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The Feminist Project under Threat in Europe

Editors

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Editorial

The Feminist Project under Threat in Europe

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Abstract

Is the feminist project under threat in Europe? This thematic issue addresses the question in both theoretical and empirical ways, focusing on the various ways in which feminist politics are opposed and why, on what the impact of such opposition is, and how to improve our theoretical understanding of this particular manifestation of gender and politics. The issue addresses three major challenges: a need to reflect on the most suited concepts and theories in political and social sciences to understand what is at stake in Europe today; a need to vernacularize existing knowledge while forging global frames of analysis; and a need to avoid the risk of reifying oppositional forces and of reiterating dichotomous frames and categories. The responses to these challenges are: to analyse the threats to the feminist project as parts of larger projects against social justice and equality; to contrast macro narratives by engaging with the microlevel of the anti-feminist project, enabling a critique of mainstream scholarship; to analyse the threats to the feminist project as related to processes of changes to democracy, such as democratic backsliding; to give prominent attention to discursive, epistemic and symbolic processes; and finally to include studies on the response of feminist actors to the threats experienced. This collection of articles offers a variety of perspectives on the various threats to the feminist project in Europe today.

Keywords

abortion politics; anti-gender campaigns; democratic backsliding; discursive politics; Europe; feminism; LGBT politics; opposition; populism; sexual politics

Issue

This editorial is the introduction to the Thematic Issue “The Feminist Project under Threat in Europe”, edited by Mieke Verloo (Radboud University, The Netherlands) and David Paternotte (Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium).

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Is the feminist project under threat in Europe? Asking this question at the beginning of 2018—when we planned this thematic issue—was a rather rhetorical question, but by the end of 2018, the answer is more and more unequivocally positive. Opposition to feminist and sexual politics—even if a staple of politics in many times and places—has become more visible in Europe, and can now be found at national, regional and international level, and involves different kinds of actors and mechanisms. This new situation is characterized by a double phenomenon: an increasing polarization in politics and an increased politicization of gender and sexuality, leading to new forms of opposition and changing alliances

between oppositional actors. Given these changes, this thematic issue addresses the question in both theoretical and empirical ways. It focuses on the various ways in which feminist politics and gender equality policies are opposed and why, on what the impact of such opposition is, and how to improve our theoretical understanding of this particular manifestation of gender and politics.

By using the term “project”, we build on Sylvia Walby’s scholarship and regard feminism as “a set of processes and practices in civil society that create new meanings and social goals, drawing on a range of rhetorical and material resources” (Walby, 2011, p. 6). This allows us to widen the understanding of what constitutes a social

movement and not to restrict it to a particular ideology, to particular activities or to relatively stabilized and institutionalized groups and practices. The feminist project includes therefore a wider and more diverse set of ideas, actors and practices, as long as these can be described as “having a general objective directed at changing society and some actors and activities trying to make that happen” (Walby, 2011). As made clear in several contributions, this also makes room for the internal diversity of feminism(s), and acknowledges that it has historically been characterized by tensions, controversies and debates (see also Kantola & Verloo, 2018).

In Europe, various events such as massive demonstrations against same-sex marriage or the Istanbul Convention, attempts to restrict access to abortion or sex education and the electoral victories of antifeminist political parties have opened the eyes of the academic community, and research is progressively catching up. Indeed, scholars, who were often influenced by modernization theories, long assumed—at least implicitly—that oppositions would simply disappear over time, and did therefore not deserve thorough academic investigation. They also regarded their limited impact on policy making as further evidence of their irrelevance. Furthermore, the scarce scholarship on opposition was generally restricted to specific geographic areas such as Eastern or Southern Europe, and decades of European optimism combined with a vigorous faith in the positive effects of Europeanization led some scholars to assume that the advent of the European project would inevitably strengthen feminist and LGBT equalities in the region (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014; Lombardo & Forest, 2012). Elsewhere, the rise of homo- and femonationalisms (e.g., Bracke, 2012; Farris, 2017; Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010) was sometimes interpreted as the evidence of the irresistible although distorted progress of emancipatory projects, while shifting the focus away from “traditional” religious and political oppositions.

In brief, for most students of gender and sexuality politics in Europe, things could only get better, including in hostile settings. As a result, unlike in the United States, where the strength of the Christian right had inspired a wide scholarship (e.g., Fetner, 2008; Staggenborg, 1994; Stone, 2012), the oppositions and resistances to gender and sexual equality were largely understudied in Europe and researchers preferred to accompany and theorize social and political change, while collaborating with stakeholders to improve policy-making.

In recent years, the academic landscape has indubitably altered, as testified by the emergence of a literature that gradually fills major research gaps (e.g., Agrikoliansky & Collovald, 2014; Avanza & Della Sudda, 2017; Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Broqua & Fillieule, 2018; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017; Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Graff, Kapur, & Walters, in press; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Tuzcu, & Winkel, 2018; Gutsche, 2018; Hark & Villa, 2015; Köttig, Bitzan, & Petö, 2017; Kovats & Pooim, 2015; Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Lom-

bardo & Mergaert, 2013; Paternotte, van der Dussen, & Piette, 2016; Roth, 2018; Scrinzi, 2014; Spierings, Zaslave, Mugge, & de Lange, 2015; Verloo, 2018a). However, while these studies document and analyse recent opposition, there is still a strong lack of more conceptual and theoretical contributions. This thematic issue moves one step forward by bringing together different research networks within the gender and politics community, and by addressing conceptual and methodological challenges crucial to a further consolidation of the field. Three of them deserve a more thorough discussion in this editorial.

First, a deeper reflection on how we approach these oppositional dynamics is needed. This implies at least two steps, as illustrated by the various articles in this thematic issue (see Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018b; Walby, 2018; but also Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Meier & Severs, 2018). On the one hand, it is urgent to reflect on the most suited concepts to understand what is at stake in Europe today. In other words, we do not only need good empirics, but also a discussion of the promises and the limitations of our concepts and perspectives. On the other hand, we have to identify the approaches and theories in political and social sciences that are likely to help us shed some light on current developments, as well as the debates in which we want to locate our scholarship. This endeavor allows scholars to distance themselves from everyday understandings of the current situation, which are often obscured by underlying values and a sense of emergency. Echoing public debates, academic discussions should avoid as much as possible to judge or ridicule, both implicitly and explicitly, the actors and the dynamics under study. They should not be obscured by the apocalyptic account of a world falling apart and nostalgic longings for the “world of yesterday”—not to say a fascination for the power of dystopias (Segal, 2017). Having said this, we do not aim to condemn researchers’ public involvement or political positioning, but to warn them against the unexpected distortions ensuing from the use of specific glasses.

Second, we need to vernacularize existing knowledge while forging global frames of analysis. As mentioned earlier, the development of a field on oppositional politics in the United States has closely followed the successes of the religious right, leading to notions and approaches such as culture wars, morality politics, or the movements/counter-movements dynamics. While these have long demonstrated their analytical value, we need to reflect on the way such concepts and approaches travel across the Ocean and whether they are best suited to examine current developments in Europe. This implies investigating whether these concepts and approaches are conditioned by the specific trajectory of the context for which they were imagined (e.g., Engeli, Green-Pedersen, & Thorup Larsen, 2012; Mondo, 2018; Ozzano & Giorgi, 2015), as well as determining what they allow us to grasp, and unpacking the specific narratives to which research participates. While context clearly mat-

ters, we observe an increasing transnationalisation and globalisation of oppositional actors and dynamics (e. g., Corrêa, Paternotte, & Kuhar, 2018), which urges us to move away from methodological nationalism and European exceptionalism. As a result, instead of promoting vague and catch-all categories such as “populism” or “global right” or even “democracy”, or assuming a mere export of US oppositional dynamics, we need to invent new analytical frames or amend existing ones that allow us to apprehend transnational and global trends while accounting for local specificities and acknowledging the agency of local actors.

Third, current research runs the risk of reifying oppositional forces and of reiterating dichotomous frames and categories, which are often modeled after the canonical opposition between “us and them”. This applies to both “camps”, as feminism as well as other so-called progressive forces can be homogenized in problematic ways, and crucial tensions and divisions characterizing their “enemies” can be overlooked. We have to avoid being dragged into the increasing division of political actors along the binary lines opposing liberals to populists, while still keeping a clear vision on what is truly dangerous for the feminist project, or for other equality and social justice projects.

To conclude, aside from much needed empirical case studies, this thematic issue offers a wealth of conceptual and theoretical reflections on how to best understand what is happening. It sheds new light on established fields such as democratization studies or right-wing politics, and further confirms the importance of adopting a gendered lens, an insight often overlooked by leading scholars in the field (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Norocel, 2013).

In response to the three challenges described above: the need for better conceptualization, the need for more vernacularization and the importance of overcoming us versus them studies, this thematic issue offers five responses.

First, it analyzes the threats to the feminist project as parts of larger political projects against social justice and equality, driven by very different actors such as those linked to the Catholic Church, those that are part of the extreme right in Europe and beyond, but also those that hide under the seemingly more neutral cover of neoliberalism. Especially the articles by Alonso and Lombardo (2018), Kuhar and Paternotte (2018), Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) and Walby (2018) have much to offer here. This perspective is especially valuable in that it displaces the US based scholarship by contextualizing the European case. It also invites us to examine how different and sometimes competing projects can be combined instead of lumping them together (as Verloo, 2018, examines in showing how opposition to feminism and to science is linked for instance).

Second, it contrasts macro narratives by engaging with the microlevel of the anti-feminist project, enabling a critique of mainstream social movement scholarship.

Avanza (2018) in this issue provides a much-needed study of this micro-level of the anti-abortion movement in Italy. Verloo (2018) zooms in more closely at the actual voting behavior of an extreme-right party in the Netherlands. Meier and Severs (2018), as well as Norocel (2018), give new data but also a new conceptualization of practices of far-right politicians in Belgium, Hungary and Romania.

Third, it analyzes the threats to the feminist project as related very deeply to processes of changes to democracy in Europe, such as democratic backsliding and de-democratization. This perspective can profoundly change and improve scholarship on gender and democracy. There are several articles contributing in this line of response: Alonso and Lombardo (2018), Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) and Miškovska Kajevska (2018) in particular.

Fourth, this thematic issue gives prominent attention to discursive, epistemic and symbolic processes. The focus on episteme as a theoretical concept expands a narrower study of gender to include also the production of knowledge and truth in societies (Verloo, 2018b). This particular line of response also highlights the role of politicians, and in doing so, asks new questions about the performance of gender in politics, about the link between discursive and material positions taken by politicians, and about symbolical representation (see especially Meier & Severs, 2018, for this, as well as Norocel, 2018).

Finally, several articles include the response of feminist actors to the threat they experience. Both Aksoy (2018) and Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) shed light on the resistance by feminist forces and examine how the actors under attack are mobilizing.

In conclusion, in this thematic issue, we are not providing a single and consistent framework, but offering a variety of perspectives which illuminate and reflect on the various threats to the feminist project in Europe today. While it is also worthwhile to develop an encompassing frame that would host these various phenomena under the same roof (see Verloo, 2018a, for an example of that), we prefer here not to hide the tensions and oppositions between articles, in order to show the vitality of this new field of research. The contributions in this thematic issue raise a set of questions which are crucial to the further development of the field (next to highlighting the urgent need for more empirical studies): what are the epistemic and analytical effects of specific concepts and approaches on the knowledge we produce? What do they allow us to see and do they obscure our analysis? How politics and research are mutually intertwined and how do they affect each other? How categories elaborated elsewhere can travel to Europe and other contexts? Can a literature forged to study other difficult times in European history help us understand what is happening nowadays? What is our role and our responsibility as scholars in Europe today, when significant parts of the region are rapidly moving towards more authoritarian regimes?

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Disentangling and Locating the “Global Right”: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe

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Abstract

This article examines the development of campaigns against “gender ideology” in Europe, leading to the emergence of a specific family of mobilizations that we call anti-gender campaigns. These campaigns, started in the mid-1990s as a Catholic project in reaction to the results of the UN conferences of Cairo and Beijing, but developed significantly in several European countries after crucial encounters with right-wing populism. While recognizing the importance of these crossovers, we contend the interpretation that mobilizations against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism are the two faces of the same coin, and we plead for a more complex understanding of the ways in which distinct—and sometimes competing—projects can converge in specific settings. We argue that research on the “Global Right Wing” should therefore disentangle the various components of this phenomenon, and locate them in concrete settings. We show that this research strategy allows us to better grasp the specificities of each project and the ways in which they interact. Opening our eyes on crucial developments in contemporary Europe, this strategy also prevents researchers from falling into the trap of a global and unqualified backlash against everything achieved in terms of gender and sexuality in the last decades.

Keywords

anti-gender campaigns; anti-gender movement; Europe; gender ideology; global right; populism

Issue

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1. Introduction

In September 2017, EuroNGOs, the network of European NGOs for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Population and Development, convened the organization’s annual meeting in Brussels under the theme *Re: Frame. Promoting SRHR in a time of growing populism*. The aim was to “challenge thinking and stimulate debate around the rise of populism, its impact on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights issues and how to respond to this changing context” (EuroNGOs, 2017). Two months later, European Commissioners Tim-

mermans and Jourová dedicated the EU annual colloquium on fundamental rights to the study of “women’s rights in turbulent times” (European Commission, 2017). The objective was to reflect, in presence of government representatives from all Member states, “on the relationship between strong fundamental rights for women, and resilient democratic societies”, including the “shrinking space for civil society” and the increasingly hostile climate in specific Member states. These two events, which followed each other very closely, are good indicators of the current climate among European policy-makers¹ and by no means exceptions in the region. They translate

¹ One of the authors was a speaker at both events.

growing concern for the fate of liberal democracy and fears that fundamental rights might be under threat.

A similar trend is observed in the academic literature, with a rapid development of research on opposition to gender and sexual rights in Europe (e.g. Avanza & Della Sudda, 2017; Bracke & Paternotte, 2016a; Broqua & Fillieule, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Tuzcu, & Winkel, 2018; Hark & Villa, 2015; Köttig, Bitzan, & Petö, 2017; Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Krook, 2015; Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte, van der Dussen, & Piette, 2016; Verloo, 2018). Several of these works rely on the idea of a global backlash against gender equality and sexual rights (Faludi, 1991; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008), with powerful actors joining forces to oppose the rights of women and LGBT people. Most of the time, these threats are lumped together, merging phenomena as diverse as populism, far right parties, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism, neoliberalism or austerity politics. These are often gathered under the broad umbrella term of “Global Right”, which identifies right-wing actors in opposition to the advocates of progressive causes (with whom they generally interact) and echoes the idea of a globalization of US culture wars (Bob, 2012). In current debates on women’s and LGBT rights, it expresses the feeling that the “Right” is on the rise everywhere, and represents a threat for liberal democracy and fundamental rights (e.g., Graff, Kapur, & Walters, in press; Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2018; Roth, 2018).

Against such an alarmist reading, we argue that scholars should not be blinded by the spectacular manifestations of opposition faced in the last years or by the various victories recently won by these actors. They should rather engage, we contend, with the complexity of these oppositional dynamics and be careful about the concepts they use. This implies fine-grained theoretical and empirical work to better understand what is exactly at stake, as well as meticulous comparative research not to overstate what could be context-specific.

To substantiate this claim, we discuss the emergence and the development of anti-gender campaigns in Europe. In recent years, this region has indeed faced numerous attacks on women’s and LGBT rights. Intriguingly, most of these mobilizations regard “gender” as the matrix of the various policy reforms they combat in specific countries. As will be explained, these campaigns form a specific type of conservative opposition to gender and

sexual equality, which needs to be distinguished from other actors in Europe today.

Following Verloo’s emphasis on the variety of oppositions to gender equality in contemporary Europe (2018, pp. 215–216), we argue that concepts such as the so-called “Global Right” should be disentangled at a theoretical and empirical level, as well as located in concrete settings. More precisely, using the example of anti-gender campaigns in Europe, we show that recent forms of resistance should not be conflated with each other, although they may sometimes crucially intersect. These are often competing projects, which involve different types of actors and originate from historically different roots. In other words, what could at first sight look alike may proceed from distinct—and potentially competing or divergent—endeavors, and researchers should investigate how these projects can suddenly converge despite sometimes fundamental disagreement instead of regarding them as two components of the same ideological block.

This article is organized as follows: we first present anti-gender activism in Europe and discuss its historical roots, its discursive underpinnings, the policy issues it combats and its repertoire of action. Second, we trace the origins of this project back to the Roman Catholic Church. Third, we discuss the impact of the current right-wing populist wave on European anti-gender campaigns. Finally, we explain why, despite the decisiveness of such encounters, both projects should not be conflated. This piece relies on a recent project comparing these mobilizations in thirteen European countries, carried out between 2014 and 2017 (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).²

2. Anti-Gender Campaigns in Contemporary Europe³

Although anti-gender campaigns⁴ only became widely visible in recent years, they started in the mid-2000s. Spain appears as the earliest case in Europe: the Catholic Church, conservative groups and political parties mobilized against the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the same-sex marriage bill from 2004 (Aguilar Fernández, 2010, 2013). Early mobilizations have also been identified in Croatia (2006, mobilizations against sex education), Italy (2007, mobilizations against same-sex civil partnership) and Slovenia (2009, mobilization against marriage equality) (Cornejo & Pichardo, 2017; Garbagnoli, 2016, 2017; Kuhar, 2015).

² This article builds upon the findings of a project on anti-gender campaigns in Europe funded by the Budapest and the Brussels Offices of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2014–2017), as well as by the Université libre de Bruxelles and the Belgian Fonds national de la recherche scientifique (grant J.0115.16). Chaired by the authors, it covers 13 European countries: Austria (Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer), Belgium (Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte), Croatia (Amir Hodžić and Aleksandar Štulhofer), France (Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Josselin Tricou), Germany (Paula-Irene Villa), Hungary (Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető), Ireland (Mary McAuliffe and Sinéad Kennedy), Italy (Sara Garbagnoli), Poland (Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk), Portugal (Alberta Giorgi), Russia (Kevin Moss), Slovenia (Roman Kuhar) and Spain (Monica Cornejo and J. Ignacio Pichardo). Although researchers did not adopt a common methodology, they applied the same analytical grid and converged around a limited number of questions. Results have been published in English and in French (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Here, the aim is not to provide the reader with a summary of empirical findings, but to discuss the way oppositional movements are usually approached in the literature on Europe.

³ Parts of this section rely on the introduction and the conclusion of Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

⁴ In most countries, these mobilizations are the result of collective action, explaining why we sometimes use the term “anti-gender movements”. However, as Russian campaigns have been engineered directly from the Kremlin and are increasingly part of public policy in Poland, Hungary and Italy, the term “campaigns” also encompasses these newer developments.

Most mobilizations, however, started in the 2010s, and 2012 appears as a tipping point, which corresponds to the climax of the “Manif pour Tous”, the massive French mobilization against same-sex marriage (Paternotte, 2015). This movement managed to bring thousands of demonstrators in the streets of Paris and various other French cities for more than two years, and it has significantly impacted policy-making on issues related to gender and sexuality (Paternotte, 2018; Perreau, 2016). In a country generally associated with sexual liberalism and secularism, this unexpected success appeared as a major victory, which could therefore be emulated elsewhere.

From this moment, similar mobilizations spread across the region, in countries as different as Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia or Slovakia. These mobilizations were all triggered by a specific policy debate, which vary cross-nationally, and can occur as a reaction to a concrete policy proposal (such as in France, where protests by the “Manif pour tous” were organized as a reaction to François Hollande’s pledge to introduce same-sex marriage) or as a form of prophylaxis against claims and policies that could emerge in the future. This happened for instance in Croatia (Hodžič & Štulhofer, 2017) and in Slovakia (Smrek, 2015), where anti-gender movements anticipated possible bills on marriage equality and called for a constitutional referendum to change their national constitutions before LGBT activists and their allies could move forward. Interestingly, despite the fact that some differences can be accredited to the historical and political contexts of post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the East-West divide does not offer a particularly useful analytical lens.

Although the triggers vary across borders, a common pattern may be identified: these mobilizations share a critique of gender, labeled as “gender ideology”, “gender

theory” or “(anti)genderism”. They all claim to combat “gender”, which is seen as the root of their worries and the matrix of the reforms they want to oppose. Therefore, following an emic approach (Avanza, 2018), we call these mobilizations anti-gender campaigns to insist on the specificity of this wave of opposition, in comparison with other forms of opposition to gender and sexual equality. The identification of a common enemy by these activists allows us to bring together mobilizations which could otherwise look like separate national events. These striking resemblances are illustrated by the logos of these movements (Figure 1), which can ultimately be counted down to only two different symbols. These commonalities are further attested by the observation of cross-border patterns of mobilization, which include a common discourse, a traveling repertoire of action, and similar strategies, which are presented in the remainder of this section along with the main areas of discontent.

2.1. What Do Campaigners Mean by “Gender Ideology”?

“Gender ideology”, or even more so “gender theory”, should not be confused with the scholarship developed in the field of gender studies, but is a term initially created to oppose women’s and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality. Erasing fierce controversies within gender and sexuality studies and the complex interplay between activism and the academy, it operates as a powerful interpretive frame. According to its opponents, “gender ideology” is the ideological matrix of the different reforms they try to oppose, which pertain to intimate/sexual citizenship debates, including LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education.



Figure 1. Logos of anti-gender campaigns in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 269).

“Gender ideology”, however, is not only regarded as an anthropological and epistemological threat but also as a covert political strategy, a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values on average people. Anti-gender ideologues often invoke George Orwell’s concept of “newspeak”, and accuse feminists, LGBT activists and gender scholars of manipulating language and hiding their objectives behind a democratic sounding language of equality and human rights (Lopez Trujillo, 2005, p. 8). They claim that gender studies are a theory of power, and question the very notion of democracy, articulating knowledge production to political enterprises. They pretend therefore to uncover the underpinnings of the nice language about (gender) equality, warning fellow citizens about its dangers.

Anti-gender theorists also claim that popular will has been confiscated by corrupt elites, and argue that “gender ideology” is a new form of totalitarianism, which would be more dangerous than Marxism and Fascism (Anatrella, 2011; Kuby, 2012, 2016; Schooyans, 1997, 2000). Kuby argues for instance that “totalitarianism has made a costume change and now appears in the mantle of freedom, tolerance, justice, equality, anti-discrimination and diversity—ideological backdrops that prove to be amputated, distorted terms” (Kuby, 2016, p. 12). Some also depict “gender ideology” as a new leftist ideology invented on the ashes of communism (Contreras & Poole, 2011). According to them, the achievement of socialism remains the goal of the revolution, but it can no longer be reached only through social revolution, as the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has clearly showed. This argument resonates particularly well in post-Socialist European countries, where gender theory is often classified as new Marxism (Cestnik, 2013).

