

Editorial

Gendering De-Democratization: Gender and Illiberalism in Post-Communist Europe

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Abstract

Many observers have written with concern about a growing “opposition to gender equality,” “anti-gender campaigns,” and even a “war on gender.” Often, these trends take place in countries that are witnessing a decline in democratic quality, a process captured by such labels as “democratic erosion,” “democratic backsliding,” or “autocratization.” This thematic issue brings together literature on gender equality and de-democratization with an emphasis on the role of illiberalism and a regional focus on post-communist Europe.

Keywords

autocratization; de-democratization; equality; Europe; gender; illiberalism; LGBTQIA+; populism

Issue

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1. Introduction

There is a growing concern about a global decline in democracy, a process captured by such labels as “democratic regression” (Erdmann & Kneuer, 2011), “democratic backsliding” (Waldner & Lust, 2018), and even “autocratization” (Cassani & Tomini, 2019). At the same time, many worry about “anti-gender campaigns” by “anti-gender movements” (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), “gender policy backsliding” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018), and even a “war on gender” (Korolczuk, 2014). Still, “there is a striking lack of research into the gendered aspects and implications of democratic backsliding” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 90). The contributions to this thematic issue aim to fill part of this gap by recounting and reconstructing how illiberalism and de-democratization have interacted to promote anti-gender politics in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia.

This introduction to the thematic issue is a plea for gendering research on de-democratization. It looks,

in turn, at gender, de-democratization, and illiberalism before combining them in a tentative causal model that is put up for further investigation. In doing so, it makes several points. The first one is that anti-gender politics comes in different gradations and manifestations—and so does de-democratization. Another point is that illiberalism is both a cause of anti-gender politics and a specific form of de-democratization. Finally, to appreciate the impact of de-democratization on gender equality, these concepts should be kept separate—analytically—and examined empirically.

2. Gender

Contemporary literature often uses the term “anti-gender” to describe movements, policies, and ideologies that threaten the rights of women and sexual minorities (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Under this broad heading, three gradations/manifestations can be distinguished. First, opposition to gender is defined as “any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and

gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage” (Verloo, 2018a, p. 6). Second, gender policy backsliding is defined as “states going back on previous commitments to gender equality norms as defined in their respective political contexts” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 92). Krizsán and Roggeband operationalize gender policy backsliding along four dimensions:

- Discursive delegitimation;
- Policy dismantling and reframing;
- Undermining of implementation;
- Erosion of accountability and inclusion mechanisms.

Finally, state antifeminism is defined as “the actions of agents or agencies of the state” that slow, stop, or push back “the mobilizations of the feminist movement (whether in or outside the state)” (Dupuis-Déri, 2016, p. 23). In other words, a change from a feminist partner to a “hostile state” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021, p. 610). The contributions to this thematic issue show that in post-communist Eastern Europe, all three anti-gender gradations/manifestations can be found, from opposition to gender in Slovakia (Maďarová & Harďoš, 2022; Zvada, 2022), gender policy backsliding in Romania (Dragolea, 2022), to state anti-feminism in Poland (Grzebalska, 2022; Zbytniewska, 2022) and even more so Hungary (Linnamäki, 2022; Parti, 2022; Takács et al., 2022).

3. De-Democratization

Like anti-gender politics, democratic decline has various gradations and manifestations. Autocratization is defined through its direction as “a process of regime change towards autocracy” (Cassani & Tomini, 2019, p. 22). De-democratization (Bogaards, 2018) is defined by its direction and its starting point. It does not preclude that democracies turn into autocracies, but it leaves the endpoint open. Democracies can become less democratic in multiple ways. Merkel and his collaborators identify four types of defective democracy: exclusive, delegative, illiberal, and tutelary (Bogaards, 2009). Hungary is a special case because it is defective across the board (Bogaards, 2018), if it has not yet crossed the threshold to an electoral authoritarian regime (Bogaards, 2020).

Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit* is critical of the region’s many hybrid regimes, combining elements of autocracy and democracy, and notes with concern that even among the comparatively strong democracies, scores have gone down (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022). However, using the Democracy Barometer, Bochsler and Juon (2020, p. 182) caution that “drastic cases, such as Hungary, and more recently, Poland...do not seem representative for the region.” Relying on data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, Stanley (2019)

is more pessimistic, but also notes substantial variation in post-communist Europe.

4. Illiberalism

The contributions to this thematic issue see a close connection between illiberalism and gender. Holzleithner (2022) argues that illiberal political thinking is fundamentally at odds with gender equality, discussing many examples of illiberal writing on gender. Linnamäki (2022) explores the link between illiberalism and familism, which sees the family as a central cultural value. Her empirical evidence comes from a content analysis of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in parliamentary discourses on child abuse in Hungary. Gaweda (2022) reveals the similarities in the discourse on the demographic crisis in Poland and Russia. Dragolea (2022) provides a discourse analysis of a new party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians. She observes a shift from gender traditionalism to an explicitly anti-gender discourse that is illiberal in nature. Zvada (2022) analyzes anti-gender rhetoric in the Slovak parliament. He finds that gender is primarily mentioned by illiberal parties, though with variation according to ideological background. Other contributions link illiberalism to populist actors and conservative ideology. Zbytniewska (2022) introduces the term “populist skirmishers” to draw attention to the pioneering work of individuals, mostly politicians, who seek to radicalize the agenda. Often, they do this by focusing on gender. Maďarová and Harďoš (2022) document the conservative/liberal divide in Slovak media and link this to the emergence of an anti-gender discourse.

This is in line with what other scholars have observed. For Laruelle (2022), traditional visions of gender relations are a defining feature of what she sees as the new ideology of “illiberalism.” Mancini and Palazzo (2021, p. 410) write that “gender conservatism is a common trait in all illiberal scripts.” The relationship between right-wing populism and gender is more complex (Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022), but Enyedi (2020) sees the heterosexual, married family as the core constituency of what he terms “paternal populism” (see also Fodor, 2022). Because of the close connection between illiberalism and anti-gender politics, several contributions to this thematic issue call for “gendering illiberalism” (Dragolea, 2022; Gaweda, 2022).

Sometimes, the gendered critique of illiberalism is difficult to distinguish from earlier critiques of neoliberalism. For example, Pető’s (2021, p. 320) discussion of the gendered consequences of the “illiberal polypore state” ties in seamlessly with her critique of the “neoliberal polypore state.” The two are even causally connected, as illiberalism “can best be understood as a majoritarian nationalist response to the failures of the global, neoliberal model” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 164).

The analogy extends to the relationship between neoliberalism and de-democratization. For Walby (2015, p. 117) “the neoliberal project of deregulation is a project

of de-democratization” (see also Alonso & Lombardo, 2018, p. 80). Whatever the merits of this argument, it is important to keep illiberalism and neoliberalism separate when studying their impact on gender equality.

5. Gendering De-Democratization

Several contributions to this thematic issue establish a direct link between de-democratization and anti-gender politics. Parti (2022) argues that de-democratization further undermined the reporting of sexual violence in Hungary. Through interviews with members of civil society organizations, she shows that the illiberal climate created by the Hungarian government discouraged victims of sexual violence to come forward. Takács et al. (2022) detail how gender-phobic policies in Hungary now even extend to children’s literature. They trace this development to prime minister Orbán’s return to power in 2010. Grzebalska (2022) explains the growing presence and normalization of women in the Polish defense sector by the pragmatism of illiberal policy-makers. Ergas et al. (2022) examine how “illiberal policymaking” has threatened gender studies programs around the world. They also briefly highlight three resistance strategies.

