equality laws and related policies.

In Bulgaria, for instance, the anti-gender movement—which brought together right-wing, centrist, and left-wing parties, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences—achieved its crucial victory in 2018, when it successfully halted the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. As in Serbia, the concept of gender was declared unconstitutional, leading to the official designation of the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Girls and Women* as incompatible with the Bulgarian constitution. The core issue was the term *gender*, which translates as *social sex* (*socialen pol*) in both Bulgarian and Slovenian. Many feared it implied a so-called *third sex*, allegedly intent on destroying Bulgarian families and values.

In Romania, *ideologie de gen* goes hand in hand with *ideologie LGBT*, both seen as variants of *sexuo-Marxism*—advocacy for sexual and reproductive rights is construed as a direct threat to Romanian traditions and linked to the country's stigmatized socialist past. Also in 2018, Romania held a referendum in defense of the traditional family. According to the Romanian constitution, the family is based on the marriage of *two spouses*; the referendum sought to prevent any broad interpretation of this definition that might allow for same-sex marriage by replacing the phrase two spouses with a man and a woman. Despite warnings of impending doom, demographic collapse, and the evil West—the referendum ultimately failed due to low voter turnout.

Serbia's northern neighbor, Hungary, has since emerged as the

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most infamous proponent of anti-gender policies in the region. The Hungarian Prime Minister, proud of his role in pioneering illiberal democracy, recently proclaimed that Hungary possesses a *serum* against progressive politics—one that it freely shares and that can be adapted to any context and applied anywhere in the world. The *serum* is simple: emblazoning bold slogans across the national flag reading *No to Migration! No to Gender! No to War!* Although Hungary remains, for now, the only country in the region to have expelled gender studies from its universities, *gender ideology* only became a major political issue there in 2017. Within a remarkably short time, it was weaponized to intimidate local activists, justify bans, and legitimize repression. By now, it hardly even needs to be stated that Hungarian traditional values—allegedly under attack—bear a striking resemblance to those of Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia. And, of course, to those of Croatia as well.

Croatia was one of the first countries where anti-gender campaigns gained traction, with the term *gender ideology* appearing as early as 2012 during the campaign against sexual education. As in other cases, gender was deliberately framed as a confusing concept, often equated with sexual orientation or depicted as something fluid and arbitrarily chosen. The effectiveness of this campaign is best illustrated by the fact that, for the first time in the history of independent Croatia, a citizen-led petition succeeded in forcing a referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage. Unlike the Romanian referendum, this one was successful: since then, the Croatian constitution has defined marriage as *a union between a man and a woman*. This outcome is largely credited to the civic initiative *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) and, in particular, to Željka Markić, one of the most prominent figures in the global anti-gender movement. From that point onward, Croatia has remained one of the key battlegrounds for anti-gender policies.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, anti-gender forces are only beginning to take shape. One possible reason for the slower pace of anti-gender mobilization in these countries is the enduring strength of traditional ethno-nationalist narratives, which have long prided themselves on their patriarchal values. However, the increasing attacks on LGBT+ activists, the organization of *family marches*, and the spread of moral panic through demographic campaigns (*Natality is the Priority*) in Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly indicate the presence

of familiar patterns. These tendencies have found their most explicit expression in the Republic of Srpska, where the first casualty was the *Law on the Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women*. According to the president of the Republic of Srpska, the law was deemed unacceptable because it allegedly introduced gender ideology through the back door. In the Republic of Srpska, like in Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church plays a particularly influential role in shaping these debates.

Finally, North Macedonia stands out as an example of a full-scale anti-gender mobilization. Although the first signs of such efforts appeared only in 2020, within a single year, a coalition was formed around well-known issues—gender-sensitive and sexual education, pride parade, gender equality legislation, and legal recognition of gender identity. The *Coalition for the Protection of Children*, consisting of 38 humanitarian organizations, religious associations, informal initiatives, and political parties, quickly became a major force. By 2023, all religious communities in North Macedonia had united in opposition to the *Gender Equality Act*. Meanwhile, Strumica, the largest city in the country’s southeast, has become a hub for anti-gender activism, which largely operates as a grassroots movement composed of teachers, journalists, intellectuals, and clergy. Their repertoire of actions follows a similar script: petitions, protests, film screenings, and public debates. Feminist and queer activists are facing a surge in both frequency and insidiousness of attacks.