In some contexts, “gender ideology” is also interpreted as imposed by the West on the rest of world. Often understood as a symptom of the devaluation of EuroAmerica, it is seen as a neocolonial project through which Western activists and their governments try to export their decadent values and to secularize non-Western societies (Alzamora Revoredo, 2005, p. 559; Peeters, 2013, p. 79; Sarah, 2013, p. 4; for a critical analysis, Graff & Korolczuk, 2018). International institutions like the UN or the EU and private funders such as the Open Society or the Ford Foundation are accused of playing a central part in this process, especially by forcing poorer and less influential countries to accept morally problematic laws and regulations in exchange for support and money. This is the reason why, for instance, Pope Francis prefers the expression “ideological colonization” when he refers to “gender ideology”, and several Vatican documents, especially in the context of the two Synods on the family, fustigate Western attempts to intermingle in the national policies of countries from the Global South (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016b).

2.2. What Is Combatted

Depending on the country, anti-gender campaigners have combatted LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools, gender itself (as meant in gender violence, gender studies and gender mainstreaming), as well as mobilized in defense of religious freedom and a certain understanding of democracy. These five areas of cross-national contention are detailed below.

(1) Debates around same-sex marriage and civil partnership appear as the most powerful triggers across the region. Related issues include fierce debates on second-parent and joint same-sex adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive technologies and similar concerns about access to kinship by (gay and lesbian) individuals and same-sex couples. Often, anti-gender activists claim they defend the best interest of the child against the “egoistic wishes and desires” of adults, and warn citizens against a slippery slope: same-sex marriage would necessary lead to more controversial policy reforms in a near future, and to an anthropological revolution because it denies motherhood and fatherhood, negates sexual differences and gender complementarity and thereby eliminates “the anthropological basis of the family” (Pope Francis, 2016, p. 56).

While lesbian and gay rights are the forefront targets of anti-gender movements, transgender rights have rarely been attacked, even when the issue was discussed in Parliament, as in 2016 in France. Yet, a few exceptions can be identified, such as the 2015 Slovenian referendum campaign, during which transgender people were objectified as the ultimate goal of gender ideologists, or the 2017 campaign by the Spanish group *HazteOír*, which attempted to drive around a bus covered with the sign “Boys have penises. Girls have vulvas. Don’t let them lie to you”. A similar version of the bus, called the Free Speech Bus, later drove around Manhattan and other locations in the United States, as well as in Nairobi and in various Latin American countries Mexico, Chile, etc.) (Holden, 2017).

(2) Reproductive rights were historically at the roots of the discourse on “gender ideology”, and issues like abortion, contraception and reproductive technologies remain at the center of the debate (Grabowska, 2014; Heinen, 2013), as shown by Spanish debates on the abortion law in 2011 and the 2016 proposal of the Polish ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to ban abortion. Reproductive rights, particularly abortion, are interpreted as being part of what Jean-Paul II called the “culture of death” and as such in opposition to the “culture of life” promoted by the Church (Grzebalska & Soós, 2016; Vaggione, 2012).⁵

(3) Sex and gender education in schools appear as another crucial area of discontent. Since 2006, Croats have been discussing different modules of sexual education, in which gender equality and homosexuality appear to

⁵ Abortion is sometimes connected to euthanasia through the notion of “culture of death”. While the issue is not discussed in most countries under study, this is the main terrain of the small Belgian anti-gender movement (Voyé & Dobbelaere, 2015).

be contentious issues (Bijelić, 2008; Hodžić, Budesa, Štulhofer, & Irvine, 2012; Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Kuhar, 2015). Similarly, French mobilizations started with a discussion about the insertion of “gender” in textbooks in 2011 (Béraud, 2013). In all these cases, opponents invoke the figure of the innocent child and claim that “gender ideology” has severe consequences on children’s development, not the least by blurring anthropological references about the sexes. Furthermore, such education and alleged promotion of “sexual permissiveness” is seen as encouraging the hypersexualization of children.

(4) Gender itself has been under discussion. In addition to debates on the notion itself, three issues directly connected to gender relations have been targeted: gender violence, gender mainstreaming, and gender studies. Although these are intrinsically different issues, they all aim at transforming unequal gender relations and are accused of being covert vehicles of “gender ideology” because of their use of the word “gender”. Polish debates on “gender ideology” started in 2012 in opposition to the ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Graff, 2014). In Slovenia or Bulgaria, anti-gender activists have similarly claimed that this Convention would turn “gender ideology” into the official ideology of the state. Spain has experienced comparable debates, with opponents suggesting the use of expressions like “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence” to avoid the abhorred term “gender”.

Gender mainstreaming was at the core of the debate in Germany and Austria. According to activists, it is a totalitarian ideology and a non-democratic practice, imposed on European countries by the feminist lobbies and elites from Brussels. As claimed by the German anti-gender activist Gabriele Kuby:

For the first time in history, power elites are claiming authority to change men’s and women’s sexual identity through political strategies and legal measures. They had previously lacked expertise in social engineering. However, today this is happening before our eyes on a global scale. The strategy’s name: *gender mainstreaming*. The battle is being fought under the banner of equality of men and women, but that has proven to be a tactical transitional stage. (2016, p. 42)

Gender was finally discussed in connection to gender studies and the existence of gender curricula and gender departments at universities. Often brushed aside as a waste of public money, gender studies are constructed as ideological and non-scientific, and the anti-gender project appears as a struggle over the legitimacy of knowledge production. In fact, anti-gender campaigns can be read as a project of alternative knowledge production, which aims to dismantle post-structural research in social sciences and humanities in particular as these are not in line with allegedly unquestionable findings of natural sciences, particularly biological, medical and psy-

chological studies about essential differences between male and female sex (including differences in male and female brains) and complementarity of male and female sexes. This has had severe outcomes in several countries. In France for instance, the region of Ile-de-France has dismantled its crucial financial support to gender studies. In 2018, the Hungarian government has threatened teaching programs in gender studies.

(5) Campaigners claim that democracy as such is endangered as they equate “gender ideology”—particularly in post-socialist Europe—with (new) Marxism and the communist political regime in order to emphasize its undemocratic character. More recently, these actors have claimed that they defend religious freedom and denounce rising forms of “christianophobia” in Europe, for instance by forcing Catholics to act or speak against their conscience and their beliefs. In order to support their claims they often make explicit connections to the situation of Christians in the Middle East (Eberstadt, 2016).

2.3. How Do They Fight?

As indicated by our study across 13 countries in Europe, these campaigns share a distinctive repertoire of action as well as a specific set of strategies, which are crucial to their identity and specificity. Protests display a colorful, youthful and festive outlook, far away from stereotypical images of conservative mobilizations and reminiscent of Pride Parades or techno music gatherings. Through this, anti-gender campaigners try to build a pluralizing (and secularizing) self-image against the religious or conservative imagery often conveyed in public opinions. It projects itself as a rational, moderate and commonsensical actor, who raises its voice because things have simply “gone too far”. Often, this movement also uses a self-victimization strategy, presenting itself as the true defender of oppressed people, of a majority who is silenced by powerful lobbies and elites, as well as the savior of national authenticity against international powers. These choices are instrumental in hiding the religious and political origins of the movement, while indicating a modernization and a professionalization of conservative activism in Europe (Datta, 2018).

The repertoire of action includes demonstrations, stand-ins and sit-ins, petitions and the collection of signatures, litigation, expertise and knowledge production, lobbying, referendum campaigns, electoral mobilization, party politics (including the establishment of new political parties), incitement to vigilance and ad hominem exposure campaigns in schools and hospitals. Anti-gender activists are extremely active on the web and take advantage of the possibilities offered by new information and communication technologies. Their online activities are multidimensional and go far beyond a mere informative function (Tricou, 2015). This active presence on the web does not mean that the movement does not target traditional media. The organization of events, lectures,

preparation of statements and press conferences are all targeted towards traditional media outlets (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017). Anti-gender campaigns also include extensive lobbying, both at national and transnational level.

Finally, the recurring usage of the image of an innocent and endangered child appears as a mechanism for triggering moral panic (Thompson, 1998). By seeking to produce a moral panic, anti-gender activists try to legitimize their particular claims, establish the validity of the issues raised, stir up concern among the general population and attract media attention. They present their claims in terms of good versus evil and use specific examples to present them as general (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). This strategy is reminiscent of the early anti-gay rights movements in the United States, such as the 1977 “Save Our Children” campaign led by Anita Bryan (Fejes, 2008, p. 99).

3. A Catholic Strategy

“Gender ideology” is not only an analytical frame, but also a political strategy. As such, it should not only be read as a reaction to social transformations, but also as a political project. As documented by numerous scholars and activists (Buss, 1998, 2004; Buss & Herman, 2003; Butler, 2006; Case, 2011, 2016; Chappel, 2006; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017; Girard, 2007, p. 334; Swiebel, 2016), it has a history, and its presence has been reported in other parts of the world (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016a). This discourse was elaborated in Catholic circles in the mid-1990s as a response to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in the UN rights system at the 1994 UN conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Beijing conference on Women. At the time, the Holy See attempted to oppose the notion of gender because it feared that it would become, along with the institutionalization of sexual and reproductive rights, a vehicle for the international recognition of abortion, additional attacks on traditional motherhood and a legitimization of homosexuality. The Holy See hence interpreted the results of Cairo and Beijing as a major defeat.

As highlighted by this literature, the notion of “gender ideology” was designed to become an important element of the counter-strategy mounted by the Vatican and its allies. It turns the notion of gender into the ideological matrix of a set of abhorred ethical and social reforms, and provides the Vatican with an interpretative frame which connects different sorts of actors under the frame of a gender conspiracy (Peeters, 2013). Relying on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony (Brustier, 2014; Peeters, 2011, p. 221), this strategy also aims at propagating alternative ideas by using and subverting the notions it repudiates in order to contest the supposed cultural and political hegemony of “postmodern gender”. The Church has reclaimed progressive notions such as gender or feminism to change their meaning, resignifying what liberal voices have been trying to articulate over the last decades. These efforts led in 2003 to

the publication of the *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* by the Pontifical Council for the Family with the support of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This official document, which resembles a dictionary with entries on a wide range of ethical topics (including several on gender), aims at reclaiming the true meaning of words. This strategy connects to crucial debates in contemporary Catholicism (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016b; Case, 2016). It builds upon John Paul II’s theology of the body (Carnac, 2013a, 2013b; Case, 2011, 2016; Favier, 2014; Garbagnoli, 2014, 2016; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017) and New Feminism (Couture, 2012) while echoing his discourse on the “culture of death”. It also mirrors Cardinal Ratzinger’s anxieties about the propagation of hedonism, laicism, relativism and individualism in Western societies (Ratzinger & Messori, 1985). “Gender ideology” should nevertheless not be understood as a mere attempt to set John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s theologies in motion. The Catholic Church has been instrumental in the emergence and the development of the notion of “gender ideology” both as an answer to the interrogations of the Vatican and as a strategy of action. As these scholars have shown and as the burgeoning literature on these mobilizations on the ground is currently documenting, its role cannot be circumscribed to a laboratory of ideas, for the Church has also offered a space where intellectuals and activists could meet and exchange views and strategies, and has provided a powerful mobilization and diffusion network.

Moreover, anti-gender campaigns must be located within wider priorities of the Vatican, particularly the project of New Evangelization (Aguilar Fernández, 2011; Béraud & Portier, 2015; Paternotte, 2017; Tricou, 2016). This project, which was initiated by the same actors under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, is an attempt by the Church to regain its influence in secularizing parts of the world (among which Europe is central), and to reaffirm the faith of its followers. Against a privatization of religion, it insists on the public role of religion, inviting lay Catholics to defend their ideas publicly and to mobilize into politics and onto the streets. The evangelizing role of the family and the importance of its defense by political authorities are often emphasized, and new technologies, especially the Internet, must be explored as new evangelization devices. Lay believers are crucial in this endeavor, and key actors include new ecclesial communities such as the Opus Dei, the Charismatic Renewal or the Neocatechumenal Way, which are also mobilized against “gender ideology”.

Having said this, numerous factors mitigate the success of this offensive on the ground and it would be misleading to picture the emergence of this social movement as a campaign entirely engineered from the Vatican. Anti-gender mobilizations did not happen everywhere in the Catholic world and did not happen with the same intensity. Moreover, Catholics are not the main driving force behind this movement everywhere, and the

actual cooperation between anti-gender movement and the Roman Catholic Church varies significantly, depending on the current (moral) position of the Church and its historic role in each country. The factors that explain the influence of the Catholic Church on national politics include the nature of the relations between Rome and the national Church, the divisions within the Church in each country, the specific pattern of state-church relations (Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015; Gryzmala-Busse, 2015; Manuel, Reardon, & Wylcox, 2006; Pérez-Agote, 2012), past legacies like the involvement of the Church under authoritarian regimes and the association between Catholicism and the construction of the nation (Ayoub, 2016; Gryzmala-Busse, 2015). The role of the Church varies from very few connections to the movement in Germany to closely intertwined collaborations, where the Church is a key actor in the movement, such as in Poland or Italy and to a certain extent in Spain and Croatia.

4. The Impact of Right-Wing Populism

Several scholars have pinpointed striking resonances between right-wing populism and anti-gender mobilizations (e.g., Chetcuti-Osorovitz & Teicher, 2016; Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Grzebalska & Soós, 2016; Hark & Villa, 2015; Kemper, 2016; Köttig et al., 2017; Kováts & Pöim, 2015), as well as right-wing populist attacks on gender and the role of gender in right-wing populism more generally (Norocel, 2013; Scrinzi, 2014; Spierings, Zaslove, Mugge, & de Lange, 2015). In such accounts, anti-gender campaigns are sometimes presented as another element of the right-wing populist wave that Europe is currently facing, especially in activism and policy circles. Two elements are often emphasized by these scholars: on the one hand, populism as a distinctive political style, a specific way of doing politics and, on the other hand, the conservative nature of the claims, which often posits anti-gender campaigns on the right of the political spectrum. Our project confirms that the current right-wing populist wave has decisively contributed to the success of anti-gender campaigns in Europe. In several countries, it has allowed anti-gender campaigns (originally a handful of people in many places) to grow significantly and to resonate more broadly in European societies. The vague notion of “gender ideology” or “gender theory”, with all it involves, appears as a cement which binds together various actors who might not share the same ideological stands across all issues they address (Kováts & Pöim, 2015), while populism offers a springboard allowing the anti-gender cause to appeal to a much wider audience. This observation reminds Mudde’s idea of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (2004, p. 543), as this political scientist insists on the capacity of populism as an ideology to be combined with other ideological tenets.

More precisely, findings show that anti-gender campaigns resonate with right-wing populism in four different ways. First, in some countries, right-wing populists

are among the main drivers of anti-gender campaigns. This is for instance the case in Germany and Austria (Hark & Villa, 2015; Kemper, 2016; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Villa, 2017). To a lesser extent, the French “Manif pour Tous” has sometimes used a populist toolkit, especially at the height of its opposition to François Hollande’s government, and dissenting voices split up to create the *Printemps français* (French Spring), presented as an emulation of the recent Arab Spring (Perreau, 2016). Similarly, in countries like Russia, Poland, Hungary or Italy, actors behind anti-gender campaigns are closely connected to the political parties in power (which are often considered as populists), turning to some extent the struggle against “gender ideology” into a state policy (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Kováts & Pető, 2017; Moss, 2017).

Second, central elements of anti-gender and right-wing populist discourses look alike, as indicated by examples from three recent debates in which right-wing populists were vocal: skepticism towards European integration, national and racial anxieties, and resistances to globalization. Right-wing populists equally attack the so-called Brussels elites and oppose their skepticism on the European project, sometimes denounced as a form of neo-colonialism, to the authenticity of national sovereignty. The nostalgia of a lost golden age, when everything was simpler, also nourishes a quest for firmer foundations at the time everything is seen as disappearing, which means nature and the nation (Villa, 2017). These debates often intersect with fears about national and racial identities, particularly in the context of the so-called refugee crisis and a global discussion about Islam, which profoundly interrogates European secularism (Bracke, 2013; Scott, 2009). These discourses also reflect demographic anxieties, which are particularly strong in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, and connect to the worries about what it means to be French, German or Polish in a globalized world. This explains—in both discourses—the specific focus on the child as the future of the nation. Similarly, opposition to specific forms of parenting, kinship and reproduction partly ensues from worries about the (re)production of the nation (Fassin, 2014; Perreau, 2016). In some cases, these are not only debates about national identities, but also about the collective destiny of Europe, understood as the standard-bearer of civilization, often in opposition to Islam.

Third, these discourses employ similar rhetorical mechanisms, identified by Wodak (2015, p. 4) as the necessary toolkit of populist rhetoric: victim-perpetrator reversal, scapegoating, and the construction of conspiracy theories. They rely on the:

“Politics of fear”, which seeks to instill the fear of real or imagined dangers while instrumentalizing minorities or other social groups to create scapegoats, and play on emotional registers “to raise the affects of the people and arouse their immediate feelings”. (Benveniste, Campani, & Lazaridis, 2016, p. 12)

As pointed out by Müller (2016), both discourses cannot be disproven, and rely heavily on the idea of common sense, as opposed to elitist knowledge.

Fourth, repertoires of action crucially resemble each other. Anti-gender activists and right-wing populists make skillful use of social media, which they also employ as a critique of traditional media, often denounced as being kidnapped by “corrupt elites” and as such unworthy and fake (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017). They rely heavily (and rather successfully) on the use of referenda (e.g., Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia), and petition political authorities to initiate a referendum in other countries (e.g., France). Both types of activism claim to give a voice back to the people.

5. Disentangling Anti-Gender Campaigns from Right-Wing Populism

All this may give the impression that anti-gender campaigns are just another component of rising right-wing populism in Europe. However, in the remainder of this section, we try to develop a more complex understanding of these encounters. Because of the four reasons discussed below, we argue that, despite the crucial role played by right-wing populism in several European countries, these two phenomena should not be conflated with each other, for instance by considering them as two faces of the same coin. They should rather be disentangled in order to understand how they resonate and/or interact with each other and may significantly contribute to their mutual development. This alternative research strategy would also allow a better understanding of the specificities of each enterprise.

First, despite a lack of conceptual clarity and the variety of definitions and understandings of populism (Priester, 2012; Taggart, 2000), a historical perspective unveils the different roots of these projects. As we have shown, “gender ideology” was born out of a Catholic project and first responded to specific concerns within the Church. It takes its roots in contemporary debates within Catholicism as well as from the project of New Evangelization. As such, it is not originally linked with right-wing populist ideology. Furthermore, as emphasized by Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016), the relations between right-wing populism and religion are not straightforward. Right-wing populism is not a religious phenomenon and, as highlighted by these authors, the instrumentalization of religion may happen in extremely different ways within specific political projects. In such a context, right-wing populists may have used the “gender ideology” discourse without being aware of its Catholic roots. One should also not overlook that the Catholic Church has historically maintained uneasy relations with right-wing populism, as illustrated by a 2017 article published in the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Written by

clergymen belonging to Pope Francis’s close circle, it explicitly mentions Donald Trump and Steve Bannon and denounces the “surprising” alliance between “Evangelical Fundamentalism” and “Catholic Integralism” in the United States (Spadaro & Figueroa, 2017).

Second, unlike defenders of “gender ideology”, right-wing populists do not necessarily oppose gender and sexual equality.⁶ For instance, as widely discussed in the literature on femo- and homonationalism (e.g., Bracke, 2012; Farris, 2017; Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010), some actors labeled as right-wing populists have increasingly endorsed women’s and LGBT rights, especially in Northern Europe. This is particularly true when these rights are used to stigmatize specific populations like migrants and people with a Muslim background.

Third, anti-gender campaigns are not restricted to Europe and locating them—that means looking at the forms they take in different parts of the world—further contributes to a more complex analysis. Latin America is the other world region where this war on gender is waged intensively. Debates on “gender ideology” actually started earlier in this part of the world (Corrêa, 2018), but mass demonstrations against gender only appeared in the last years (e.g., Corrêa, 2017; Miskolci & Campana, 2017; Viveros Vigoya & Rodríguez Rondón, 2017). As claimed in a recent piece authored with Sonia Corrêa (Corrêa, Kuhar, & Paternotte, 2018):

The populism analytical frame, so common in European and the US, is inappropriate to study mobilizations in Latin America. Indeed, populist imaginaries and practices have long been deeply ingrained in the regional political culture.

Consequently, “populism has no side” and cannot be easily mapped onto the left-right divide in the region” (Lavinias, 2017; see also Grigera, 2017). Moreover, ongoing research highlights a distinctive set of actors. The role of Evangelicals in the region and their unprecedented collaboration with Catholics cannot be overlooked. Research on countries like Brazil (Miskolci, 2018) reveals even more complex constellations including ambitious politicians, extreme-right activists, center-liberals connecting their opposition to the state to anti-gender arguments, middle-class campaigners longing for social order and transnationally connected Jewish right-wing activists. In brief, locating anti-gender mobilizations in a specific setting and comparing them to similar developments in other parts of the world reminds us that populism designates different realities across the globe (Hadiz & Chrysosgelos, 2017), while it unveils more complex sets of anti-gender actors.

Finally, anti-gender campaigns should not be restricted to the right, especially as left-wing leaders have endorsed this struggle in different parts of the world.

⁶ This is also true of the Catholic Church and religion more generally. Religious actors do not necessarily oppose gender and sexuality rights because of their faith or their doctrine, and several religious denominations (including Catholicism) are currently experiencing fierce internal debates on these issues.

Again, a comparison with Latin America is insightful. In that region, anti-gender campaigns are no monopoly of the right and the leftist Ecuadorian president Rafael Corréa was one of the first to attack “gender ideology”. As early as 2013, he denounced it as an instrument aimed at destructing the family in one of his weekly TV programs. More recently, the Mexican leader López Obrador won the general elections in coalition with the Evangelical party Encuentro social, that opposes “gender ideology”.

However, left-wing support to mobilizations against “gender ideology” are no Latin American exception, and similar cases are found in Europe. In France, the Socialist Party has always been divided on LGBT issues, particularly in relation to family rights, and reproductive technologies more generally. During same-sex marriage debates, several leaders such as former Prime ministers Rocard and Jospin openly disavowed the government, and Jospin’s wife, Sylviane Agacinski, was even invoked as a reference by anti-gender activists (Borrillo, 2017; Paternotte, 2018; Perreau, 2014). Sara Garbagnoli has also described how important Marxists voices in Italy have publicly endorsed anti-gender claims (2017, p. 166).