An investigation of the relationship between de-democratization and gender backlash requires an analytical separation between cause and effect. A model can be found in Vachudova’s (2020) careful analysis of the relationship between ethnopopulism and democratic backsliding. The concept of “gender democracy” (Galligan, 2015; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2019a) is less helpful. If less gender equality equals less democracy, if an attack on gender is an attack on democracy (Lombardo et al., 2021, p. 527), then there is no point in examining the impact of de-democratization on gender.

While for analytical purposes it is necessary to keep de-democratization and anti-gender politics separate, empirically, the two can go together and both can be cause and effect. For Biroli (2019, p. 2), for example, the “gender backlash” and the weakening of democracy are mutually reinforcing. She identifies four mechanisms of “engendered backsliding” (Biroli, 2019, p. 3): majoritarian conceptions of democracy that come at the expense of minorities, acceptance of hierarchies and inequalities as natural, criminalization of opposition, and replacement of individual rights with rights for narrowly defined families. Future research should explore

the causal relationships and mechanisms of gendered de-democratization in more depth.

A common pattern is that concentration of power (Verloo, 2018b, p. 226) and reduced civic space (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2019b) make it more difficult for women’s associations to organize effectively, make themselves heard, and exert influence on policy-making. Krizsán and Roggeband’s (2021, p. 622) social movement perspective interprets increasing state hostility towards gender equality as the result of state capture by anti-gender actors. One limitation of this approach is that it leaves little autonomy for political parties and the state. In Hungary, it was the government itself that invited, constructed, and funded anti-gender actors after it started a backlash against gender (Datta, 2021).

Figure 1 presents a basic overview of the causal relationships between illiberalism, de-democratization, and anti-gender politics. One can see that illiberalism, which is at the heart of this thematic issue, is both a cause of and part of de-democratization, through the phenomenon of illiberal democracy. De-democratization is separate from anti-gender politics and the arrow runs in one direction only, though in practice the relationship can be mutually reinforcing. At this stage, these causal claims are best treated as hypotheses in urgent need of theoretical development and empirical testing. Moreover, the picture is far from complete. It might be that populism and illiberalism have a direct impact on gender regimes, without the intermediate process of de-democratization. Also, the gender regime may be impacted by other factors.

6. Conclusion

Tripp (2013, p. 529) concluded that “there is still much that is not known about how regimes influence gender quality.” What is true for regime type holds even stronger for regime change. Post-communist Europe is witnessing a rise in illiberalism, de-democratization, and anti-gender politics. The contributions to this thematic issue have examined these processes in a variety of countries and a variety of spheres, policy domains, and institutions. Several contributions also identified strategies of resistance, sometimes in unexpected places, as in the article by Ergas et al. (2022). For Chenoweth and Marks (2022), “understanding the relationship between sexism and democratic backsliding is vital for those who wish to

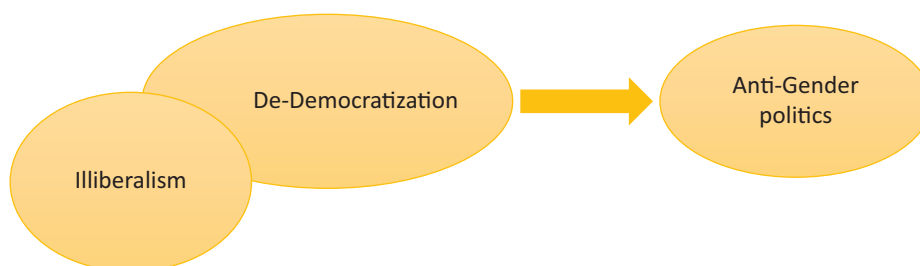


Figure 1. The causal chain between illiberalism, de-democratization, and anti-gender politics.

fight back against both.” This thematic issue seeks to contribute to that fight, agreeing with Verloo (2018b, p. 228) that the best way to protect feminist gains is to protect democracy, notwithstanding democracy’s own troubled history with gender equality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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