Ultimately, across all these countries—as well as globally—gender-critical feminist currents are gaining visibility. Their opposition to the concept of gender, insistence on biological sex, rejection of the alliance between feminism and the queer movements, and denial of the legitimacy of trans women present an increasingly significant challenge for feminist movements. Alarming, the rhetoric of anti-gender actors and gender-critical feminists often overlaps and mutually reinforces one another. One need only remember that the Trump administration justified its policies as *protecting women* from the extremism of gender ideology—a stance welcomed by Italy’s radical feminist network, whose sole grievance was that they had not led the charge themselves.

Where Do We Stand Now?

This brief overview of the current situation highlights the following:

- Anti-gender mobilizations *concern us directly*—not only in terms of the topics we engage with as individuals and collectives, but also personally, as we can easily become targets of these campaigns;
- Anti-gender mobilizations *are not local* phenomena but rather a *transnational political* movement that is becoming increasingly dominant across continents, while also adapting easily to specific local contexts;
- The *narrative patterns*—family values, tradition, Christian values, natural order, endangered children, and the nation under threat—are the same everywhere, from Brazil to Russia;
- While the focus appears to be on gender, these mobilizations are part of a broader ultra-conservative, *far-right political movement*;
- Although they target different groups—women, trans people, and LGBT+ communities—their ultimate goal is a forceful attack on *equality* and the hard-won freedoms *of all*.

What Have We Done So Far?

- We have often refused to recognize anti-gender actors as a real threat;
- We have attempted to educate them and explain what gender and gender equality actually mean;
- We have believed that this is *just our issue*—a problem with our church and our conservatives—but also that we knew how to handle them because we had been doing so for decades;
- We have assumed that gender equality is safeguarded by *European* legislation and therefore untouchable;
- We have thought we had time—that the opposition would not organize quickly, act effectively, or gain support from higher authorities;

- We have divided ourselves by topic, believing that these specific issues did not concern our groups or organizations directly.

This was a mistaken approach. As developments in Serbia show, anti-gender mobilizations are highly effective. They can swiftly rally and direct like-minded supporters, influence legislative changes, restrict freedom of assembly and speech, and even threaten individual safety. Awareness of these realities is crucial, as is recognizing the vital importance of solidarity among groups and organizations.

What Must Be Done?

- Build connections, share information, empower each other—feminist solidarity has never been more critical!
- Stay informed: many of the actions carried out by *our* anti-gender actors have already been implemented in neighboring countries. If we do not yet know how to counter them effectively, someone else does—whether in Slovenia, Croatia, Poland, or Italy. Feminist knowledge and the exchange of experiences are more vital than ever!
- We do not have to like each other to work together. Always remember: the opposition consists of diverse actors, yet they have clearly united around a common goal.
- The fight against disinformation (fact-checking) is essential to countering these movements in the broader public sphere. Analyzing false claims and presenting counterarguments helps challenge conspiracy theories and the spread of moral panic.
- Humor, though little about this is funny, remains a powerful tool. Rather than just expressing outrage at phenomena like *kneelers* (anti-feminist protesters who kneel in prayer), we must also be able to mock them.
- Resistance can be subversive—viral influencers and online campaigns that reach large audiences play a crucial role.
- Positive narratives can also be healing. Anti-gender mobilizations thrive on negativity, fear, and threats.
- When we have the numbers, counter-protests can serve as an effective public response. The argument that visibility will only

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benefit the other side is no longer relevant—they are already visible.

- Public debates on gender (or human rights) often serve to amplify anti-gender platforms. We must carefully consider who we engage with, what we hope to achieve, and whether the discussion is even productive. Instead of debating whether there are 153 genders, we should insist on addressing concrete issues. Human rights should not be up for discussion.
- When speaking publicly, avoid overly technical terms and prioritize familiar, local expressions. Anti-gender actors frame us as foreign agents, claiming our work is an imported agenda with no place here. We must dismantle this narrative through the very language we use.
- Remember our feminist history: the term gender has been in use since the early 1980s. It did not arrive with *genderization* or Brussels-imposed mandates. Like our struggle for emancipation, it has a long history.
- Strategic withdrawal—especially from online debates—can be beneficial. Not only does it protect our mental well-being, but it also denies space for further insults, defamation, and misinformation.
- Anti-gender actors employ numerous legal strategies to achieve their goals. This is why legal experts and lawyers must be among our key allies, and why legal actions on our part are of paramount importance.
- Coalitions are crucial. Solidarity is not about love or friendship but about political alliances among comrades. Partnerships with our traditional allies—LGBT+ groups—are essential, but we must go further. All those who uphold justice, democracy, pluralism, and equality—student protests have shown that such individuals exist across all sectors of society—should stand as our allies.

Now, more than ever, we must care for one another—and for the ideals to which so many lives, including our own, have been dedicated.

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