6. Conclusion

This article examines the development of campaigns against “gender ideology” in Europe, leading to the emergence of a specific family of social movements that we call anti-gender campaigns. These campaigns started as a Catholic project in reaction to the results of the UN conferences of Cairo and Beijing in the mid-1990s. In several European countries, this movement developed significantly after various encounters with right-wing populism, expanding far beyond its original Catholic cradle. While recognizing the importance of these crossovers, we contend the interpretation that mobilizations against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism are the two faces of the same coin, and we plead for a more complex understanding of the ways in which distinct—and sometimes competing—projects can actually converge in specific settings.

The example of anti-gender campaigns helps us illustrate and substantiate the argument we want to make: research on the so-called “Global Right Wing” should disentangle the various components of this phenomenon, and locate them in concrete settings. The concept of “Global Right Wing” (Bob, 2012) is indeed far too vague to be meaningful, and current debates in academia, activism and policy circles in Europe and the United States often conflate different projects under such an overarching label. This prevents us from examining how diverse actors, discourses and strategies can interact with each other, and obscures our understanding of what is currently at stake.

Disentangling these various phenomena, as we do with campaigns against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism, appears as a more fruitful research strategy, which allows us to grasp the specificities of each project

and the ways in which they interact with each other. As we have demonstrated, it permits us to understand the history and the main features of these mobilizations, which are intimately connected to the Roman Catholic Church, as well as to unveil the crucial role played by intersections with rising right-wing populism.

Moreover, locating the “Global Right” in concrete settings allows us to analyze the specific forms taken by the various oppositions to women’s and LGBT rights and, as already mentioned, to distance ourselves from overarching ideas such as a global export of US culture wars (e.g., Kaoma, 2009, 2012). While European actors are connected to US ones in various ways, such an approach usually overlooks the home-grown roots of the phenomenon, the forms it takes in different settings (Ozcano & Giorgi, 2015), and the specificities of the various transcontinental and transnational networks being established on these issues (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, pp. 253–271).

This research strategy also permits a better understanding of the forms taken by the same type of opposition—here campaigns against “gender ideology”—in other settings. Indeed, while the latter are undoubtedly a global project, they take a flavor which is often specific to the context. For instance, in Russia and the countries under its influence, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin play an active role in the development of these campaigns, turning what is usually a social movement into a state policy. Similarly, in Latin America, specific forms of encounters, this time between Catholics and Evangelicals, contribute to the success of these mobilizations, while the connections with populism—which has a totally different history and meaning in the region—are less obvious. Therefore, if a global or a transnational perspective is needed to highlight cross-border similarities, a comparative approach sheds new light on the domestic reception of these transnational trends, and addresses the impact of national and local factors on the circulation of discourses, strategies, actors, etc.

To conclude, these reflections invite us to move beyond a rather naïve and teleological account of gender and sexual politics, particularly in contemporary Europe. Scholars, observers and actors alike were generally convinced that Europe was on an unstoppable way toward “full” gender equality and sexual citizenship. They assumed that such forms of opposition were largely foreign to the European experience or could only subsist as remains of the past, primarily in Eastern Europe or in Catholic countries such as Italy or Ireland. The development of anti-gender movements in a large number of European countries, both East and West, has largely invalidated this understanding of sexual politics. The amendment of this understanding should not, however, propel us into another grand narrative: the one of a global and unqualified backlash against everything achieved in terms of gender and sexuality in the last decades.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Gender Knowledge, and Opposition to the Feminist Project: Extreme-Right Populist Parties in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article aims to better understand current opposition to feminist politics by analyzing positions of extreme-right populist parties on gender knowledge, “explicit and implicit representations concerning the differences between the sexes and the relations between them, the origins and normative significance of these, the rationale and evidence underpinning them and their material form” (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 48). These understandings contribute to constructing a societal truth on gender and/or to setting the terms of the political debate about gender issues. This article introduces and uses the theoretical concept of episteme to highlight the systematic nature of discursive institutional settings, and the role knowledge and truth production plays in processes reproducing or countering gender inequality. The article analyzes the positions of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands and their discursive attacks on the feminist project in the Netherlands, in which these opponents use a redefined concept of ‘cultural Marxism’. Through this analysis, the article illustrates the theoretical argument that epistemic dynamics play a strong role in opposition to feminist politics, that the shifting epistemic framing of science is important in these oppositions and that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed.

Keywords

episteme; Europe; extreme right; sciences; gender equality; gender knowledge; political party; sexual equality; social complexity theory; the Netherlands

Issue

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1. Introduction

Extreme-right populist parties often express strong positions against feminism and feminists, frequently oppose sexual equality and are vocal against abortion rights (Köttig, Bitzan, & Pető, 2017). This article argues that the problem that extreme-right populist parties pose for the feminist project (Walby, 2011) is not just linked to their political positioning on gender and sexuality. To better understand the impact these parties may have on the feminist project, we need to analyze their positioning on gender and sexuality in conjunction with their understanding of, and positioning on, knowledge and truth in our societies. This article first explores this more theoretically, drawing on Walby’s social complexity theory. In the

second section, the article presents a concise analysis of the specific positions the two major extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands have taken on gender and sexuality, and of their positions on knowledge and truth. The current discursive attack on the feminist project, in which opponents redefine the concept of “cultural Marxism” (see Jamin, 2014, also for information on the roots of this concept in the US far right) to bundle the broader social justice projects in the Netherlands together and attack them, illustrates this article’s argument that epistemic dynamics play a very strong role in opposition to feminist politics, that in political dynamics the shifting epistemic position of science is important and that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed. This analysis leads to conclusions that call for

more attention to the analysis of gender knowledge in grasping the damaging potential of extreme-right populist parties for the feminist project in Europe.

2. Truth Claims, Power and Feminist Politics

All political projects, whether pushing for social justice and equality or against it, whether striving for societal change or actively engaging to conserve a certain status quo, need stories, framings of what they do and why, in order to focus their activities, mobilize followers and leaders, and find out which alliances can work for them and which resources and opportunities they can access (Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Tarrow, 2011). Thus, they need and benefit greatly from comprehensive narratives that compellingly articulate what is currently wrong and needs to change or what is worthwhile conserving, why that is, and which actors and institutions are currently constructing the world in a right or wrong way for their project. Good stories increase political projects' chances of successful mobilization and action. Such stories are stronger and more useful if they offer not just a compelling diagnosis, but also an articulated prognosis showing visions, objectives, strategies and potential measures to push for, or activities to engage in. They are also stronger if they are credible, that is, if these stories make a convincing truth claim about what constitutes our reality.

To better understand the current opposition to feminist politics in Europe, it is thus crucial to investigate not just which actors are against it or where they find their resources, but also what kind of comprehensive and credible narratives are used as part of these oppositional activities. To do so, this article builds on the social-movement concept of (master) frames (Benford, 2013), and links it to the theoretical concept of episteme to highlight the role knowledge and truth production plays in processes that reproduce or counter gender and sexual inequality. In doing so, it also underlines the systematic nature of the discursive institutional settings involved. The aim is to improve our understanding of opposition to the feminist project in Europe and of the role that the discursive dimension of power plays in this opposition.

At the heart of the discursive dimension of power is what Giddens (1984) calls "signification", the meaning given to reality using interpretative schemes, or, in other words, the social definition of reality: what is what, and what is its role in our social world. This signification dimension of power is highly significant in opposition to feminist politics. Signification is not reducible to the normative: there might be different understandings of who "is" a parent in our society (and that in itself is indeed a normative positioning), but such a signification can be combined with different normative positions on who is a "good" or "proper" or "normal" parent. Signification is a power dimension in its own right because of its power to define reality. In the words of Thomas and Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their conse-

quences" (1928, p. 572). Signification's specific strength is that it can fly under the radar: it defines not how the world should be—or at least this is not the obvious message—but how it actually "is". Successful signification involves making real truths. If the world "is" a certain way, this establishes a truth about reality, reducing the available options on how to act upon and within the world (Verloo, 1992).

To understand opposition to feminist politics, a crucial and obvious part of the signification dimension is the way gender and gender relations are defined, understood and given meaning. This is extremely complex. Gender relations are multilevel and multidimensional, located in all social domains, and deeply connected to other social relations. And as the world is deeply social, none of this is fixed, and everything is in flux. Human beings make conscious decisions about this gendered world and their positioning in it, but often just routinely follow the gendered tracks or scripts that history provides in their contexts. These omnipresent gendered tracks or scripts provide deeply engrained truths about gender and gender relations. In all domains of life, the gender-unequal configurations of the past offer the material that people use to live their lives, and provide the words and signs people use to be accepted and understood by others. In doing so, people reproduce and to some degree reorganize these gendered tracks, these gendered words, this gendered world. Knowledge and truth on all dimensions and levels of gender thus is a crucial part of gender relations and of gender inequality regimes. As gender permeates all dimensions of social life, everybody can be seen to have their own particular "gender knowledge", and their "durable gendered assumptions are enmeshed in local understandings of 'mainstream' issues and local practices" (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 43). Such knowledge on gender combines answering the signification question, "what is gender?", with normative positions on when and how gender is done "right" in often hard-to-untangle ways, and establishes and enacts truths about gender.

Feminist collective action—focused collective political pressure to change an element of gender inequality regimes—has always included feminist knowledge production on what gender is, on how to understand the gendered world, and has introduced new truth claims about gender. New concepts have been developed in feminist collective action that enable distancing from the scripts which are constitutive of gender inequality regimes. Feminist consciousness-raising groups (and other separate "public" spheres, see Fraser's critique of Habermas, 1990) were set up precisely to create spaces where women could develop new meanings of what is it to be a woman, or be feminine, in a patriarchal world. The second wave excelled in developing new institutions (however temporary) solely devoted to feminist knowledge production and the transfer of such knowledge: bookshops and publishing houses, libraries, archives, journals, radio and television programs,

movies and movie production and distribution companies, new branches in churches, education programs, and women's and gender studies research and teaching (Evans, 1995). In the 21st century, we see similar (and some ongoing) initiatives, although they are not as often independent of larger institutions: feminist blogs, academic gender studies programs, gender training, and courses against gender stereotyping in schools (McLean & Maalsen, 2013).

As a project to change society, feminism has played and continues to play an important role in producing knowledge and truth about gender that is compatible with, and useful for, the fight for social justice. This knowledge comprises *non-essentialist* understandings of gender, *empirical* data on the lives of people disaggregated on gender, race, class, and sexuality, and understandings of the *dynamics* of gender inequality in and across domains (including the role of knowledge) and of the *intersectional* dynamics between different regimes of inequality such as class, ethnicity/race and sexuality (see also Disch & Hawkesworth, 2016). Feminist gender knowledge is embedded in broader understandings of the world and of how inequalities are made and conserved (Brown, 2006), about the world at large and about how societal change comes about.

Opposition to feminist politics can target all women or only specific groups of women at intersections of other inequality regimes such as class, sexuality or race (Farris, 2012; hooks, 1981; Puar, 2013; Wekker, 2016). When opposition to feminist politics takes the form of a political project to change society, as recently seems to be happening in Europe and the Western world (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018), it engages prominently in activities of knowledge production about gender and gender relations that fit its goal (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). To better understand opposition to gender+equality and feminist politics, we therefore need to analyze where and how which knowledge on gender is produced, and how the truth claims of opponents to gender equality and social justice become credible or dominant. Aside from analyzing what these actors do and say, a good starting point for this is to identify the domains in which this knowledge production and transfer happens. This article argues that there is a domain, here called episteme, where such knowledge and truth production forms the core of several major institutions.

In this article, gender knowledge will be understood as:

Explicit and implicit representations concerning the differences between the sexes and the relations between them, the origins and normative significance of these, the rationale and evidence underpinning them and their material form". (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 48)

Oppositions to "gender" then also are projects of "alternative knowledge production" (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016, p. 144), which produce *knowledges* that can—and

should—be compared to other knowledges (such as those within the feminist project).

2.1. Knowledge and Truth Production and Societal Domains

Social complexity theory (Walby, 2009) is a promising way of addressing issues related to opposition to feminist politics (Verloo, 2018), because it offers a set of concepts (path dependency, co-evolving, positive and negative feedback loops) that theorize how changes in one system relate to changes in other systems. Walby distinguishes four domains—economy, polity, violence and civil society—that together constitute society. The four domains work as separate systems, each with their own dominant actors and institutions, and they function as each other's environment, meaning that changes in one domain impact other domains. A simple example of this is how changes in the polity—say the coming to power of parties that loosen restrictions on capitalist exploitation—have a strong impact on the economy—because they strengthen actors and institutions that exploit workers. I here propose a differentiation within what Walby calls the domain of civil society. More specifically, I propose to distinguish episteme (a system that produces and organizes knowledge and truth, located strongly in social fields such as religion, education, media and research) as a fifth and separate domain.

2.2. Episteme as a System

While all societal domains have a discursive dimension underpinning their rationale and *modus operandi*—or, probably more accurately, they contain sets of struggles over rationales and *modi operandi* resulting in the temporary hegemony of some of them—episteme is the one domain whose whole *raison d'être* lies in the discursive dimension of society: defining the meaning of life, not to mention reality, knowledge and truth. In this domain, we find several powerful institutions, those dealing with religion, sciences and education, and media being the most important ones. These institutions have mechanisms in place that create knowledge and truth claims, as well as mechanisms for transfer of these. They also impact opportunities for creating knowledge and truth on gender. Changes in these epistemic institutions are related to changes in domains such as polity, economy and violence. More specifically, these changes impact the emergence, strength or success of opposition to feminist politics. Opposition to feminist politics is shaped by the emergence of oppositional ideas about sex and gender and its success depends on the strength of the actors and institutions producing or successfully claiming oppositional gender "truths".

Religion, as a set of social institutions, is based on assumptions that god-given truths exist and are transmitted to believers through mediators such as priests. Religions always have specific institutions and elites that pro-

duce, guard and transfer their truths (beliefs) to their followers, and these may or may not be given space by the polity in which they operate. Obviously, the more space they are given, the stronger their truth-claiming power and the weaker democratic control over it. All religions have specific understandings of gender relations that are predominantly essentialist (meaning that they see a god-given nature of who men and women are as dual and complementary categories of human beings that have different, god-given roles in society). These essentialist and heteronormative truths on gender are often combined with sanctions on deviations. Before the Enlightenment, religion was the primary and dominant institutional actor that produced (gender) knowledge about society. It also dominated educational institutions and had their own media for knowledge transfer. Though secularization diminishes this power, religion kept some of this truth power, as well as many of its educational institutions and media, even after the Enlightenment, however. Religion's truth-constructing power is strongly connected to positions religious actors acquire in the polity (like the Catholic or Orthodox churches, Islamic religious actors or Hindu religious elites have in some countries), and to the ways in which they can acquire powerful positions in the economy (see US tax exemptions that enrich US churches), or have state-sponsored violence at their disposal as a sanction measure (Islamic imams in Islamist sharia states). In Europe, the oppositional drive of the centralized Roman Catholic church is well documented, as is its essentialist understanding of sex, sexuality and gender (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Even more importantly, in these times of secularization religious institutions have been observed to shift "from God to science", substituting their oppositional truth claims from god-given dogmas or biblical discourse, to what appears to be a rational, scientific discourse molded into reassuring and populist common-sense statements (Kuhar, 2015, p. 87). A strong example of this is the current oppositional religious discourse against "gender theory" that originates in the writings of the last three popes and a network of actors around them (Case, 2016), and is found in oppositional actions against feminism and sexual equality across many Catholic countries in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Media is a set of institutions dealing with information as something of value, and with the transfer of information. They can be profit based or not, meaning that the value of information can be that it is sellable or otherwise valuable. Media is a strong intermediary institution in society that transfers and translates knowledge and truths produced in other domains to society at large. Media institutions create knowledge by combining information elements and presenting them in various appealing ways. Media institutions are often segregated, reaching certain specific segments of the population (think of the Dutch system of public broadcasting based on religious and political cleavages). This enables them to create intersubjective truths based on an assumed common ground. In

the current mediascape, a high frequency of statements (in a segregated media context) seems the main driver of truth production: truth is produced if enough people say it. Media institutions are also increasingly commercial and dominated by market logic. The emergence and widespread use of social media has introduced a new logic in all media (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), leading to information bubbles, "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2018) or "discursive cocoons" (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016) in which truth claims can be made and validated without a rational basis, creating what some call a post-truth society. A better term would be post-rational truth society, as it is not the truth that has disappeared, but the facts and arguments producing it. The concept of post-truth politics refers to intricate links between the polity and media by which powerful media support hegemonic (or wannabe hegemonic) polity actors making truth claims that are not based on rational facts. It also refers to polity-media configurations that deliberately create confusion so as to facilitate non-fact-based but regime-friendly truth claims (Pomerantzev, 2014). Media's truth-constructing power is strongly connected to accessibility (the higher the accessibility, the stronger the potential truth-claiming power, hence the power of social media), and to powerful institutional actors' support or restrictions in other domains such as the polity or economy (censorship, monopolies, resources).

Sciences as a set of institutions is based mostly on rationality, considered the only proper way to acquire knowledge, combined with objectivity (or refutability), setting the institutional conditions for developing knowledge and scientific truth. The Enlightenment has given science the dominant role of knowledge and truth production in the Western world, and this has been extended to education and educational knowledge transfer. Yet that rationality has many faces. Within science there are paradigms that adhere to a principle of proof, preferring the collection of objective facts and the quest for causality, and paradigms that adhere to a principle of questioning, preferring the power of argument and logical thinking. A paradigm that takes this questioning to the point of not assuming any reality before thought is called poststructuralism. The concept of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004) transcends these different competing paradigms by arguing that the ways in which we know and represent the world are inseparable from the ways we choose to live in it. The current production of knowledge on gender can be found across all these paradigms.

Knowledge production in academic and educational institutions is currently challenged in many ways. The neoliberalization of academia has seriously limited the potential for slow science and education and now offers incentives for researchers and teachers to base their decisions on a market logic (Ferree & Zippel, 2015). Moreover, a number of scandals have harmed science's reputation of integrity in pursuing its goals (Stroebe, Postmes, & Spears, 2012). Those disciplines that have the study of sex and gender at its core (women's studies in the

past, gender studies or gender and diversity studies in recent times) have shown how mechanisms such as old boys' networks, numerical gender inequality in high academic positions and the low status of women academics and gender studies are detrimental to the production of much-needed knowledge on gender-inequality processes. At present, the reduced funding for the social sciences and humanities, the sharp increase of precarious labor in academia (Ferree & Zippel, 2015; Poggio, 2018; Viseu, 2015) and the endangerment of autonomous research by market logic and political interference (Grimm & Saliba, 2017) all decrease the status and authority of these disciplines and the overall democratic transparency in knowledge production and transfer.

This short discussion on the role of the three main epistemic institutions in the production of knowledge shows that religion's role should not be neglected, because a new master frame with strong Catholic roots has an observable impact on opposition to the feminist project in Europe. It also shows that new media developments have contributed to post-rational truth politics, and that the space in academia to further develop gender knowledge that is useful to counter gender inequality is shrinking.

In the next section, I will illustrate how opposition to the feminist political project for social justice and equality is affected by (discursive) actions of extreme-right political parties in the Netherlands, not just directly, by the ways these parties oppose "gender", but also indirectly, by the positions these parties take on epistemic institutions and truth production.

3. The Gendered Politics of Knowledge in Extreme-Right Populist Parties

There are several reasons why it is interesting to analyze the gender knowledge of extreme-right populist parties. One is because of the combination of extreme right and populism. Populism in politics claims that certain attitudes or concepts (such as "the people" or "the nation") are collective, even without evidence of this (Krämer, 2014). The key characteristics of populism, such as simplification or an aversion to complexity (Krämer, 2014; Mueller, 2016), the use of more conflictive anti-elitist messages (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017) and their anti-pluralist and often authoritarian (Taguieff, 1997) perspectives are interpreted here as epistemic positions that favor certainty over inquiry or reflection, and conflict over deliberation. In Europe today, populism takes a largely extreme right-wing direction (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Mouffe, 2005). The anti-pluralist and authoritarian tendencies of populist parties at the far-right or extreme-right end of the political spectrum are even stronger.

A second reason is due to the specific links that extreme-right populist parties have to epistemic institutions, particularly the media and religion. While mainstream media and social media have become the dominant sites for political debate in late modern democra-

cies, the link between populist parties and especially new media, but also classic media such as tabloids and radio talk shows, is even stronger, and there is substantial resonance between these media and the above-noted populist characteristics (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017). The concept of media populism—the media's use of populist stylistic and ideological elements, viz. the construction and favoritism of in-groups, hostility toward and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy, reliance on charisma and (group-related) common sense and appeal to moral sentiments—points at this resonance as a factor reinforcing populist parties (Krämer, 2014). Media populism is potentially effective through its priming, its impact on cognitive schemata (representations of the social order), particularly those on social differentiation and identity (Krämer, 2014).

A third reason is that extreme-right populist parties can be closely linked to religious groups with strong essentialist gender knowledge such as anti-gender ideology or anti-gender theory, and, if so, can act as strong diffusion channels for such knowledge.

To illustrate this article's argument that the epistemic dimension of opposition to feminist politics deserves more attention, the next two sections will look at specific statements on gender knowledge and on epistemic institutions from extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands. I will first look at positions taken on sex, sexuality and gender, then at positions taken on knowledge, knowledge production and truth. The Netherlands scores high on gender equality indices (see EIGE index where it ranked fourth among the EU member states in 2015). The two Dutch extreme-right populist parties that will be discussed are the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), led by Thierry Baudet. Both are seen as successful in influencing the positions taken by other parties (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010; Schumacher & Van Kersbergen, 2016).

3.1. The Politics of Knowledge in Two Dutch Extreme-Right Parties: Sex, Gender and Sexuality

Wilders started his PVV not as a regular party with members, but as a "movement" in 2004, after he left the Liberal Conservative party (VVD) over the Dutch (and EU's) strengthened ties with Turkey (Vossen, 2017; Witteveen, 2017). Like other populist parties, he argues against "the elite" (Mudde, 2007) using a strong populist rhetoric. The main item on his political program is to stop the "Islamization" of the Netherlands, seen as driven by "mass immigration" and accommodation of Muslim citizens through multicultural politics (PVV, 2012). On economic and welfare-state issues, the positions taken are on the left; on law and order or on "small" government, his positions are on the right of the political spectrum. While formally defending supposed Dutch/Western values such as reason and equality, he simultaneously at-

tacks existing institutions such as parliament, universities or courts as “fake” (Witteveen, 2017). After the elections of 2017, the PVV has 20 seats in parliament (out of 150), making it the second-largest party.

On gender and sexuality, the Netherlands is seen as an outlier in the European extreme-right landscape, because Wilders’ PVV does not endorse homophobia or the promotion of traditional gender roles as much as extreme-right parties in other European countries do (see Norocel, 2011). Instead, the PVV embraces forms of homonationalism (Puar, 2013) and femonationalism (Farris, 2012) by declaring the Netherlands a country proud of its sexual and gender equality, if not for the Muslim migrants who supposedly do not support these quintessential “Dutch” values. At first sight, gender and sexuality appear to be a non-issue for this party, hardly mentioned in their program or in their parliamentary interventions. De Lange and Mügge (2015, p. 74) conclude that “the PVV cannot be qualified as neo-traditional, modern-traditional or modern due to a lack of statements on classical gender issues”. This conclusion is correct as far as the party’s direct statements in their programs go. The latest PVV election program, in 2017, only one page long, did not mention gender and sexuality issues at all, and was a mix of positions: against Islam and against the European Union, against development aid, for direct democracy and lower taxes, for reversing some austerity measures and for strengthening law and order.

Based on the literature (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015), the following can be said about the PVV’s “gender knowledge”: gender and sexual equality has already been achieved in the Netherlands, except for groups that refuse this and threaten the progress made (read: Muslims). As the party considers the status quo to be fine and adheres to a liberal understanding of what governments should do (very little), they oppose all gender- and sexual-equality measures. The PVV formally supports full gender equality, but does not consider it a high priority and does not want the state to “force” society to become more equal (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). It states that they do not consider women to be a “weak” group that needs state protection, and therefore it opposes all positive discrimination, affirmative action or other “diversity nonsense” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 28; PVV, 2012, p. 25). They are “for gender equality”, but against “gender equality measures”.

Based on this positioning and unlike De Lange and Mügge (2015), I would rather argue that the PVV is against gender equality. I argue that denying existing gender inequality when there is clear evidence of it (Portegijs & van den Brakel, 2016) is a particular form of opposing gender equality (Verloo, 2018). PVV’s femo- and homonationalism adds a further oppositional element, as it does

not come with an interest in women’s rights or sexual rights, but with an interest in blaming parts of the Dutch population. Femo- and homonationalism are obnoxious forms of window-dressing that do not go together well with real action on furthering feminism (see more in the analysis below).

To illustrate the gender knowledge of the PVV, I performed two analyses: (a) one of the PVV’s website¹, and (b) one of the PVV’s votes in parliament². The website analysis (<https://www.pvv.nl>) showed that gender and sexuality are indeed not a frequently stressed element, and that references to gender and sexual equality are almost always strategically linked to statements about Muslims or Islam. Opposition to gender equality measures is unconcealed, though. When claims for more gender equality or proposals for gender equality measures are mentioned, it is to showcase them as either superfluous or ridiculous, as Beertema, MP, says: “while the politically correct elite is worrying about getting one or two more female professors or with the need for gender-neutral toilets in kindergartens, Islamic mass immigration is destroying what we achieved” (2016, October 2, author’s translation). This illustration shows how the gender and sex status quo is seen as unproblematic, how measures therefore are unneeded, and how the only stated problem is Islam as a threat to sex and gender equality. The PVV never presents itself as an ally to feminism. Whether arguing for a strong punishment for female genital mutilation or offering positive statements about women’s emancipation, the core position is always that gender equality has already been achieved in the Netherlands, and that gender equality is a defining feature of the Dutch national culture which has to be defended against “foreign” influences, most notably Islam. The PVV predominantly defends gender equality (using the Dutch label of women’s emancipation) as a weapon against the alleged “Islamization” of Europe. This position has already been observed for other politicians such as Rita Verdonk (VVD MP and cabinet minister before she started her own party that never made it to parliament), or Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007), but in the last decades the PVV is the strongest political voice about this. The link between gender equality and Islam is made by depicting Dutch women—often referred to as “our” women, “our” mothers, “our” girls—as feeling or being threatened by the “islamization” of the Netherlands. Such references obviously exclude many Muslim Dutch citizens from being “seen” by the PVV as Dutch. In a speech in Parliament, Wilders said: “we are the Netherlands, and this is our country. And we will reclaim it. Starting today. We will not accept our women and daughters being harassed by you” (2016, September 21, author’s translation). The “you” in this quote is meant to

¹ The website analysis (<https://www.pvv.nl>), performed 15–18 January 2018, involved a keyword search using the following words: *vrouw, emancipatie, gender, wetenschap, homo, diversiteit, Marx* (woman, gender, science, homosexual, diversity, Marx). The texts that had these words were analyzed for their argumentation about gender and sexual equality. The extensive website contains party information and short texts, speeches by Wilders, texts from parliamentary interventions of PVV party members, as well as some newspaper clippings.

² The analysis of the votes in parliament was done for the period 2010–2016 with the same keywords, using the [watstemthetparlement.nl](http://www.watstemthetparlement.nl) website, a political-sciences and quality-journalism project led by Tom Louwerse, Amsterdam University (Louwerse, Otjes, & van Vonno, 2018).

be Muslims. This femonationalist position is a de-facto position against gender equality. It should not be interpreted as a position to support women, but only as a position to attack Muslims, because there is no mention whatsoever that women who suffer such attacks should be supported.

The position taken by the PVV on gender equality is increasingly mirrored by other, large and influential parties. Recently, for instance, the Christian Democrats (CDA), in contrast to many of that party's positions since the 1970s, claimed that "women have been equal to men for centuries in our Judeo-Christian society" (Witteveen, 2017) in a very PVV-like argument about how migrants or Muslims threaten gender equality.

The analysis of the PVV votes in parliament (<https://watstemthetparlement.nl>) confirmed most of these findings. The rare votes in favor of women are about the medical domain: access to midwife care (2011, February 17) and sex-specific medicine (2013, December 19). They do not side with the occasional propositions of orthodox Christian parties to restrict abortions (2012, December 11). Other than that, I found no votes in favor of anything related to gender equality policy, measures or budget. On gender equality, the PVV voted against having better indicators, programs for low-educated women, policies against child marriages, and anything on gender equality in development aid. They vote against diversity policies in the police and the army, arguing that all diversity policy is discrimination (2015, April 30). Their femonationalism shows in an initiative to ask for research on "the consequences of 'mass immigration' on sexual and gender equality" (2011, November 22, quotation marks added). Their position on sexual equality runs parallel but is slightly more open: they sometimes vote for a higher budget (2013, December 5) or specific measures against homophobia in schools (2011, June 28). Yet they have also voted against a higher budget for sexual equality (2012, April 3). Their homo-nationalism shows in their voting against evaluating a program on tolerance on homosexuality for migrants (2013, April 16), asking instead for "recognition that Islam is an obstacle to sexual equality" (2011, June 28), voting against a joint approach to hate crimes (meaning across several discrimination grounds) (2011, June 28) and voting in favor of special sanctions against asylum seekers that threaten gay or lesbian asylum seekers (2015, December 15). The PVV's femonationalism and homonationalism show in a strong preference for using gender and sexual equality to blame or sanction "Islam" or "migrants", while nothing is offered for improving the situation.

Thierry Baudet's FvD is more recent than the PVV, developed out of a think tank founded in 2015. In 2010, while he was still a PhD student, Baudet published an op-ed in a Dutch quality newspaper critiquing the European Court of Human Rights, sparking a long public and academic debate (Oomen, 2016). He started more directly engaging in politics by (unsuccessfully) mobilizing for a referendum on the European Union (2013) and more suc-

cessfully mobilizing for a referendum on the trade association with Ukraine in 2015, using the then-new law on advisory referenda (Vossen, 2017). As a think tank, the PVV also commissioned the FvD to report on the need for referenda in Dutch politics.

As the FvD is very new and has only two MPs since March 2017, it is hard to make a sound assessment of their positions. Similarly to the PVV, sex and gender is a non-issue in their official program. They are very active outside of parliament, though. Baudet and MP Hiddema have used newspaper interviews to directly ridicule feminism and to argue against sexual equality and in favor of keeping the country white. There have been anarcho-feminist attacks on Baudet's house which diverted the following public discussion. Since the beginning of 2018, the party has seen strong internal turbulence and a high turnover of important internal positions.

This brief analysis of the "gender knowledge" (Cavaghan, 2017) of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands shows that the PVV's position is problematic for the feminist project. Their femonationalism and homonationalism are rooted in their belief that Islam is the only threat to gender and sexual equality, their denial of the problem of gender inequality and their refusal of state responsibility for gender equality. In short, they oppose feminism. For the FvD, it is a bit too early for a serious assessment, but there are clear resonances with the PVV, and both its MPs do not refrain from misogynistic, racist and homophobic statements. To understand the parties' full position, however, it is also necessary to look at what they say and do about knowledge and on knowledge production. This is the topic of the following section.

3.2. The Politics of Knowledge in Two Dutch Extreme-Right Parties: Science, Truth and Politics

Extreme-right parties in Europe are not only united in their position against Islam, but also their position against specific forms of progressive politics and against the knowledge on which that progressive politics is based. This position is articulated strongly in relation to education and to academia, especially the social sciences. One of the concepts used to address the latter is "cultural Marxism", which fits into their argument as follows: there is a specific form of current "Islamization" that uses a more "cultural" strategy enabled by a change in mentalities caused by "cultural Marxism" (Jamin, 2014). In this framing, "cultural Marxism" is a set of tools used by "leftists" and "globalists" to promote a multicultural society and attack all discourses that oppose such a project. It is a diagnosis of an internal threat in Western societies that is seen as supporting the "Islamic invasion" (see also Allen, 2014). The destruction of "our societies" is thus not only seen to be threatened by Islamization but also by this "cultural Marxism". This opens a space for opposing and attacking the social sciences and humanities, explicitly including gender studies.

Comparing the two parties, this position on knowledge is predominantly and most explicitly taken by the new FvD, although it resonates strongly with positions taken by the PVV. What they have in common in their populist anti-elite stance is that they see schools and universities as part of the elite, and as part of a “leftist cabal” that has taken over society. Since its beginnings, the PVV consistently argues in parliament (voiced most strongly by MP Beertema) that Dutch education is politically biased towards leftist and progressive perspectives, that this is “indoctrination” and that especially the PVV is “demonized” by educators all over the country. This translates into positions taken against the social sciences, against gender studies and in favor of more applied technical sciences. It is also linked to a demand that anyone teaching should refrain from taking political positions—this alongside a contradictory demand that teachers should “support Dutch culture”, according to Beertema in several speeches in parliament (2015, May 21; 2001, September 29; 2016, November 3). The PVV’s initiative to ask for a code of conduct in academic research on political motives (2013, December 17) was not supported by any other party (only by one ex-PVV MP). The argument for this initiative was again their claim that science and education too often take an ideological (read: left) perspective. Evidence for this is never provided.

Some academics linked to the FvD have joined in to elaborate on the supposed existence and origin of this so-called cultural Marxism. They do so in the public sphere by publishing op-eds in major newspapers and on blogs where they use hyperbolic language. Paul Cliteur, professor at the Law Faculty in Leiden, published a blog post entitled “Cultural Marxists will not rest before you are subjected” that was warmly received in far-right communities. This blog post depicts cultural Marxism (following Yiannopoulos, 2017) as a “political ideology” based on Gramsci and the Frankfurter Schule which “took over” universities in the 1960s and 70s. In this view, “cultural Marxism” is not a scholarly perspective but an ideology that is “continually finding new groups of oppressed people and that depicts anyone who questions this as a racist or Nazi” (Cliteur, 2017). Because, in their framing, “cultural Marxism” is the entry point for the destruction of society through Islamization, this move links projects for social justice, such as the feminist project (including gender studies), directly to the potential destruction of society. It enables seeing feminism and gender studies (and anti-racism for that matter) as enemies of society. Since March 2018, Cliteur is the director of the Renaissance Institute, which is the scientific institute of the FvD. He continues to be invited for prominent talks by prestigious Dutch academic institutions such as the Royal Academy of Sciences. Cliteur has been joined by other Dutch academics such as Eric Hendriks (University of Beijing, later Bonn), who—in an op-ed in a quality newspaper—depicts the Chinese Cultural Revolution as the most extreme expression of this cul-

tural Marxist ideology (2017). While statements such as these have also received severe criticism, they have managed to define “cultural Marxism” as a reality in Dutch society. As a result, concepts such as intersectionality, white privilege, diversity or institutional racism are now heavily politicized and are drawn into the public debate that the FvD has started, often on their terms. Right-wing online media thrive on the polarization these debates have induced, and they therefore act as important diffusion channels.

As the FvD is a very small party (2 seats out of 150), the strength of FvD’s framing of knowledge production is not linked to their influence in parliament. Their strength lies in influencing public debate and in weakening the reputation of the social sciences and humanities, and the position of scholars working in these disciplines. The position both the PVV and FvD take on knowledge production and on education and science is especially problematic because their claim of “indoctrination in education and social sciences”, or of a “cultural Marxist” conspiracy in education and social sciences is unfounded, yet already successful. Worse, this claim also functions as a shield against any critique, especially from anyone linked to the social sciences and humanities. Any critique is just further direct proof of the “bias” against them. Moreover, the serious reputation damage to the social sciences caused by the success of their “frame” of “cultural Marxism” hinders the future production of feminist knowledge and the future transfer of feminist knowledge to society.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This article has focused on struggles about gender knowledge, arguing that more attention for the epistemic dimension of debates on gender and sexuality is needed to understand the threat to the feminist project coming from extreme-right populist parties. The example of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands illustrates this article’s argument that epistemic dynamics play a strong role in opposition to feminist politics. In contrast to earlier research (De Lange & Mügge, 2015), this article argues that extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands do take a position on gender equality. These parties, the PVV and FvD, take the femonationalist and homonationalist position that gender (and sexual) equality has been achieved for those parts of the population that matter to them and is only threatened by the actions of those parts of the population that they do not see as part of the Dutch nation. By excluding Muslim Dutch citizens and Dutch citizens with a migration background from the Dutch nation, they already take an anti-feminist position. Moreover, their anti-feminist position also shows in their consistently voting or acting against gender equality measures, and their consistent denial of the existence of gender inequality.

The analysis also shows how the shifting power position of epistemic institutions such as the sciences is of

crucial importance in the political dynamics around gender and sexuality. Extreme-right populist parties are consistently campaigning to frame science, especially the social sciences and education, as extremely biased and as part of the Islamist threat to the nation. This is directly harmful to debates on gender and racial inequalities, but also further weakens the already low status of the social sciences, creating a positive feedback loop in which the more the academic quality of social sciences research is attacked, the easier it becomes for them to attack academic research about gender, ethnicity or sexuality with results unwelcome to them. Extreme-right actors flat out deny that gender-studies knowledge is cognitive or rational at all, reducing it to a set of (in their view) despicable normative positions. Unfortunately, this attack is potentially successful because gender studies has always been seen as merely normative, and academic paradigms such as poststructuralism and constructivism can play into these kinds of arguments. Moreover, under the currently dominant market logic in academia, the need to claim absolute knowledge in order to acquire funding also diminishes the space for critical reflection on knowledge and knowledge production (creating another feedback loop). The two Dutch extreme-right populist parties do not link to epistemic master frames (Benford, 2013) from Catholicism, such as the “gender ideology” frame. Their only reference to religion is in blaming Islam for the (coming) destruction of Dutch society. The frame of “cultural Marxism” they use, however, has similar potential to fuel opposition to the feminist project, and its roots in the US far right also enable cross country alliances. Both parties take a strong position against “elite” media, even if they also profit from them—the FvD has profited much from publishing op-eds in one of the Dutch quality newspapers.

Based on the theoretical argument and the empirical illustrations in this article, I argue that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed. Even if these parties are not in government or, like the FvD, are still very small, they have a strong impact on public debates and on positions taken by larger parties. And even if many of the positions taken on gender knowledge by these parties are weak or even nonsense by academic standards, it would be a mistake not to pay attention to them. We need to reclaim the political engagement of gender and sexuality studies. In these times, any technocratic positioning of gender equality is a trap. Four things are especially needed: In the short term, there is a need for more direct responses by gender scholars in public debates. In the longer term, we need to (re)develop and improve the transfer of feminist positions on knowledge politics. Thirdly, we need more research on how neoliberalism and other broader political developments feed into the disavowal of the social sciences and gender studies through their fueling of polarization and false certainty. And lastly, we need stronger action to safeguard the social sciences and humanities’ status and resources. Aside from continuing our efforts to better understand opposi-

tional dynamics to gender equality and social justice, we need to make the struggle between knowledges on sex, gender and gender inequality a topic of research, even under circumstances that decrease both the autonomy of social-sciences and humanities researchers and their potential for successful truth claims. There is an ongoing need to see the emergence and positioning of truth claims on gender relations and gender equality as one element of a dynamics of gender inequality in which different actors, institutions and strategies participate, and now is the time we need to understand and map the changing configurations of allies and opponents in politics, civil society, economy and academia.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Dark Side of Descriptive Representation: Bodies, Normalisation and Exclusion

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Abstract

This contribution elaborates on the role model function of descriptive representatives. We seek to elaborate on potentially negative effects of role models, as we think they can endanger a feminist project of dismantling hierarchical power relations. When society attributes descriptive representatives the position of role models, the former no longer simply stand for their groups in a socio-demographic manner. Role models also stand for them in an exemplary manner, allowing them to prescribe a set of appropriate or desirable traits and behaviours. The presence and performance of role models, thus, powerfully shapes the context to the representation of disadvantaged groups. Because of their exemplary function, the personal experiences and life trajectory of descriptive representatives may be elevated to a standard; potentially causing the interests and demands of other group members to be considered abnormal or marginal. Also, role models may, paradoxically, promote exclusion. Representatives' social differences provide them with powerful symbolic resources to speak on behalf of their group. While such authority may help them put previously overlooked interests on the agenda, their personal take on things may limit the terms of the debate, as it cuts out alternative intersections of social positions; making it difficult to voice alternative group perspectives. In this regard, role models may hamper the feminist project which precisely implies giving voice to excluded groups so as to broaden the range of voices articulated.

Keywords

alternative voices; descriptive representation; feminism; political role models; symbolic representation

Issue

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, a growing number of women and citizens with migration backgrounds entered parliament. This descriptive diversification of politics has been accompanied by an expanding literature that examines the impact of such diversification. This literature has theorised the impact of descriptive representation in predominantly positive terms (Dolan, 2006). Echoing Anne Phillips' influential book, *The Politics of Presence* (1995), descriptive representatives are generally conceived as contributing to the legitimacy of the representative system. Their presence in central decision-making institu-

tions corrects historical injustices and may help restore trust between the state and disadvantaged groups. Their presence may equally help place previously overlooked interests on the political agenda and may, in doing so, improve the quality of deliberation. Finally, the presence of descriptive representatives also affirms the ability to rule of members of disadvantaged groups: having like people in parliament may empower members of historically disadvantaged groups and enhance their self-esteem (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995).

However, empirical research has found the effects of descriptive representation to be mixed: not every descriptive representative promotes the interests of dis-

advantaged groups or enhances their political engagement. Having a like candidate or politician does not suffice to represent, inspire and empower members of disadvantaged groups. Much depends on the conditions that facilitate such presence and the particular performance of representatives. Their positive impact is, for instance, greatly affected by the extent to which people regard them as competent (Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006; Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012).

In spite of these findings, scholars continue to build their hypotheses around the positive difference that descriptive representatives can make (for noteworthy exceptions, see Fenno, 2003; Gay, 2002). While scholars accept that descriptive representatives may, in themselves, not be sufficient to yield the hypothesised positive effects on disadvantaged groups' interest representation and political engagement, they nonetheless continue to treat descriptive representation as an asset to representative democracy. As a result, the potentially negative effects of descriptive representation remain undertheorized.

In this contribution, we seek to elaborate on these potentially negative effects, as we think they endanger a feminist project of dismantling of hierarchical power relations. To raise attention to the ambiguous relation between descriptive representation and empowerment, we scrutinise the role model function of descriptive representatives. Clearly, we do not contest that political role models are valuable. We, however, argue that the concept of political role models remains undertheorized, and that closer attention must be paid to the constitutive effects of role models. When society labels descriptive representatives as role models, they are not simply seen as standing for their social groups in a socio-demographic manner. Instead, they are conceived as standing for their social groups in an exemplary manner: while being like other group members, their professional successes also set them apart (Severs & de Jong, 2018). The label of role model, in this regard, already creates a context to the representation of historically disadvantaged groups: it specifies what society expects from disadvantaged groups and how it wants them to behave and interact with more privileged groups. Set against this backdrop, representatives' performance (i.e., their attire, appearance, acts) can strengthen or help attenuate the expectations that are hierarchically imposed on disadvantaged groups. Representatives' impact needs not be voluntarist: because they are seen as standing for their social group, everything they do, the ways in which they (do not) behave, the type of representative claims they (do not) formulate affects, in a powerful manner, how their social group is conceived.

We put these constitutive effects (i.e., how social groups and their relations to others are defined) at the centre of our theoretical framework and argue that descriptive representatives are in themselves neither good nor bad. The impact of role models depends on how they perform their (ascribed or self-identified) group identi-

ties, and how such performances affect the distribution of power among social groups. This is where role models may hamper a feminist project. Much depends on how descriptive representatives interact with the role model function that is explicitly or implicitly ascribed to them. The exemplary function of role models may elevate the personal experiences and life trajectory of descriptive representatives to a standard. Such a standard leads to normalisation, i.e., ascribing how group members *should* behave and what the group *should* be about. In addition to this normalisation, role models may, somewhat paradoxically, promote exclusion. Representatives' social differences provide them powerful symbolic resources to speak on behalf of their group. While such authority may help them put previously overlooked interests on the agenda (Phillips, 1995), their personal take on things may also limit the terms of the debate, as it cuts out alternative intersections of social positions; making it difficult to voice alternative group perspectives. Research (e.g., Strolovitch, 2006) has documented that group advocacy predominantly promotes the interests of privileged subgroups. Descriptive representatives' role model function may, thus, provide them powerful symbolic resources to suppress the range of options and keep the issues that affect the most disadvantaged of the table (cf. Schattschneider, 1960). In this respect role models may hamper the feminist project, which has traditionally been about giving voice to women and other traditionally discriminated against or excluded groups and which has tried, by supporting group members to speak for themselves, to broaden the range of voices articulated. Such diversification (drawing attention to the intersectional character of group members' identities and experiences) comes at risk when too much attention is attributed to the particular positionality of a role model.

So as to better understand the potential harms caused by descriptive representatives, we reconsider the interplay between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Our argument continues over four sections. First, we discuss the literature on descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. In the second section, we offer our conceptualisation of symbolic representation and specify its relationship to descriptive representation. We argue that the language of descriptive representation is too passive to understand the potentially negative impact of role models. Descriptive representation ignores how representatives co-constitute the subjects they stand for: it is premised on an aesthetic fit of socio-demographic characteristics between an agent and a subject, and audiences' acknowledgment of such a fit (Pitkin, 1967). Symbolic representation, instead, directs attention to representatives' ability to craft an aesthetic fit; using their group identities to prescribe appropriate group behaviour (cf. Diehl & Escudier, 2014). When conceived as a role model, descriptive representatives not only stand for their social group in socio-demographic terms, but they equally hold normative power over them. This effect of normalisation can

only be understood through the lens of symbolic representation, and the ways in which role models become symbolic agents of the subjects they are seen to stand for (Lombardo & Meier, 2014).

In the third section, we turn to the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) [Flemish-Nationalist party] as an illustration of the ways in which role models may turn into agents of normalisation and how this may negatively affect the inclusiveness of representation processes. The N-VA is a regionalist party and strives for a peaceful secession of Flanders from Belgium. In recent years, the N-VA has become the largest party of Flanders. It currently presides the Flemish government and is one of the main coalition partners in the federal government. In our discussion of the N-VA, we will focus on two politicians. The first case refers to Liesbeth Homans. Following the 2014 regional elections, Homans was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs, Integration, Housing, Equal Opportunities and Poverty Reduction to the Flemish government. The portfolio of Homans is not arbitrary: she is known for her personal experiences with childhood poverty, and she frequently alludes to such personal experiences. Zuhair Demir features as our second case. Demir's parents are Alevi Kurds who in the 1970s moved from Turkey to Flanders, attracted by the financial prospects of working in the coalmining industry. In 2010, Demir was for the first time elected into the Belgian federal parliament. Her political fame rose quickly. In February 2017, she was appointed State Secretary of Poverty Reduction, Equal Opportunities, People with a Disability, Urban Policy and Science Policy to the federal government. In the fourth section, we link our cases to the argument set out before. Finally, in the conclusion we specify the main take-away points.

2. Descriptive Representatives

The gender and politics literature owes much to Hanna Pitkin's (1967) foundational work *The Concept of Representation*. In this work, Pitkin defined political representation as "the making present of something absent" and differentiated four dimensions of representation (i.e., formal, descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation). The gender and politics literature most profoundly invested in the dimension of substantive representation (that Pitkin herself had placed at the heart of representative democracy) and sought to explain its relation to descriptive representation.

This literature is premised on the assumption that, as the result of their history, experiences with structural inequalities and relationships with other group members, members of historically disadvantaged groups are likely to understand social events in a different way than individuals belonging to privileged groups. In the same manner, affected by their social locations, privileged groups are also less likely to understand and acknowledge the relevance of minority perspectives (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7; Young, 1989, p. 264). The premise that

representatives' social locations have an epistemic impact and affect their capacity to represent others lies at the core of the theoretical literature that advocates an institutionalised presence for historically disadvantaged groups (Dovi, 2002; Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998). The insight that representatives' social locations shape their understanding of political issues and priorities revealed the limitations of traditional mechanisms of accountability that are rooted in representatives' relations to an anonymous electorate. Especially in contexts where distrust between social groups is high and disadvantaged groups' interests may not yet have crystallised, representatives' social identities are crucial to promote fair representation (Mansbridge, 1999).

However, when it comes to proving the relevance of descriptive representation, the findings are mixed. Research revealed that the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is not deterministic but should be conceived as probabilistic at best (Dodson, 2006). Sharing the outward signs of having lived through the same experiences does not automatically cause descriptive representatives to advocate the interests of their social group. Not all female politicians, for instance, seek to promote women's interests. At the same time, some male politicians fervently advocate the interests of women. In addition, scholars found that the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation varies greatly depending on the type of representative activities under study (e.g., parliamentary interpellations, written questions, etc.) and the specific operationalisation of women's interests (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008). These insights, along with black feminist critiques on the white, feminist, middle-class biases in scholarly operationalisations of women's interests, has promoted inductive approaches to studying social group representation. These approaches attribute closer attention to the nature, type and range of political interests claimed on behalf of social groups.

In parallel to this literature on the descriptive-substantive relationship, scholars have begun to explore the relationship between descriptive and symbolic representation. This literature is premised on the belief that the presence of historically disadvantaged groups in central decision-making institutions may equally increase the self-esteem of members of historically disadvantaged groups and promote their capacity to assume leadership positions themselves. Female candidates may act as role models, sending, as Dolan (2006, p. 688) argued, "the signal that politics is no longer an exclusive man's world and that female participation is an important and valued act".

Phillips (1995, p. 63) herself dismissed the role model argument as less interesting and without much bearing on democratic politics. Others (e.g., Dovi, 2002, p. 730) have, in contrast, argued that the ability to inspire and to act as an example for historically disadvantaged groups may be crucial for mobilising members from that group. In the context of past and sometimes continuing injus-

tices, the presence of role models may positively affect the political engagement (knowledge of, interest in and participation in politics) of members of disadvantaged groups. At the same time, however, scholars have also problematised the possibility for manipulation. Scholars have, for instance, pointed to the possibility that descriptive representatives may enjoy a “representational leeway on policy matters” (Fenno, 2003, p. 32). Thanks to their descriptive characteristics, representatives can more easily make emotional appeals of likeness with members of disadvantaged groups; potentially causing the latter to extend their support even when representatives do not promote their substantive interests (Gay, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999).

Studies on women and ethnic minorities (Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006; Jones, 2014) have, however, invalidated the thesis of blind loyalty: women and ethnic minorities have greater knowledge of their descriptive representatives’ actions (compared to the actions of other representatives) and weigh these actions more carefully when evaluating them. This suggests that members of historically disadvantaged groups hold higher expectations toward their representatives (Severs & de Jong, 2018). Studies have, in addition, confirmed the positive impact of the presence of disadvantaged groups: when female candidates run for and win office, women express greater interest in politics (Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997), are more likely to discuss politics (Atkeson, 2003), and display greater levels of political participation (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Women are also more likely to recognise the names of female candidates than male candidates (Dolan, 2011; Reingold & Harrell, 2010). The positive impact of female candidates on women’s levels of political engagement is likely mediated by female candidates’ greater propensity to campaign on issues of interest to women, and the greater visibility of women’s issues in these races (Dolan, 2006).

Research, however, also shows that the impact of descriptive representatives on the political engagement of members of historically disadvantaged groups is mediated by contextual factors. Simply having a like candidate on the ballot or a like person in parliament is not enough to stimulate political engagement. In a longitudinal study on American elections, Atkeson (2003), for instance, found that women who lived in states with female candidates were more likely to discuss politics and had higher levels of political knowledge than women who experience male-only races. This effect was, however, conditional on the perceived competitiveness of female candidates: when candidates are conceived as mere tokens, they fail to elicit the expected positive effects (cf. Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Hansen, 1997; Tate, 1991).

3. Symbolic Representation and Normalisation

Although empirical research has invalidated the fear that descriptive representatives would yield blind loyalty, this

is not the only danger conceivable. As we seek to demonstrate in this contribution, representatives’ descriptive characteristics form powerful symbolic resources allowing them to claim experiential authority in representation processes. Such authority carries a risk of normalisation: namely, that representatives’ personal, and invariably limited, experiences are elevated to the level of standards against which all other group members are measured and may, by their failure to achieve comparable successes, be found wanting or deviant (cf. Young, 2006, p. 96). The one-directional character of descriptive representation helps explain why this risk has insufficiently been theorised in the literature. The quality of descriptive representation is measured by the extent to which the diversity of parliament maps onto socio-demographic reality. In this sense, descriptive representation invokes a relationship with constituents that are, presumably, readily given in society.

Because the dimension of descriptive representation is premised on a logic of mimesis (Pitkin, 1967), it prevents any serious interrogation of the ways in which descriptive representatives also co-constitute the subjects they are seen to stand for (two-directionality). To understand how descriptive representatives may inverse the representative relationship (from mimicking reality to co-constituting reality), we need to add the dimension of symbolic representation to our analyses. Only this dimension allows for understanding how descriptive representatives, once attributed the exemplary function of role model, become symbolic agents that prescribe (top-down relationships) inasmuch as they describe (bottom-up relationships) (Lombardo & Meier, 2014).

Before we proceed further, it is important to point out that within the empirical literature, symbolic representation is often understood in terms of the attitudinal and behavioural effects that descriptive representatives elicit among members of historically disadvantaged groups. Symbolic representation is often equated to constituents’ feelings of being represented, included or recognised (Lawless, 2004, p. 81). Such an approach, however, subsumes symbolic representation under the header of descriptive representation, and treats it as a by-product of the latter; as opposed to a dimension in its own right (Lombardo & Meier, 2014). To better understand the relationship between descriptive and symbolic representation, we advocate a reappraisal of Pitkin’s (1967) original discussion thereof.

Pitkin’s treatment of symbolic representation clarified that representation need not necessarily involve human activity but may equally be realised through inanimate objects, such as a flag or anthem “standing for” a nation (Pitkin, 1967, 93). It is precisely this evocative power that sets symbolic representation apart from descriptive representation. In descriptive representation, the relation between parliament and the people can be judged on the basis of rationally justifiably and objectively verifiable criteria, such as the extent to which parliament reflects descriptive characteristics that are

judged relevant by a political community at a given time—such as geographical area of birth, occupation, ethnicity or gender (Pitkin, 1967, p. 100). In symbolic representation, by contrast, there are no rational justifications. “Symbol-making”, Pitkin (1967, p. 101) argued, “is not a process of rational persuasion, but of manipulating affective responses and forming habits”.

In this sense, symbolic representation operates as the pendant to descriptive representation. The success of both dimensions depends on the ability of the representative agent to establish a meaningful relationship with the subject; allowing the former to be seen as standing for the latter. But whereas descriptive representation is judged by the extent to which it mirrors a society’s descriptive characteristics, the success of symbolic representation hinges upon representatives’ ability for mobilising people and inducing relevant audiences to conceive of some of their features (e.g., life trajectory, personality traits) as characteristic or prototypical of the group (cf. Diehl, 2015; Lowndes, 2013). Clearly, there are restrictions to the creativity of a representative: representative relationships cannot be forged out of thin air (Saward, 2010). Symbols’ capacity to stand for (a set of) the people depends upon their fit with prevailing socio-historical, cultural and political repertoires. Symbols, however, also have the capacity to reaffirm, or else reinterpret and transform, these repertoires by appealing to people’s sentiments and emotions. It is this capacity that defines the prescriptive or normalising impact of symbolic representation.

This insight lies at the heart of Lombardo and Meier’s work on symbolic representation. In *The Symbolic Representation of Gender. A Discursive Approach* (2014), they argue that political symbols do not passively stand for political reality but actively contribute to constituting that reality. Political symbols only appear to be passive containers or mirrors of reality because they can draw upon conventional and routinized associations between symbol and subject (cf. Disch, 2012; Saward, 2010). The evocative power of a public statue, for instance, originates from prevailing (invariably selective and contingent) understandings routinely associated with a people, such as courage and self-sacrifice (as expressed by World War memorials). While re-iterating routinised associations, statues however also actively contribute to constituting that people in a particular way.

Contrary to Pitkin (1967), who did not consider the mutually constitutive effects between symbols and their constituents, Lombardo and Meier’s (2014) approach explicitly focuses on the human agency involved in symbol making and re-making and explores the power differentials at play within such processes. The conventional and routinized associations that grant a political symbol its seemingly natural character are by no means neutral. The sheer handful of women that feature on national coins and bills reflect traditionally gendered conceptions of politics and continue to shape the public sphere and the nation in overtly masculinist terms.

Following scholars such as Gamson (1997), Lombardo and Meier (2014) emphasize that symbols and, by extension, the processes through which symbols are attributed meaning set the boundaries of in- and out-groups. With respect to gender, they for instance argue that a symbolic construction of gender that attributes public roles to men and domestic ones to women shapes societal expectations toward men’s and women’s respective appearance, behaviour, and tasks. Symbolic representation does not only put forward specific presentations of gender (or of other groups, see Parkinson (2009) on the issue of ability); it also enshrines expectations on their roles, tasks, social position; thereby legitimising some and delegitimising others.

Lombardo and Meier’s (2014) approach to symbolic representation is helpful to understand that the status of role model does not necessarily reflect the representative’s intentions, nor does it require constituents’ recognition or acceptance. To stand for others in an exemplary way requires, first and foremost, that one establishes a relationship of likeness with others. Representatives’ descriptive traits, in this regard, facilitate their capacity *to stand for* their respective social groups. Representatives’ capacity *to stand as an example for* their group depends, then again, on people’s beliefs that representatives’ life trajectories are laudable and that their success can be emulated by people like them. The establishment of such relations does not depend solely on the performances of descriptive representatives; although they are powerful agents in mediating these relations (see *infra*). Descriptive representatives stand before multiple audiences (Saward, 2010) and the label of role model is oftentimes conferred onto them by media, political commentators or parties; and this irrespective of their self-identifications, actions or the judgments of minority members for that matter.

As “bodies out of place” (Puwar, 2004), meaning (such as, being exemplary) is routinely attributed to descriptive representatives and they sometimes become role models against their own will. This insight was also central to Kanter’s (1977) research on women’s token status in American corporations in the 1970s. When the ratio of men to women is skewed in men’s favour (as it continues to be in parliament), inter-group differences are often exaggerated, and women are reduced to tokens or mere symbolic representatives of their social category. Because men control the institution and its culture, women (and by extension, other minoritized groups) often exercise little control over the type of features that are considered characteristic of, let alone, exemplary of their social group (cf. Childs and Krook, 2008). Clearly, this attenuates descriptive representatives’ responsibility for the effects which their ascribed exemplary character may have on others like them. Descriptive representatives, however, are not passive agents. How they engage with role model ascriptions and how they perform their group identity (through their representative claims, attire, communication style, etc.) may strengthen

or counter-balance the prescriptive force of the label. Precisely because they are conceived as “standing in” for their social groups (as being somehow interchangeable with them), descriptive representatives hold normative power over them. Representatives’ performances, therefore, directly reflect on their social groups: these performances help define their group in a particular way and, in doing so, can facilitate, respectively, limit the range of political demands which these groups may credibly make.

Role models’ social differences feature, in this regard, as symbolic resources that bolster their representative authority. Such authority may do good: it may, for instance, help put issues on the political agenda. However, representatives’ capacity to claim authority on matters of difference may also contribute to reducing the range of experiences, needs and interests of disadvantaged social groups. When too much weight is given to the experiences or perspective of political role models, these may end up supplanting the plurality of lived experiences and the diversity of intersecting social positions that characterise their social group (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc.). The exemplary function of a role model may serve as a standard and may project expectations on other, in particular less privileged, group members. Such normalisation may play in the hands of those actors who seek to hold members of disadvantaged groups responsible for their failure to move forward in life. More damaging still is the risk that role models’ authority becomes so established, that it allows them to set the terms of the debate; making it increasingly difficult to voice alternative minority perspectives. These risks become all the more real when we consider that the label of role model is oftentimes extended by more privileged (sub)groups in society and seldom reflects the judgment of the most marginalised.

4. The Power of Bodies: The Flemish-Nationalist Party

To illustrate the ways in which role models may undermine the inclusiveness of representation processes we turn to the N-VA. The N-VA is a regionalist and separatist party that is part of the Flemish movement and strives for a peaceful and gradual secession of Flanders (Northern region of mainly Dutch-speaking inhabitants) from Belgium. Founded in 2001, the N-VA finds its origin in the People’s Union (“Volksunie”), created in 1954. In recent years, N-VA has become the largest party of Flanders and presides the 2014–2019 Flemish government. It is also a coalition partner in the federal government. The party identifies as economically liberal and situates itself at the centre-right of the ideological spectrum (Deschouwer, 2012). N-VA adheres to a civic nationalism and various party officials, including some top politicians, have a migration background. Some party officials also grew up in blue collar households. This diversity helps legitimise the party’s political agenda: politicians’ references to their family background reinforce the people’s party image

of the N-VA and offers support to its meritocracy-based model of fairness. Like other right-liberal and conservative parties, the N-VA emphasises the responsibility of individuals to take command of their personal lives and invokes meritocratic ideals to legitimise cut-backs in public spending.

In our discussion of the N-VA, we will focus on two female politicians who have become role models over the last years. The first case refers to Liesbeth Homans. Following the 2014 regional elections, Homans was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs, Integration, Housing, Equal Opportunities and Poverty Reduction to the Flemish government. Before being nominated as minister to the Flemish government, Homans was the president of the public social services (known as OCMW) in Antwerp, one of the largest cities in Flanders. As a member of the municipal council, Homans was also charged with Social Affairs, Housing, Diversity and Integration, Society and Civil Services. The political portfolio of Homans is not arbitrary: her personal experiences with childhood poverty are well-known, and she has spoken on her personal experiences in the media. Zuhail Demir features as our second case. Demir’s parents are Alevi Kurds who migrated in 1972 from Turkey to Flanders where her father worked in the coal mines. Demir was first elected into the Belgian federal parliament in 2010 and was re-elected in 2014. In February 2017, she was appointed State Secretary of Poverty Reduction, Equal Opportunities, People with a Disability, Urban Policy and Science Policy to the federal government.

What makes these politicians stand out as role models? Over the last years, neither Demir nor Homans explicitly self-identified as role models. Media and their political party, however, frequently present them as such. Meanwhile, Homans and Demir themselves, often refer to their personal experiences, and sometimes invoke them to legitimate policy proposals. This duality is useful to our theoretical argument: while it is often the majoritarian or dominant social group that attributes descriptive representatives the position of role model, descriptive representatives themselves can respond to these attributions in diverse ways so as to reinforce or undermine the normalising effect of their role model status.

Let us first consider the case of Liesbeth Homans. In a column, Lex Moolenaar (2012), political commentator for the local newspaper *Gazet van Antwerpen*, attributed Homans’ extensive policy portfolio to her political ambition. He, in turn, ascribed this ambition to her personal experiences; growing up in a family with limited financial means. Moolenaar stated:

To finance her studies, she worked full-time at a supermarket. She had to pass her exams in June because she simply could not afford to lose the income of the summer months [when students can take re-examinations]. In terms of personal efforts to get ahead in life, Liesbeth Homans can be considered a role model. I believe that her personal background

will, over the years to come, influence the social policy of Antwerp. (2012, own translation)

Homans herself contributed to the belief that she serves as a role model for people living in poverty. In an interview that preceded her appointment as Minister, Homans commented upon her recent divorce. She stated:

This [getting divorced] is not what you have in mind when you get married and decide to have children. But life is too short to keep feeling miserable. It [getting divorced] was not the most difficult decision I have had to make in life. After high school, it would have been easier for me to start working full time instead of going to university. But the rebel in me wanted to show what she was worth. From the age of 16 till 24 I worked in *den Delhaize* [a brand of supermarkets]: baker, butcher, cash register. First on the Boomssesteenweg [street name] and then in the Museumstraat [street name] in the South of the city [wealthier neighbourhood]. People liked me. They still like me; [I experience that] whenever I go shopping there. (Bultinck & Faes, 2013, own translation)

This quote both evidences Homans' transition from poverty (now able to visit the shop she once had to work in) and her continued vulnerability (as a divorced mum). While her past and present vulnerabilities allow her to connect to destitute people (descriptive representation), her life narrative, personal strength and transition from poverty depict her as a role model (symbolic representation). While reflecting on her personal struggles, she defines poor people as resilient and rebellious, driven by a need to demonstrate their worthiness to society. This depiction is beyond reproach: by presenting the decision to file for divorce (no doubt, a highly emotional and difficult one) as less challenging than working her way through university, Homans does justice to the dire situation of people living in poverty and the self-sacrifices it often takes to get ahead in life.

The statement, however, reads differently in conjunction to the appeals to individual responsibility Homans regularly makes as Minister of Equal Opportunities and Poverty Reduction. In conjunction to these appeals, her life story becomes a standard by which other group members are measured and judged. Because alternative life narratives (e.g., of those unsuitable for higher education) are silenced by Homans' leading example, the prevailing conception that poverty reflects an inadequacy in one's work ethos or personality is reinforced. This successfully undermines empathetic stances toward the poor and recognition of the difficulties of overcoming poverty (such as, the lack of means that often inhibits people from taking necessary steps).

While Homans' emphasis on individual responsibility already shows from the former quote, another example from the same interview further evidences Homans' belief that destitute people should take control of their

own lives. During the interview, Homans referred to an eye condition she had as a child. She invoked this illness as a means to showcase her moral outstanding when confronted with financial dilemmas. "By the age of 16, I had saved some money", Homans stated, "at that time, I could choose between a scooter—a Wallaroo [a brand of scooters]—or an eye operation. I gave priority to my eyes" (Bultinck & Faes, 2013, own translation). Like the quote on working her way through college, this quote emphasises the sacrifices Homans made in life. Because Homans is an appointed official of the people, her emphasis on moral responsibility and individual responsibility transcends the mere anecdotal. It has normative implications in that it re-affirms extant beliefs that among the group of destitute people there are poor people undeserving of public efforts for redressing their lives.

The case of Zuhail Demir follows a similar pattern. However, this time, in reference to citizens originating from migration. Justifying Demir's 2017 appointment as State Secretary of Poverty Reduction, Equal Opportunities, People with a Disability, Urban Policy and Science Policy, Bart de Wever, president of the N-VA, stated:

We asked ourselves which of us would be best suited to tell the story of equal opportunities. Our story that people are provided opportunities, but that they also have [the obligation] to grasp these opportunities. [Our story that] if there is an economic revival, everyone benefits from it....Discrimination is real, but people should not shroud themselves in a culture of victimhood. A vast majority within the party believes that Zuhail Demir has the ability to confer this story in a credible manner during the remaining 2,5 years [of the legislature]. (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 2017, own translation)

Statements, such as this one, pit Demir as a role model: her individual successes are believed to inspire others like her and to motivate them to grasp the opportunities available to them. In addition, and similar to Homans, the function of role model is not only ascribed to Demir. When intervening in public debates, Demir frequently invokes her identity and proclaims a sense of identification with her group. When Demir took the oath as State Secretary, she for instance wore her father's mineworker's scarf around her wrist. "It is the family's keep sake", Demir commented, "never forget where you come from, my father always told me" (Paelinck, 2017).

When intervening in political debates, Demir also routinely emphasises the need for positive stories and role models. "Yes, you can' is my motto. I have also experienced mild forms of discrimination", Demir stated during the early days of her political career, "But I persisted, and many people with a migration background persisted and have become successful" (*De Standaard*, 2013, own translation). Although this statement weakens her exemplary function—highlighting that she is just one among the many people with a migration background that are

successful—, accompanying statements in which Demir emphasises individuals’ responsibility to grasp the opportunities that society offers them does elevate her individual successes to a model to be emulated.

Consider the following statement in which Demir reflects on her childhood and what it was like growing up in a migrant neighbourhood (Sioen, 2015, own translation):

At a certain point in time, my father took on his responsibilities and moved the family into a white neighbourhood. He personally introduced himself to the neighbours so as to break the ice. Because they were not that keen on having a Turkish family with five children move into the neighbourhood.

In this statement Demir acknowledges that ethnic minorities experience stereotyping and discrimination. But she attributes at least part of the responsibility for overcoming such discrimination to minority groups. They have a responsibility, like her father, to seek for ways to overcome structural inequality (de Jong & Severs, 2017, p. 499). It is telling, in this regard, that Demir describes her role as State Secretary as that of a “realtor in opportunities”. The metaphor of realtor suggests that Demir does not seek to transform societal structures (and, hence, tackle underlying inequalities). Instead, like a realtor, she positions herself in a “market of opportunities” and helps people navigate this market. The belief that the opportunities are available but that it is just a matter of grasping them obscures the structural character of (labour market, housing, etc.) inequalities and justifies policies that call on individuals’ responsibility. In the opening paragraph of her policy declaration on poverty reduction and equal opportunities, Demir clearly stated that “as citizens, we all have the societal responsibility to grasp the available opportunities and take charge of our lives” (Abbeloos, 2017, own translation).

5. One Swallow Does Not Make a Summer

What we seek to demonstrate with our two cases is that role models are not in themselves good or bad. Instead, the impact they have on disadvantaged social groups depends upon the ways in which they perform their group identities. Although any performance of group identity is likely to have some prescribing effects (“the group is about”, “group members should act like”), these effects are only damaging when representatives’ performances conflict with other group members’ experiences and leave no space for alternative stances to be heard. Under such circumstances, role models are likely to disempower group members, to undermine their self-esteem, participation, and the representation of their needs and interests.

Psychological studies have, for instance, demonstrated that role models only enhance group members’ psychological well-being and self-confidence when the latter consider themselves as capable of attaining com-

parable successes. Role models only inspire and promote feelings of self-enhancement when their life trajectory and professional successes seem attainable to others. When representatives’ lived experiences or life trajectories are too far removed from people’s proper lives and the opportunities available to them, role models provoke self-deflation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In close connection to this, studies (e.g., Taylor, Lord, & McIntyre, 2011) have revealed that role models only enhance people’s self-confidence and performances when the latter believe that role models deserve their success. Stated differently, people only feel inspired and experience a boost in self-confidence when they ascribe role models’ successes to the latter’s intrinsic qualities (as opposed to tokenism) and believe that similar opportunities are available to them.

Although it is impossible to provide consistent findings on the ways in which disadvantaged groups relate to Zuhail Demir and Liesbeth Homans, there is some evidence that their acceptance is not fool-proof. Following Demir’s appointment as State Secretary, the news site *De Redactie.be* interviewed people who share her migration background and who, like Demir, grew up in a mining family. Not all respondents felt inspired by her statements. One respondent, in particular, contested Demir’s unnuanced emphasis on the opportunities available:

I don’t agree with that [statement]. Our parents were illiterate and didn’t have a clue on how to proceed. Zuhail was fortunate that her dad was a teacher before moving to Belgium. She was able to go to university. But that wasn’t the case for everyone. A lot of migrant children, like me, had to take care of the household, help their parents with paper work, and go out and earn a living. (Sellam, 2017, own translation)

This comment illustrates that role models’ capacity to elevate their proper experiences to a standard may divert attention from the continued vulnerabilities of historically disadvantaged groups. One swallow does not make a summer. Representatives’ individual successes may disempower vulnerable others when these successes are depicted as readily attainable to all group members. Such generalisations—although communicating a message of hope—can backfire and be used to hold vulnerable group members responsible for their failure to move forward in life, or, at least, give them that feeling.

Clearly, the impact of role models is not limited to the levels of self-confidence and empowerment of members of disadvantaged groups. Their impact also extends to the structure of political debates, and their openness to dissenting voices. As Schattschneider (1960) but also, more recently, Iyengar (1990) have shown, the way in which powerful and influential actors, such as role models, frame their political arguments has the capacity to set the terms of the debate. Role models’ ability to draw on anecdotal evidence from their own lives enables them to keep certain conflicts off the table. As liv-

ing proof, Homans and Demir evidence the opportunities that are available to members of their social groups. It is difficult to argue against representatives whom, despite their personal struggles—and perhaps, even in light of them—, emphasise people’s responsibility to take charge of their lives.

In a double interview with Rachida Aziz, Belgian fashion designer and activist, Demir countered the critique that, because of her privileges (having a literate father and caring family) she would have no right to speak on issues of inequality and racial discrimination. She replied: “Hey, I also grew up in a ghetto, Rachida. The district [cité] of Waterschei. I also had to fight for everything myself. In life, nothing was ever handed to me. By no one” (Sioen, 2015, own translation).

Demir’s statement that she never received any favours obscures the defining role her father has played in her life. Despite her many public expressions of gratitude toward him, Demir fails to recognise that other minority group members may not have had the same chances or opportunities in life (such as, having a present father). It is, however, difficult to rebut Demir’s selective reading of her life because it so strongly resonates with the normative ideal of the responsible citizen. Demir’s blindness to her proper privileges portrays her as a responsible citizen who, in the face of challenges, took charge of her life. She thereby zooms out the intersections of social positions of other group members, who might, for instance, not combine poverty with a literate family background.

The powerful ways in which role models may hold particular conflicts off the table and delegitimise alternative group perspectives may cause the already low political participation of members of disadvantaged groups to further decrease (cf. Giger, Rosset, & Bernauer, 2012; Imig, 1996). As Schattschneider (1960) reminds us, these groups’ lower political participation cannot simply be attributed to political disinterest. Such an explanation would miss the point that groups’ failure to participate in politics “often reflects the suppression of the options and alternatives that reflect the needs of the non-participants” (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 105).

6. Conclusion

In this contribution, we have cautioned against accounts that unequivocally treat political role models, such as female politicians and politicians with migration backgrounds, as boosting the transformation and dismantling of hierarchical relations in society. Clearly, we do not contest the value of political role models or the emancipatory effects that stem from showcasing the ability to rule of historically disadvantaged groups. We, however, argue that role models’ capacity to embody what the group is about produces normalising effects that may downplay the diversity of experiences of the members of their (ascribed or self-identified) social group and may, as such, reinforce (intersectional) inequalities. As shows from our

examples, the label of role model is oftentimes extended by majoritarian or dominant groups in society. The label, in this sense, oftentimes reflects dominant groups’ conceptions of what disadvantaged groups should be like or how they should behave.

Clearly, this is reason to also consider the potentially negative impacts role models can have on minority constituents’ feelings of self-worth, their empowerment, and levels of political engagement. In this contribution, we have argued that these negative impacts can only be understood through the lens of symbolic representation. To date, scholarly accounts have mainly equated symbolic representation to citizens’ attitudes and behaviour in reaction to descriptive representation. This failure to treat symbolic representation as a dimension in its own right has diverted attention from the dynamic processes of symbol making and re-making through which descriptive representatives become symbolic agents that ascribe appropriate behaviour to group members.

The fact that the label of role model is oftentimes extended to descriptive representatives attenuates the latter’s responsibility for the effects which their ascribed exemplary character may have on others like them. Descriptive representatives, however, are not passive agents. How they engage with role model ascriptions and how they perform their group identity may strengthen or counter-balance the prescriptive force of the label, even though their capacity to do so is very much dependent on a number of contextual factors (such as, their position within their parties, etc.). Nonetheless, the fact that descriptive representatives can deploy their heightened visibility to counter-balance restrictive assumptions on their social group, makes some descriptive representatives preferable over others.

To convey our argument, we have mainly drawn upon what we consider negative examples. Although it is beyond the scope of this contribution to develop the point here in full, our analysis does offer insights into what could constitute a good role model. To undo, prevent or restrain the effects of normalisation, role models should perform their group identities in such a manner that the exceptionality of their successes cannot be invoked to penalise less successful group members, by narrowing the scope of intersections within that group. A good case in point forms US president Barack Obama who spoke up against tendencies to treat his individual success as evidence of a post-racial America. He, for instance, illustrated the limitations of a discourse of individual responsibility by stating that as a Senator he had, like many other male African-American professionals his age, been confused for a waiter at a reception. This statement powerfully conveys the insight that professional success (or individual effort) does not render people insensitive to (racial) stereotyping and discrimination (cf. Severs & de Jong, 2018).

Good role models should, thus, strike a careful balance between evidencing that minorities too can be successful and acknowledging the structural character of in-

equalities that continues to make it more difficult for members of disadvantaged groups to achieve comparable successes. Otherwise, role models end up doing the opposite of what they are supposed to do, disempowering instead of empowering those they serve as a role model. In today's political times, when politicians' personalities become increasingly important to winning over voters and cleavages between the empowered and the disempowered are growing, we need to exert caution in dealing with role models.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Antifeminist and “Truly Liberated”: Conservative Performances of Gender by Women Politicians in Hungary and Romania

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Abstract

This article employs a two-level analysis to compare the discursive performance of gender on social media in Hungary and Romania; the two countries with the lowest percentage of women in politics in the European Union (EU). First, by revealing the tension between conservative views about gender roles, and social and political specificities in the two countries, the research illustrates how various parties on the conservative right ideological continuum—from the center-right to right-wing populism—relate to the feminist project. Secondly, it analyzes how selected women politicians within this continuum negotiate their ideological beliefs about gender roles with their political career interests, by means of social media (Facebook). The analytical constructs of idealized motherhood and feminine toughness are employed to examine a period of intensive political campaigning in 2014 in both Hungary and Romania. The study triangulates the multi-layered discursive circumstances (the historical, contextual, and social media contexts) in Hungary and Romania, and maps out the similarities and differences that are disclosed when comparing the selected women politicians. The article makes a significant theoretical and empirical contribution to scholarship on gender and conservatism in particular and raises questions for the wider study of gender, politics, and social media in general.

Keywords

conservatism; Eastern Europe; Facebook; feminism; gender; ideological continuum; politics; right-wing populism; social media; women

Issue

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1. Introduction

This study contributes to the emerging scholarship on the conservative opposition to, or reinterpretation of, the feminist project (Celis & Childs, 2011; Celis & Erzeel, 2015; Childs & Webb, 2012; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Verloo, 2018). It examines how women’s issues and women’s interests are expressed along a conservative right continuum, encompassing a trajectory from center-right parties to right-wing populist parties that subscribe to a socially conservative political agenda. The article expands the focus of previous studies on gender and conservatism, which tend to privilege US- and Western-centered perspectives—such as the special issue *Gender*

and Conservatism, edited by Celis and Childs (2018)—by focusing on Hungary and Romania, which stand out in the European Union (EU) for having the lowest levels of women’s political participation in their respective national parliaments. In 2014, the newly elected Hungarian National Assembly registered 10.1% women members of parliament (MPs); in turn, in both Romanian Houses of Parliament there were approximately 11.5% women MPs. It is noteworthy in this context, that among the fourteen candidates in the 2014 Romanian Presidential elections, the two women both had conservative right backgrounds. Neither qualified for the runoff. In the EU Parliament elections organized the same year, the percentage of women members from Hungary and

Romania elected to as MEPs was somewhat better, albeit significantly below the European average: 19% in Hungary, 28% in Romania. Concerning elections, especially after Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential election in the United States, it was acknowledged that social media had become a significant platform for political campaigns, particularly Facebook. Unlike traditional media, Facebook encourages more personalized political performances on behalf of the candidates, and stimulates engagement between politicians and potential voters. These developments are not limited to the US and Western Europe (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Kalsnes, 2016). Indeed, campaigning through Facebook has been promptly embraced by both male and female politicians in Eastern Europe as well (Băluță, 2015; Bene, 2017). The article thus answers appeals for studies that contextualize how leading conservative politicians have shaped the gender equality agenda (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015, pp. 172–173), providing an Eastern European perspective, and for additional analyses of the relationship between politics, gender, and social media (Sandberg & Öhlberg, 2017, p. 327).

The research questions are: *What form(s) does the conservative opposition to, or reinterpretation of, the feminist project in Hungary and Romania take? How do conservative right women politicians in these countries negotiate their ideological beliefs about gender roles with their political career interests?* In considering these, the article provides a two-level analysis: first, the conservative right continuum is examined in both Hungary and Romania; secondly, the social media campaigns of four established women politicians (two from each country) who are situated along this ideological continuum are analyzed. The article is organized in six sections. First, the conceptual basis to the theoretical framework of the study is articulated. Secondly, the methodology which underpins the two-level analysis is outlined. Thirdly, the historical context of the conservative right continuum in the two countries is critically analyzed. Fourthly, the context of situation is utilized to examine the careers of selected women politicians. Fifthly, the discursive performance of gender is analyzed in the social media political campaigning of the successive elections in 2014. Finally, the conclusion suggests ways in which the study contributes to the field and indicates potential avenues for further research.

2. Conceptual Articulations

I suggest the concept of *conservative right continuum* to describe the ideological space occupied by center-right parties, often labelled "New Right" in the US and Western Europe, which fuse new conceptions of social conservatism with neoliberal economic dogma (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 28; Schreiber, 2016, p. 7), as well as right-wing populist parties, which combine nostalgic welfare chauvinism with cultural conservatism in nativist clothing—supposedly defending the native ethnic majority

from harmful, and polluting external influences (Mudde, 2016, p. 4). The common denominator of this ideological continuum is the constitutive parties' position towards the feminist project, emphasizing the "natural" basis of the heterosexual nuclear family, and not least its biological unity (Celis & Childs, 2018; Childs & Webb, 2012; Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Schreiber, 2016; Wodak, 2015). The conservative understanding of a "traditional family" is often juxtaposed against perceived degeneracy and state dependency in contemporary society (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 28; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017, p. 6), and it is consequently weaponized against the state's economic meddling and attempts to promote gender (and sexual) equality. In other words, under the neoliberal imperative to "roll back the state" (Walby, 2015, p. 172), the heterosexual nuclear family emerges as "the ideal setting to ensure the reproduction of a disciplined working force, to stimulate and regulate consumerist identifications, and to provide for childcare and social security" (Norocel, 2013, p. 163), whereby women and men are constituted "as different, albeit complementary, sexes, with accompanying sex specific gender roles" (Childs & Webb, 2012, p. 9).

2.1. Conservative Conceptions of Women in Politics

Such complementarity between men and women rests on an inherent gender hierarchy that is "theologically and/or biologically derived and should be the basis for women's pride and social status" (Schreiber, 2016, p. 2). Consequently, women are accepted in politics insofar as they embody two overlapping ideals: the elevated maternal image, cementing the gender hierarchy within the family unit whereby the acts of childbearing and childrearing are performed; and that of a woman with a strong professional background, though in this case espousing opposition to feminism is, at least nominally, imperative (Gibson & Heyse, 2010, pp. 251–253; Klien & Farrar, 2009, p. 75; Meret, 2015, pp. 94–97). *Motherhood*, symbolically connected to the cultic image of Virgin Mary (Petö, 2010), is performed in the conservative context in intimate connection to such values as nurturance, empathy, and community, which are deemed to exclusively belong to the "feminine repertoire"; its corresponding masculine ideal of the warrior-hero, the bread-winning family father, or the rugged pioneer is tacitly endorsed (Gibson & Heyse, 2010, p. 253). Women's performance of their motherhood in politics is accepted provided they do not seek political power in itself; rather, they may seek office from compassion, given they balance work and family responsibilities, and ensure their "husband's blessing (and participation in domestic life)" (Schreiber, 2016, p. 16). Motherhood as one's defining political performance is nonetheless confining women to a position of simple appendages to their family, and eventually ushers them back into the safety of their family homes. This notwithstanding, right-wing populist female leaders synthesize "the role of woman not only as

a mother and wife at home because of her natural reproductive abilities, but also not shaped by ‘radical’ views on gender and gender equality” (Meret, 2015, p. 96). Claiming to defend conservative family values, they employ motherhood instrumentally to position themselves as nurturing and protecting “their people”, thereby justifying strict and dominant female party leadership (Meret, 2015, p. 101). In this regard, while inherently contradictory, the ideal of professional woman, or feminine toughness, presents itself with a greater potential. The conservative women who adopt it follow a dress-code that acknowledges their ascribed gender difference from their male fellows with whom they openly compete for political power. “However, while they are being praised for their femininity, they are also touted for being tough and aggressive” (Schreiber, 2016, p. 8). On the conservative right continuum, these women come to represent the “truly liberated women”, as opposed to the allegedly “self-serving and hypocritical” feminists, encapsulating in one performance both the endeavors “to reinscribe traditional gender roles”, and the efforts to disrupt the very roles they supposedly embody; such proclaimed liberation “also serves to cast feminists as being out of touch, while reinforcing the unfounded stereotype of feminists as unfeminine” (Schreiber, 2016, pp. 11–12).

2.2. Women, Politics, and Facebook

To enter politics and legitimize their presence in a sphere traditionally dominated by men, women have “developed particular patterns of expressions based largely on the articulation of lived experiences, often moving beyond abstract intellect to embrace the concrete, the emotional, the inclusive, and the personal through narrative” (Klien & Farrar, 2009, p. 66). Facebook proves an excellent additional medium for women politicians to make use of these discursive patterns. Establishing “oneself as the spokesperson of an...underrepresented group (such as women) becomes easier without gatekeepers, and Facebook, in particular, can facilitate such a strategy” (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 41). Indeed, Facebook is a particularly potent social media platform that enables politicians to present their personal interests, their political biographies, and craft a closer relationship with their potential voters, based upon issues which are generally toned down, or very difficult to achieve through traditional media (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, pp. 20–22; Sandberg & Öhlberg, 2017, pp. 315–316; Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012, pp. 10–11). This is enabled by the inherent nature of communication on Facebook (i.e., posting various updates on the personal profile, liking, or commenting on other people’s posts), which emphasizes agency and self-representation. Put another way, Facebook supports the “reification of self through public performance”; it enables the re-presentation of specific aspects of one’s identity—here gender roles and other normative influences are very important—, which are deemed desirable and incarnate “an idea of who one wants to be, in-

cluding incipient aspects of personal identity that users want to cultivate”, and which otherwise “might be inhibited in the off-line world” (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008, pp. 450–452). The feedback from other Facebook users serves as a kind of “social verification”, and bestows the identity performance with “social legitimacy”. This posits a serious challenge for politicians, since there is an “inherent tension between the expectation for professionalism, and the need to craft a more personalized and intimate display, aiming for a quasi-total transparency, in the politician’s performative on their social media profiles” (Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012, pp. 17–18).

2.3. Facebook Use by Conservative Women

The present study aims to connect these two research areas, and contribute to the emerging field of gender, politics, and social media. Theoretically, the article aims to map out how the tensions between ideological constraints about gender roles specific to the conservative right continuum, and women’s empowerment in politics, are ironed out by means of social media, which enables conservative women to pursue their political career interests while reinterpreting or opposing outright the feminist project. Empirically, it draws on evidence from both the East European historical context (the specificities of Hungarian and Romanian politics concerning women), whilst also providing a snapshot of the situational context (women’s participation in the 2014 long election year) in which four women with a political background on the conservative right continuum perform unmediated and “truer” selves on Facebook.

3. Methodological Notes

I make use of a modified set of tools inspired by the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), to discern in the collected empirics discursive performances of gender (Butler, 1993). DHA entails a *retroductable* investigation (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3): since no hypotheses are formulated/tested in the study, the analysis must be transparent, the interpretations justified, and the value positions made explicit. Discourse in this respect is understood as a “cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices” that are in equal measure “socially constituted and socially constitutive”, and “related to a macrotopic”, although discourse is “not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). The DHA aims to analyze “texts—be they audio, spoken, visual and/or written—as they relate to structured knowledge (*discourses*), [which] must be viewed in terms of their *situatedness*” (Wodak, 2015, p. 51, italics in original). The DHA follows the *principle of triangulation* that positions the analyzed discourse in a multi-layered context, which first sheds light on the “broader sociopo-

litical and historical context” that the discourse is embedded in, and then accounts for the “extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames” of the specific “context of situation”, in which the empirical material was collected (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 93). Using primary (party manifestoes, policy proposals, etc.) and secondary sources, the first two stages of triangulation are explicit in the Eastern European specificity, thus positioning this study in the wider framework of analyses of conservatism and gender.

Use is also made of *discursive performances of gender*, whereby performativity is “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). These citational practices may be either compliant with, or disruptive of the heterosexual norm, revealing that gender, in the context of discourse, “is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but regulate various bodily beings” (Butler, 1993, p. x). With reference to the matter at hand, the discursive performance of gender is employed to analyze Facebook posts, thereby exposing the reiterative and citational practices, which on social media produce the gendered identity of women politicians on the conservative right continuum within the ideologically sanctioned boundaries thereof. Put simply, and aware that Facebook allows account-owners to later modify, even delete their posts or accompanying comments, I argue that what these women politicians have left after such a politically intense year as 2014, documents how successive posts produced their discursive performance of gender, and that these practices are embedded in the wider historical context of discourse that DHA triangulation unveils.

The selected women politicians are Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz and Dóra Dúró in Hungary, and Elena Udrea and Monica Macovei in Romania, respectively. They represent various forces along the conservative right continuum: from center-right parties (PMP, M10), to radicalized center-right parties (FIDESZ), and right-wing populist parties (JOBBIK) (see Table 1). In addition, they occupy powerful positions both in their own parties, and in national (Dúró, Udrea), or European politics (Gáll-Pelcz, Macovei).

The chosen timeframe stretched from January 1 to December 31, 2014, and the empirical material gathered illustrated several fields of political action (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 91): national and European elections, as well as day-to-day activities aimed at consolidating public attitudes towards the party’s political agenda. These observations needed to be corroborated with previous findings in the field, which indicated that such a timeframe accounted for the different opportunities that Facebook provides: intensive scrutiny by traditional media, supplemented by the candidates’ social media presence during national elections; the candidates’ efforts to profile themselves in so-called second order elections such as those for the EU Parliament, which generally yields less attention from the traditional media; and the long-term construction of a distinctive political profile (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, pp. 38–39). Following the ethical guidelines for Internet research (Association of Internet Researchers, 2002, 2012), the web application *Facebook loader* (University of Oslo, 2013) was used to extract the posts and comments from their public Facebook pages¹, and to study various types of interaction, such as Likes, Shares, and Comments (Kalsnes, 2016, pp. 3–4).

First, a total of 1998 posts were collected; the overwhelming majority belonging to the Romanian politicians (see Table 1). A possible explanation for this may be that the two Romanian politicians participated in campaigning for both the EU Parliament elections, as well as subsequent Presidential elections. Macovei’s posts are twice as numerous as Udrea’s, but this may be a result of Macovei running as an independent presidential candidate, and thus more reliant on social media than traditional media for reaching out to potential supporters. Similarly, Gáll-Pelcz’s reduced presence may be explained by the significant campaign that FIDESZ pushed through conventional channels for all candidates.

Second, the collected posts were systematized thematically: experiences of maternity and family issues (*motherhood*), and those concerning the challenges of women’s engagement in politics (*feminine toughness*)—see Table 1. These posts were scattered during the entire selected period and received a varied amount of attention. For example, Gáll-Pelcz gathered at most

Table 1. Facebook activity of selected women politicians.

Politicians	Party	Facebook profile	Total posts in 2014	Total thematic posts
Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz	FIDESZ	https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/	166	18
Dóra Dúró	JOBBIK	https://www.facebook.com/durodora/	205	57
Elena Udrea	PDL/PMP	https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/	506	96
Monica Macovei	PDL/M10	https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/	1121	85

¹ This was undertaken in April-May 2016, and cross-checked in April 2017, to ensure that the analyzed posts have not been altered/deleted in the meanwhile.

1239 likes (with a maximum of 1456 likes for a post that year); Dúró received 4062 likes (the most likes for any of her posts in 2014); Udrea had 15923 likes (with maximum 26817 likes for a post in 2014); while Macovei received 16871 likes (with maximum 19720 likes). This indicates that the posts fulfilling these criteria received the same amount of attention as other posts, therefore playing an important role in contouring the political self that these women perform on Facebook.

4. The Historical Context

In Hungary, the political parties on the conservative right continuum share an opposition to feminism, and place a strong emphasis on normative heterosexuality, particularly the “cult of motherhood” (Félix, 2017; Petö, 2010; Szikra, 2014). In the conservative discourses, the demographic problems faced by Hungary are attributed to the previous “austerity regime of the left-liberal camp—plus the pervasiveness of liberalism in individualism and personal freedom. Therefore, the political elements of liberalization appear to threaten the family as much as the economic ones, while the politics of gender and reproduction reconstitute political camps” (Korkut, 2012, p. 175). As such, politics concerning women’s rights are assimilated to “family politics, which covers the social role of women by models offered by the cult of [Virgin] Mary”, which implicitly posits women’s choice to withstand motherhood as “‘national’ sabotage” (Petö, 2010, p. 196).

Of great significance to the political context, was the ideological transition of the Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ), from a previously liberal anti-Communist stance, to one locating itself firmly on the conservative right continuum (Egedy, 2009, pp. 47–48; Korkut, 2012, p. 19; Montgomery, 2015, p. 230). It is argued that while FIDESZ “share elements with other populist and/or right-wing parties in the [region], it follows a multifarious conservative ideology” (Korkut, 2012, p. 168), based on “exclusionary national identity and populism” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 228), in the sense that the party underwent an “adjustment of self-identity...that in time accommodated Christianity, moral revolution, entrepreneurship, and finally family” (Korkut, 2012, p. 165). FIDESZ consolidated its position as the major conservative right political force, defining itself not only “as the guardian and agent of order and moral progressions”, but also looking upon “itself

as the protector and rescuer of Hungarian society, fulfilling its mission in harmony with the moral demands of the cosmic world order” (Egedy, 2009, p. 49). Taking advantage of the political implosion of the center-left, FIDESZ continued its collaboration with the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP) and cemented its grip onto power in the 2014 Hungarian Parliament elections (see Table 2). The two parties had won the previous elections with a two thirds majority, which allowed them to draft and adopt a new constitution without much opposition (Montgomery, 2015, p. 231). Importantly, the new Hungarian Constitution (2011) narrowly defines the family to be based on “the marriage between a man and a woman”, thereby refusing the same legal rights to same-sex couples and discriminating against “thousands of heterosexual cohabiting couples and their children” (Szikra, 2014, p. 494). The main campaign message in the 2014 EU Parliament elections the same year centered on identity issues, delimiting the “us” (Hungarians) from “Brussels” (a colloquial term, referring to the EU institutions, and the set of norms and values FIDESZ intended to protect Hungarians from being forced to adopt); in this struggle, the center-left opposition were swiftly depicted as mere “incompetent actors” (Koller, 2017, p. 174). Such vocal opposition against the EU is surprising, given that in the EU Parliament FIDESZ is affiliated to the European People’s Party (EPP), the largest political force that gathers Christian Democratic and other conservative parties with a nominally center-right political perspective, and that Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz is among the Parliament’s acting Vice-Presidents.

The other political force on the conservative right continuum of interest here is the right-wing populist Movement for a Better Hungary (JOBBIK). Although in a position of relative ideological proximity to FIDESZ, JOBBIK espouses a type of social conservatism wrapped aggressively in ethnic-based nativism, which proclaims “the homogeneous people as ‘national-minded ethnic Hungarians’, a category that assumes Christianity and excludes a large range of other groups, including Roma, Jews, Communists and ex-Communists, urbanist intellectuals and journalists, feminists, homosexuals and politicians who espouse pro-EU, pro-mondialist or neoliberal views” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 233). Different in tone rather than focus from FIDESZ, JOBBIK declare their concern about the demographic crisis Hungary is facing; their solution is to indicate the mothering of ethnically pure Hungarian offspring as “women’s primary citizen-

Table 2. Elections in Hungary (2010–2014).

Party	National Parliamentary elections, in % (and MPs)		EU Parliament elections in % (and MEPs)
	Year	2010 (386)	2014 (21)
FIDESZ + KDNP		2014 (only 199)	
		52.7 (227 + 26)	51.5 (11 + 1)
JOBBIK		44.9 (117 + 16)	14.7 (3)
		16.7 (21)	20.2 (23)

ship value” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 233). This is to be achieved through a combination of measures, from a total ban on abortions, strengthening the role of family and encouraging “responsibly conceived children” among the ethnic Hungarians, to discouraging the perceived excessive nativity of Roma minority, or what JOBBIK disparagingly labelled “Gypsy breeding (*cigánytenyészet*) maintained by state funds” (Korkut, 2012, p. 190). In the EU Parliament JOBBIK were deemed too extreme by other right-wing populist parties; their three MEPs are among the Non-Attached Members.

In Romania, support for women’s access to politics and women’s issues has generally been fluid, conjectural, and punctual, rather than programmatic, and played out against a backdrop of tacit misogyny masquerading as an emphasis on traditional family values (Băluță, 2015; Miroiu, 2015). The conservative discourses mix such arguments as “being European”, or “adhering to European values” with appeals to enrich politics with “feminine beauty”, and sometimes even resort to religion to legitimize women’s participation in politics—as God created both men and women. This notwithstanding, feminism and the non-traditional and emancipatory ideals it promotes have been strongly rejected as antinational and outright unnatural (Norocel, 2016, p. 250), women have generally been relegated to a narrowly functionalist role, selflessly sacrificing themselves for the wellbeing of others, both as mothers and wives at home, and as colleagues at work. In addition, like in the US and the rest of Europe (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), some vociferous pro-life movements have emerged, with shifting political anchorage and close ties to religious conservative groups, and whose existence reflects the fading public memory about the draconic anti-abortion laws during the Ceaușescu dictatorship (Miroiu, 2015, p. 99).

The conservative right continuum in Romania is more fragmented, and more dynamic, than in Hungary (Cinpoș, 2015, p. 113). There are however certain conservative parties that have shaped Romanian politics (see Table 3). Much like FIDESZ in Hungary, the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), had a sinuous ideological development under the guardianship of Traian Băsescu, espe-

cially during his two consecutive presidential mandates (2004–2014). Founded in 2008 through the merger of center-left with center-right parties, PDL eventually consolidated their position as the main conservative right political force. Although acknowledging the persistent inequalities between women and men in Romania, PDL actively opposed feminism. Often described derogatorily as the “feminist-Marxist amalgam” that encourages a “contraceptive ethos”, PDL argued that women’s primary duty when entering politics is to represent the interest of women and mothers that are resisting these challenges (Iancu, 2012, pp. 159–160). During its time in government between 2008 and 2012, PDL translated the previous discursive polarization, one that centered on the topic of Communist legacy, into one that challenged the future of welfare services. This shift led to the effective marginalization, demonization, and delegitimization of entire social segments, particularly the pauper Roma minority (Cinpoș, 2015, p. 114). The austerity measures in the aftermath of 2008 financial crisis were clearly gendered. The salary cuts disproportionately affected feminized sectors—education, healthcare, and public administration—while the burden of rolling back the already insufficient welfare services was implicitly assumed to be borne by women within the family (Iancu, 2012, p. 160). In the wake of the 2014 EU parliament elections, and as Băsescu was concluding his last presidential mandate, PDL entered a period of turmoil and crafted a political alliance with their previous opponents, the National Liberal Party (PNL). In July that year, the two parties announced their merger under the name PNL, although decided to maintain PDL’s conservative right affiliation to EPP in the EU Parliament. In the 2014 Presidential elections, they jointly supported Klaus Johannis, whose campaign centered on an intolerance to corruption and a strongly anti-welfare discourse. This enabled him to insinuate pervasive corruption to his center-left competitor, and reject most notions of social equality and justice that underpinned the welfare system (Cinpoș, 2015, pp. 109–111). Qualifying for the runoff, Johannis’ anti-corruption and conservative platform resonated with most candidates on the conserva-

Table 3. Elections in Romania (2012–2016).

Party	National Parliamentary elections, in % (and MPs), both Chambers		Presidential elections, Candidate (%), first round	EU Parliament elections in % (and MEPs)
	2012 (588)	2016 (466)	2014	2014 (32)
PNL	58.6 ^a (150)	20.4 ^c (99)	Klaus Johannis ^d (30.4)	15 (6)
PDL	16.5 ^b (74)			12.2 (5-1 ^e)
PMP	—	5.7 (26)	Elena Udrea (5.2)	6.2 (2)
M10	—	—	Monica Macovei (4.4)	(1 ^e)

Notes: ^a % USL electoral alliance; ^b % ARD electoral alliance; ^c PNL and PDL merged as PNL; ^d qualified to, and won, the runoff; ^e Macovei left PDL—independent MEP.

tive right continuum and was eventually endorsed formally by their majority.

The People's Movement Party (PMP) are a splinter from PDL, that arose when the faction supported by then-President Bănescu, lost the internal elections and opted to form a new party in early 2014. Under the leadership of Elena Udrea, and despite open support from Bănescu, PMP hovered at around 5% in the elections. The two MEPs that PMP secured in the EU Parliament elections joined EPP as well. PMP supported Udrea as a candidate in the presidential elections that year. M10 are another, even smaller splinter from PDL, gathered around Monica Macovei who left PDL after having renewed her MEP mandate on their list; she later contested the Presidential elections as an independent candidate. Ideologically, both these parties embrace various strains of conservatism. It is worth noting, however, that all Romanian parties on the conservative right continuum are to varying degrees positive about the European project, which tends to be discursively internalized to bolster their anti-Communist and neoliberal anti-welfare credentials.

5. The Context of Situation

The *context of situation* is represented by the intense political activity during several electoral campaigns throughout 2014: the Hungarian Parliament elections (April 6); the EU Parliament elections (May 25, in both countries); and the first round of the Romanian Presidential elections (November 2). For the elections taking place in 2014, it seems that social media, particularly Facebook, became an important addition to traditional campaigning in both countries. The Facebook platform enabled politicians to adopt a more colloquial style, and switch the focus onto consolidating their relationship with supporters by exploiting the superficial presentation of political issues as perceptibly non-political, emotional and familiar topics (Bene, 2017, p. 526; Tasențe, 2015, p. 93). A few explanations about the networking infrastructure in each country are necessary here. In 2014, some 76.1% of the population in Hungary (Internet Live Stats, 2016a) had access to Internet, while 54.1% were connected in Romania (Internet Live Stats, 2016b). Concerning social media usage that year, some 38.89% in Hungary (Statista, 2017a), respectively 24.24% of the total population in Romania (Statista, 2017b) had a Facebook profile.

5.1. Conservative Women in Hungarian Politics

Despite holding prominent positions, the political activities of Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz and Dóra Dúró have been hardly researched (Hajdú, 2014; Róna, 2016). Gáll-Pelcz (née Gáll, born 1962) has considerable political experience, gleaned from holding various high-profile positions both nationally and at EU level. She is married, with three children. In 2003 Gáll-Pelcz joined FIDESZ, apparently hand-picked by its chair Viktor Orbán, and quickly climbed

the internal hierarchy becoming vice-chair in 2005. In the 2006 Hungarian Parliament elections, she won her first MP mandate; towards the end of the mandate she served as Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly. In the 2010 elections, she had her seat confirmed in the National Assembly, but soon thereafter she replaced Pál Schmitt as MEP in Brussels, joining EPP. Gáll-Pelcz chaired FIDESZ women's chapter (2004–2014). Indeed, her political profile is centered on women's and family issues, oftentimes speaking at conferences dedicated to women's issues. She campaigned in 2014 for new policy measures on childcare aimed at supporting parents wishing to join the labor market. In the 2014 EU Parliament elections, she renewed her MEP mandate, and was elected one of the EU Parliament's Vice-Presidents.

Notwithstanding her young age, Dúró (born 1987) also has a depth of political experience. She started her political career in 2006 by joining JOBBIK. She was first elected MP in 2010 as the youngest member of the National Assembly, one of only three women JOBBIK MPs (Hajdú, 2014, p. 67). She was re-elected in the 2014 Hungarian Parliament elections and chaired the Standing Committee on Culture (2014–2018), which deals with matters of culture, education, and media. She was also member of the subcommittee on Women's Dignity (2015–2018). The party was present in all aspects of her life, having married former JOBBIK deputy-chair Előd Novák with whom she has three children. Dúró declared her motto to be "In the womb lives the nation!" (Neményi, 2015).

5.2. Conservative Women in Romanian Politics

Reflecting on Elena Udrea's and Monica Macovei's rise to political prominence reveals several studies analyzing their political activity, either individually or in the wider political context (Băluță, 2015; Branea, 2017; Miroiu, 2015; Savulescu & Vitelar, 2012). Both Udrea and Macovei were initially connected to PDL and benefited at various stages in their political careers from the support of then-President Bănescu. Udrea (born 1973) is often described as a negative example for how women succeed in politics—her political career being the result of an alleged intimate relationship with Bănescu (Norocel, 2016, p. 259). She entered politics in 2004, having been elected in the Bucharest city council on a PNL ticket, but in early 2006 she followed Bănescu to the precursor of conservative PDL, becoming vice-chair shortly thereafter. She won two consecutive MP mandates in 2008 and 2012. She held the portfolio of Tourism, and then that of Regional Development and Tourism (2008–2012). In 2014, Udrea joined Bănescu's PDL breakup wing, and was elected chair of the newly founded PMP. She participated actively in the EU Parliament elections, and later that year was the PMP presidential candidate. In the first round of Presidential elections, Udrea came in fourth with 5.2% (see Table 3); in the runoff she announced her support for the conservative candidate Johannis (Miroiu,

2015, p. 101). Udrea divorced her husband in 2013 and has no children. She used her good-looks to consolidate a political profile often courting controversy, not only appearing in a rubber dress and thigh-high boots on the cover of a women's glossy magazine, or parachute-jumping in the eve of the EU Parliament elections, but also using sexual innuendo in her various campaign slogans (Miroiu, 2015, p. 100).

Macovei (born 1959) is perhaps one of the best-known politicians outside Romania. She entered politics in 2004, appointed by then-President Bănescu at the helm of Ministry of Justice (2004–2007). Macovei profiled herself as a champion of the rule of law and positioned herself at the frontline of anti-corruption, winning international praise for doing so. She joined PDL in 2009 and won a MEP mandate in the EU Parliament elections that year. At EU level, Macovei juxtaposed her fervent anti-Communism, which consolidated her political profile in Romania, against socialist appeals for rapprochement with the Russian Federation, which she was vehemently opposed to. In the 2014 EU Parliament elections, Macovei was one of the few women candidates to run a negative campaign against her center-left counter-candidates (Branea, 2017, p. 139), equating a vote for the Romanian Social-Democrats with a vote for a pro-Russian President of the European Commission, thus “against the country’s own interests”. Having won another mandate, Macovei left PDL and EPP, to found her own party M10. She later allied M10 with the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which unites conservative and Eurosceptic parties, such as the Conservative and Unionist Party (UK), and right-wing populist parties, such as the (True) Finns Party (Finland). Despite her MEP mandate, Macovei ran in the 2014 Presidential elections as an independent candidate on a conservative platform that was “unfriendly to equal opportunities, and [with] a clear preference for the rule of law but not for social justice” (Miroiu, 2015, p. 100). Although lacking a party machine to support her, Macovei came in fifth with 4.4% of the votes (see Table 3). Faithful to her conservative agenda, she too encouraged her supporters to vote for Johannis in the runoff. Macovei is divorced and has one son.

6. Discursive Performances of Gender on Facebook

The discursive performances of gender centered on idealized motherhood are most clearly articulated in Dúró’s posts, which define her politically, and blur the distinction between private and public. This echoes similar trends with instances of right-wing populism elsewhere in Europe (Meret, 2015). Even when motherhood itself

is not central, there are numerous references to the importance of the traditional family, and women’s role in preserving its values and passing them on to future generations. For instance, discussing the challenges of having three young children, Dúró mentions that, besides the grandparents actively caretaking for their grandchildren, her daughter Hunóra has precociously showed interest in nurturing her younger siblings (post with 1200 Likes, 20 Shares and 55 Comments²). In another post, Dúró reacts vehemently to the 2014 Eurovision winner Conchita Wurst, proclaiming the timeliness for JOBBIK’s social policies aimed at consolidating the “family-based social organization, and nurturing national traditions” (post with 470 Likes; 80 Shares; 25 Comments³). Significantly more restrained, as evinced by the limited number of posts, Gáll-Pelcz confirms her conservative credentials as a good mother and wife, celebrating her wedding anniversary in the company of her husband and their daughters (post with 750 Likes; 20 Shares; 60 Comments⁴). She echoes FIDESZ’s demographic preoccupations, by talking appreciatively about a woman’s mothering of numerous offspring, concluding in religious tones that motherhood is a godly blessing (post with 371 Likes; 6 Shares; 10 Comments⁵). Having no children, Udrea is the most subdued amongst the analyzed politicians with references to motherhood. In turn, she takes pictures with children (post with 4500 Likes; and 105 Comments⁶), and discusses the importance of traditions and moral values, arguing that the traditional family is “the pillar of Romanian society” (post with 2080 Likes; 150 Shares; and 78 Comments⁷). Motherhood does not take center stage in Macovei’s discursive performance of gender either, though she mentions “the trinity of Romanian nation, Orthodox religion and morality, and traditional family.” Unlike Dúró, she maintains a certain separation between private and public life: references to her being a mother are very rare and mostly indirect (4 posts during the analyzed period), such as posting the birthday greetings received from her son (post with 16870 Likes; 502 Shares; 450 Comments⁸). Attempting a more personal approach, however, Macovei focuses on her relationship with her cat, Dubi (post with 3540 Likes; 135 Shares; 175 Comments⁹).

When it comes to the discursive performances of gender that detail the ideal of feminine toughness, the situation is somewhat different. Macovei’s posts contour most clearly with this ideal, and are in stark contrast to Dúró’s extensive performance of motherhood. Interestingly, Macovei rarely mentions being a woman, or a mother herself; instead, she performs an almost gender-blind professional ideal of the hardworking individual,

² <https://www.facebook.com/durodora/photos/a.743964055639463.1073741834.191946490841225/807835052585696/?type=3&theater>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/durodora/posts/699069860128883?match=c3pha8OhbGxhcyBuxZFrIG11dGF0dGE%3D>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/photos/a.206701452863821.1073741829.194170724116894/269129426621023/?type=3>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/posts/242120095988623?match=bWEgYSAxMSBneWVybWVrZXMGXRibGvDoW7DoWw%3D>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/ElenaBasescuOficial/photos/a.546312515458289.1073741849.430856153670593/591071704315703/?type=3>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152236957199584/?type=3>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/706673709427809/?type=3>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/618288461599668/?type=3>

fighting singlehandedly and stubbornly against corruption (post with 5700 Likes; 700 Shares; 290 Comments¹⁰). Nonetheless, Macovei dismisses the pervasive misogyny in Romanian society. She uses a conservative way of reasoning, arguing that since women acquire extensive management skills by maintaining their family households, they may use these skills when engaging in politics (post with 1439 Likes; 156 Shares; 298 Comments¹¹). She positions herself as the “mother of National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA)”, which suggests a substitute for her biological motherhood (post with 240 Likes; 50 Shares; 5 Comments¹²), or encourages comparisons between herself and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the account that they both embody good professional women, with a strong character and will, but also capable of (feminine) warmth. Gáll-Pelcz, on the other hand, contours the ideal of a professional woman with a profound knowledge and engagement in women’s issues, understood in a conservative key to pertain to balancing between family life, and some sort of participation on the labor market (post with 324 Likes; 34 Shares; 7 Comments¹³). Intriguingly, Udrea’s discursive performance of gender appropriates the ideal of feminine toughness by fusing conservative discourse—women as social glue, maintaining the traditional family, and Romanian values and spirituality—with feminist stances against women’s discrimination (post with 6300 Likes; 340 Shares; and 460 Likes¹⁴); positive examples of women fighting traditionalism—such as Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, and socialist politician Dilma Rousseff; and glimpses of her own personal life. Unlike Macovei, Udrea emphasizes her physical attributes, skillfully using to her advantage the slanderous insinuations of her being Băsescu’s lover. This is candidly illustrated by comments on one of her photos that the awkward position she was in was due to her arranging her bra (post with 2750 Likes; 180 Shares; and 270 Comments¹⁵). In general, Udrea argues in her posts that beauty, modernity, and youthfulness are the paramount values for PMP and her presidential campaign, which had the motto “For a beautiful Romania!” (post with 3730 Likes; 450 Shares; and 775 Comments¹⁶).

7. Conclusions

Whilst Hungary and Romania have the lowest levels of women’s political participation in the EU, and parties on the conservative right ideological continuum relate somewhat differently to the feminist project, the analysis of them is significant to the extant scholarship on gender and conservatism. For example, in Hungary, both FIDESZ and JOBBIK position themselves against the feminist project. In a context of strong demographic anxieties,

they fuse social conservatism with exclusionary nationalism in ways that cement traditional gender roles and emphasize normative heterosexuality. In Romania, in turn, PMP and M10 are more ambiguous, blending outright opposition to the feminist project with instrumental efforts to reinterpret traditional gender roles that emanate from neoliberal anti-welfare attitudes.

Corroborating these with the discursive performances of gender (summarized in Table 4), and the significant gap in the level of visibility between the women politicians in Hungary and in Romania, three key conclusions are discerned. First, the predominance of motherhood performances fortifies the political profiles of Gáll-Pelcz and Dúró as committed representatives of what are generally regarded as feminine “soft issues” in the masculine “hard” political competition. To varying degrees, both Hungarian politicians merely reiterate the conservative ideological expectations about women’s traditional gender roles, even on social media (Celis & Childs, 2018; Childs & Webb, 2012; Gibson & Heyse, 2010). However, they do this in quite different ways. Dúró for example, uses her motherhood instrumentally to achieve greater political visibility, whilst Macovei and Udrea attempt to widen their repertoire of discursive performances of gender. They for instance, navigate between women’s traditional gender roles that emphasize familial and maternal instincts, and those that stress feminine toughness (Schreiber, 2016), albeit with only sporadic and contradictory attempts to recast women’s position as a tolerated presence in the political arena. In a few instances, there were other performances of gender, such as the almost gender-blind neoliberal professional, which appears to be the most extreme interpretation of “true liberation”.

Secondly, the most clearly antifeminist conceptions on the conservative right continuum, those that are underpinned by traditional family values, are espoused by the right-wing populist parties. In this case, women politicians employ various iterations of the motherhood ideal, but as Dúró exemplifies, this may be used instrumentally to construct a political career. In other words, it is not only the different cultural contexts in Hungary and Romania that enable specific discursive performances of gender, but also the ideological context into which these women embed their political activity in these countries. On the other hand, women’s “true liberation” builds on the ideal of feminine toughness, but *in extremis* it dismisses feminist contestations about women’s underrepresentation in politics by simply erasing their gender. However, selecting four women politicians, and analyzing their official Facebook profiles in 2014, the article offers a snapshot, albeit a revealing one, of these complex issues.

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/a.330775430350974.73077.130380413723811/705629052865608/?type=3>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/130380413723811/posts/660444824050698>

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaMacoveiUE/photos/pb.130380413723811.-2207520000.1464168783./703467069748473/?type=3&theater>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/ildiko.pelcz.gall/posts/303210239879608?match=a2VkdMvZlG7FkXTDoXJzYW0%3D>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152091854719584/?type=3>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/photos/a.10150113418889584.283864.349853434583/10152562229034584/?type=3&theater>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/EUdrea/videos/10152543752774584/>

Table 4. Facebook posts—Summary of analysis.

Politicians	Performance of gender	Motherhood	Feminine toughness
Ildikó Gáll-Pelcz		Well-contoured	Contoured on women's issues
Dóra Dúró		Strong contours	Subdued
Elena Udrea		Subdued substitute	Well-contoured, though contradictory
Monica Macovei		Subdued	Strong contours

Thirdly, the combination of DHA and social media analysis sheds light on the way Facebook bridges the divisions between the ideological constraints about gender roles specific to the conservative right continuum, and to women's empowerment in politics. Further research could explore comparatively and, in more detail, how these conservative ideals (Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Schreiber, 2016) are faithfully performed, resisted, contested, or even replaced by women politicians (Celis & Childs, 2018; Celis & Erzeel, 2015; Childs & Webb, 2012). Further, and arguably more significant, is the new research opportunities social media allows, and how the discursive performances of gender articulate resistance to, or offer a reinterpretation of, the feminist project.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

A Foe of Democracy, Gender and Sexual Equality in Macedonia: The Worrisome Role of the Party VMRO-DPMNE

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Abstract

Between 2006 and 2017, the political power in the Republic of Macedonia was predominantly held by the Christian-democratic party VMRO-DPMNE. Its increasing opposition to gender and sexual equality manifested, inter alia, in the imposition of an antidiscrimination law, which did not explicitly recognise sexual orientation as a ground of discrimination, the replacement of the rather liberal abortion law with a restrictive one, and the two attempts to constitutionally define marriage as a heterosexual union. Building upon earlier inquiries into the development of the LGBT movement in Macedonia and the introduction of the new abortion law, I examine here the discourse which the ruling coalitions used to justify the removal of the term ‘sexual orientation’ from the antidiscrimination law, and the need for a constitutional definition of marriage. I explore further how the authorities pushed their conservative agenda by undermining democracy through infringement of the official legislative procedures and suppression of dissent. In closing, I underline the retrograde impact of de-democratisation on the already and the yet to be attained progressive legislation and practices in the realm of gender and sexual equality.

Keywords

antidiscrimination law; constitutional definition of marriage; de-democratisation; gender equality; Macedonia; NGOs; party VMRO-DPMNE; sexual equality; state capture

Issue

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1. Introduction

Between 2006 and 2017, the political power in the Republic of Macedonia was predominantly held by the Christian-democratic party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). Its opposition to gender and sexual equality manifested, inter alia, in the imposition in April 2010 of an antidiscrimination law—Macedonia’s first one—which did not explicitly recognise sexual orientation as a ground of discrimination, the replacement of the rather liberal abortion law with a restrictive one in June 2013, and the two attempts (August/September 2013, and June 2014/January 2015) to constitutionally define marriage as a heterosexual union.

During VMRO-DPMNE’s rule, there was not only a proliferation of discriminatory discourses (including those employed by state officials) and anti-LGBT violence, but also a virtual impunity of the perpetrators, despite the existence of Criminal Code which proscribed physical violence against people and discrimination based on personal characteristics (e.g., *Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija*, 37/1996). This dismantling of the already vulnerable nascent rule of law was also visible in the way in which the new abortion law came about. In fact, the interference with the freedom of choice regarding childbirth proved to be an excellent case for observing the state-led interference with other human rights and freedoms, and learning more about the mechanisms of de-democratisation (Miškovska Kajevska, 2016, 2018).

As in my analysis of the installation of a new abortion law (Miškovska Kajevska, 2018), I use the term ‘de-democratisation’ to refer to the various legislative breaches and other forms of disregard of official procedures, which were undertaken by the authorities themselves. Building upon Walby’s assertion (2011, p. 11) that ‘the shrinking of democratic spaces makes for a more difficult environment for the operation of feminism, which attempts to reduce inequalities and to deepen democratic governance’, I set here to explore the interaction between de-democratisation and opposition to gender and sexual equality further. I examine the discourse which the Macedonian authorities used in their successful efforts to remove the term ‘sexual orientation’ from the draft antidiscrimination law and their unsuccessful endeavours to constitutionally define marriage. In addition, I look into the ways in which the ruling coalitions pushed their conservative agenda on those occasions by repeatedly infringing the official legislative procedures and readily discarding the criticism, which was put forward by the parliamentary and NGO opposition, as well as international and supranational institutions. My findings are based on the data obtained from official documents of the government and parliament of Macedonia, media statements, and publications by (LGBT) human rights NGOs.¹

I begin by introducing the Macedonian legal context in relation to the antidiscrimination law and the legal definition of marriage. Subsequently, following the chronological order of the analysed instances of law-making, I scrutinise the related legislative procedure and the accompanying discourse. The thick descriptions, which I employ, lend themselves valuable for attending to the many facets and stages of the analysed cases. I close the article by offering insights into the retrograde impact of de-democratisation on gender and sexual equality. My focus on Macedonia, in accordance with Paternotte and Kuhar (2017), should not be understood as a suggestion that the addressed developments are unique, i.e., represent a ‘Macedonian exception’. By providing extensive empirical material regarding one specific and thus far insufficiently explored context, I aim instead to inspire directions for future comparative analyses, which will better situate the Macedonian case within the European landscape of disturbing (un)democratic mobilisation against gender and sexual equality (Kováts, 2017; Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018).

2. Legal Background

Until 1991, the Republic of Macedonia was one of the constitutive units of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. No separate law on prevention and protection against discrimination existed. Macedonia’s Crim-

inal Code of 1977 addressed discrimination by criminalising the breach of citizens’ equal rights on the grounds of ‘nationality, ethnic background, race, faith, [assigned] sex, language, education, or societal status’ (Služben vesnik na Socijalistička Republika Makedonija, 25/1977, Article 50, p. 496). The same Criminal Code criminalised male homosexuality—there were no provisions on female homosexuality—as ‘unnatural debauchery’ for which one could ‘be incarcerated for up to one year’ (Služben vesnik na Socijalistička Republika Makedonija 25/1977, Article 101.2, p. 501). Given this stipulation, it is no surprise that sexual orientation was not specified as a ground upon which one’s equality could be violated.

Male homosexuality was finally decriminalised in the Criminal Code of 1996. That was one of the obligations which Macedonia had agreed to meet upon becoming a member of the Council of Europe in November 1995. Even then, though, the altered article on the breach of the equal rights failed to explicitly mention sexual orientation. The list of grounds upon which one could unfairly receive unequal treatment stated ‘[assigned] sex, race, skin colour, ethnic and social background, political and religious conviction, property ownership, societal status, language, or another personal characteristic or circumstance’ (Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, 37/1996, Article 137, p. 1539). The decriminalisation of male homosexuality did not bring a constitutional change either. Just like the previous versions of the constitution, those which were proclaimed after 1996 did not specify that one’s equality was to be respected and protected also regardless of one’s sexual orientation.

Macedonia’s first law on marriage was passed in 1973. Until then, the legislation on family matters had been decided upon at the federal level. That law, just like the preceding and succeeding ones, including those enacted after 1991, defined marriage as an opposite-sex union. Hence, it has never been possible to form a legally recognised same-sex matrimony in Macedonia. Under certain conditions, cohabitation could qualify as marriage, but that, too, concerned the opposite-sex unions only. The constitution did not contain any definitions of marriage and cohabitation (Služben vesnik na Socijalistička Republika Makedonija, 35/1973; Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, 157/2008).

3. Legislative Procedures

3.1. Antidiscrimination Law

Already the first NGOs which in the early 2000s started to advocate the rights of LGBT people in Macedonia demanded the creation of an antidiscrimination law wherein sexual orientation would be one of the prohibited discrimination grounds. They prompted the au-

¹ I only analyse texts in Macedonian, which is the country’s official language and the native language of its largest ethnic community: the ethnic Macedonians. Being, unfortunately, unable to understand the native language of the ethnic Albanians (the second-largest ethnic community in the country), no Albanian-language items are featured here.

thorities and the general public that such a law was needed also in light of Macedonia's aspirations for becoming an EU member state. However, although Macedonia applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was given the status of an EU candidate country in December 2005, the then ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)² failed to make any progress regarding the antidiscrimination law. It was only at the end of 2007 that the government, led by VMRO-DPMNE, announced the forthcoming start of the relevant law-making procedure. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the working group in charge of drafting this law was to incorporate NGO representatives, too (Helsinki komitet za čovekovi prava na Republika Makedonija & Makedonska asocijacija za slobodna seksualna orijentacija, 2005; Makedonska asocijacija za slobodna seksualna orijentacija, 2008; Najčevska et al., 2002).

This analysis explores the last phase of the procedure, when 'sexual orientation' all of a sudden disappeared from the long list of 18 explicitly formulated discrimination grounds (many more than in the earlier related legislation), plus the general category 'any other discrimination ground'. This happened in late January 2010, when the government, represented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, submitted a new draft to parliament. Up to then, all versions of the draft law, including the last one from November 2009 which was expected to go to parliament, contained the term 'sexual orientation' and there were no indications of its removal (Koalicija za zaštita i promocija na seksualnite i zdravstvenite prava na marginaliziranite zaednici, 2009; Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2010).³ It appears that the government conceded to the inclusion of 'sexual orientation' in the antidiscrimination law because that was one of EU's conditions for granting visa liberalisation to Macedonia. Once the EU positively decided upon the liberalisation in late November 2009, without having awaited the promulgation of the antidiscrimination law, the government deleted the parts of the draft law it disagreed with (Kacarska, 2015).

The Minister of Labour and Social Policy provided contradictory explanations for the removal. He stated both that the discrimination based on sexual orientation fell under 'any other discrimination ground' and that the inclusion of sexual orientation was 'not in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the Republic of Macedonia' (BBC Macedonian, 2010). At that moment, though, there were six laws (the seventh was passed only two weeks later) which explicitly listed 'sexual orientation' as one of the grounds which could not justify unequal treatment. For example, the Law on Protection of Patients' Rights (Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, 82/2008), unambiguously defined that the reali-

sation of those rights was not to be impeded due to one's sexual orientation. Even by using the least malign defence of the erasure, i.e., by stating that 'sexual orientation' was subsumed in 'any other discrimination ground', the proponents of the law ignored the importance of an explicit mention of this ground in order to discourage more successfully the unequal treatment of a highly marginalised population.

In the ensuing parliamentary debates, the oppositional parties and the involved NGOs demanded a withdrawal of this draft, which whitewashed the widespread discrimination of LGBT people, was not in accordance with the EU *acquis*, and ignored the concerns and recommendations which the Venice Commission⁴ and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights had expressed to earlier drafts. VMRO-DPMNE's parliamentarians unhesitatingly rejected not only the criticism coming from domestic actors, but also that of members of the European Parliament, foreign ambassadors, international human rights organisations, and the EU Delegation to Macedonia. Foreign politicians and activists were accused of supporting the agenda of the oppositional SDSM and, thereby, promoting values which did not correspond to the tradition of the Macedonian society. The inclusion of 'sexual orientation' was seen as potentially causing societal unrests and largely facilitating the demands for the detrimental legalisation of same-sex marriages and adoptions by same-sex couples. One deputy argued that in democratic societies 'the non-governmental organisations are not legitimate subjects and do not have the sovereignty' to monitor and control the work of the authorities (Komisija za evropski prašanja, 2010, p. 4). This statement clearly showed VMRO-DPMNE's distorted conceptualisation of democracy which precluded the more than necessary existence of citizens' critical engagement with the actions and policies of the authorities (Fouéré, 2016; Koalicija za zaštita i promocija na seksualnite i zdravstvenite prava na marginaliziranite zaednici, 2011; Najčevska, 2010).

After it had become obvious that the government did not intend to withdraw the draft law, a group of oppositional parliamentarians submitted to parliament in early March 2010 another draft antidiscrimination law. This draft was prepared by a number of NGOs and contained the term 'sexual orientation'. During that month, thus, parliament discussed two drafts. Given the safe majority which the ruling coalition had, the oppositional draft was rejected right after first reading, whereas the governmental draft was found acceptable to be sent to second reading. The debates which took place that month were full of misleading and contradictory information, as well as phobic and discriminatory utterances by VMRO-DPMNE's parliamentarians and government offi-

² VMRO-DPMNE's main political rival.

³ This was not the only staggering and problematic alteration, but the other issues do not fall under the scope of this analysis.

⁴ Officially called 'European Commission for Democracy through Law', this advisory body of the Council of Europe serves to provide legal advice 'to its member states and, in particular, to help states wishing to bring their legal and institutional structures into line with European standards and international experience in the fields of democracy, human rights and the rule of law' (Retrieved from www.venice.coe.int/WebForms/pages/?p=01_Presentation).

cials. They insisted that the inclusion of ‘sexual orientation’ was part of SDSM’s agenda to change the Family Law, i.e., legalise the unnatural same-sex marriages and adoptions by same-sex couples. In their view, that change would take away all legal obstacles to the later legalisation of incest, paedophilia, polyandry, polygamy, and zoophilia. Homosexuality was portrayed as an illness and a deviant Western phenomenon, which led to decadence and national self-destruction, and was antithetical to the local traditions and values as endorsed by the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community⁵—an argument which directly undermined the constitutionally guaranteed secularism. The rights of homosexual people were called ‘quasi human rights’ and the struggle for their achievement was presented as irrelevant because, as it was claimed, those people already enjoyed all rights and were not discriminated by anybody in the tolerant Macedonian society. At the same time, VMRO-DPMNE and the government in general were portrayed as committed to human rights and EU membership, and as respecting and following the EU standards and values (Anketna komisija, 2010; Dimitrov, 2015; Koalicija za zaštita i promocija na seksualnite i zdravstvenite prava na marginaliziranite zaednici, 2011; Sobranie na R. Makedonija, 2010a).

So, instead of providing space for a substantial debate on equality, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE ‘abused the law-making procedure to promote discriminatory behaviour [and] unbridled hate speech by many parliamentarians’ (Najčevska, as cited in Makedonski centar za međunarodna sorabotka, 2010). Once parliament received a new version of the governmental draft law in the second half of March 2010, there was a significant reduction of the overt utterances of discrimination and hate speech. Nonetheless, the amendment for adding ‘sexual orientation’, proposed by a deputy from one of VMRO-DPMNE’s smaller coalition partners, was rejected and the new draft was supplemented with a definition of marriage as ‘a life union exclusively of one man and one woman’ (Komisija za trud i socijalna politika & Zakonodavno-pravna komisija, 2010, p. 4). In view of the already existing definition of marriage in the Family Law, this supplement was legally superfluous, but it served to further install VMRO-DPMNE’s heteronormative agenda. The addition of the word ‘exclusively’, which was absent from the corresponding definition in the Family Law, strengthened this endeavour. It seems, therefore, that VMRO-DPMNE, having reached its goal, temporarily abstained from spreading moral panic about the imposition of homosexuality, only to return to it in a big way three years later, during its attempts to introduce constitutional changes.

On 8 April 2010, the new draft of the antidiscrimination law—officially called Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination—was swiftly passed by parlia-

ment. By way of protest, the oppositional parliamentarians were either absent or abstained from the final debate and the voting.⁶ A week earlier, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy warned once more the Macedonian Prime Minister (and VMRO-DPMNE’s leader) about the problematic character of the proposed draft. He stressed the importance of respecting the EU *acquis* and mentioning ‘sexual orientation’ as a discrimination ground, and added that its exclusion ‘could paradoxically, be seen as a form of discrimination’ (Füle, as cited in Fouéré, 2016, p. 227). Referring to the oft-mentioned alleged causality between the inclusion of ‘sexual orientation’ and the introduction of same-sex marriages, the Commissioner pointed that while all EU member states considered sexual orientation a potential discrimination ground, their family laws were not affected by that and differed greatly. Unfortunately, even this letter and the related advocacy attempts by the Head of the EU delegation to Macedonia did not thwart the adoption of the law (Fouéré, 2016; Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, 50/2010; Sobranie na R. Makedonija, 2010b).

In its 2010 progress report for Macedonia, the European Commission (2010, pp. 19–20), next to criticising the country for passing such an antidiscrimination law, commented on the overall procedure, too: ‘The quality of the dialogue on the law was low. The debates in parliament were divisive and remarks from civil society and the international community were not considered’. That comment would prove to be valid also for the procedures concerning the abortion law and the constitutional changes.

3.2. A Constitutional Definition of Marriage

On 29 December 2010, during their New Year’s meeting with the President of Macedonia, the representatives of the five main religious communities in Macedonia presented their call for a constitutional definition of marriage as an opposite-sex union and invited all citizens and deputies to support their endeavour. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE said not to be familiar with this request, but considered it a legitimate effort of those who ‘cared for the health of the citizens and the nation, as well as for the preservation of moral values’ (Makfaks, 2010). Although the news reports of the meeting did not note an explicit utterance of support by this party, it is difficult to imagine its absence. There was a large overlap between the relevant discourse of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and that which VMRO-DPMNE used in its defence of the removal of ‘sexual orientation’ from the antidiscrimination law.

Its unambiguous rejection of same-sex marriages notwithstanding, VMRO-DPMNE did not speak of introducing a constitutional definition of marriage. That was

⁵ The two largest religious authorities in Macedonia.

⁶ Absenteeism is a common, albeit typically unsuccessful, protest strategy of the parliamentary opposition in Macedonia, regardless of which political parties constitute that opposition.

not the case even in October 2012, when the issue of same-sex marriages and adoptions resurfaced again. On the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy asserted that there would be no gay marriages in Macedonia nor adoptions by same-sex couples as long as VMRO-DPMNE was in power. According to him, the only way for a child to develop normally was to be raised by its biological parents. Just a day later, in an interview on one of the main pro-government TV stations, he underlined that these standpoints were in accordance with his party's Christian and traditional values. Responding to the criticism of several NGOs which qualified his statements as discriminating against LGBT people, adopted children, and single and adoptive parents, the Minister said that he did not understand this exaggerated reaction and threatened the NGOs with a libel lawsuit (which he eventually did not set in motion). Few days later, his fellow party member, the Minister of Internal Affairs, similarly spoke of opposite-sex marriages as being based on natural principles and considered the adoptions by same-sex couples as not leading to the nation's prosperity. Her comment, too, was given at an event which was unrelated to the issues at stake: The EU Anti-Trafficking Day (E-vesti, 2012; E. Š., 2012; Koalicija "Seksualni i zdravstveni prava na marginaliziranite zaednici", 2013). Shortly afterwards, in his festive speech given on a Macedonian national holiday, the Prime Minister called for respect for traditional family values and portrayed same-sex marriages and adoptions by same-sex couples as 'distorted values', just like the struggle for women's rights and women's political and economic participation (Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2012).

The silence on the potential constitutional definition of marriage was soon to end. In early August 2013, a group of deputies from the ruling coalition submitted to parliament an initiative for constitutional changes. In hindsight, one can say that the preceding homophobic statements—including the Minister of Health's resolute rejection in June 2013 of the chance of introducing same-sex marriages and gender reassignment surgeries (A1on, 2013)—were a harbinger of the requested constitutional changes: the insertion of the exclusive definition of marriage and cohabitation as a union of one man and one woman, and the insertion of the restrictive stipulation that only a married opposite-sex couple or a single parent could adopt children. The initiative did not mention the terms 'homosexuality' and 'same-sex', but these terms were to be inferred from the formulation that the institution of marriage was 'faced with the modern-day challenges [and] efforts for its redefinition' (Grupa pratenici, 2013, p. 7). While acknowledging the existence of a definition of marriage in both the Family Law and the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, the initiators suggested that those stipulations were insufficient. The deputies argued that Mace-

donia needed to invoke constitutional mechanisms to additionally protect the traditional definition of marriage, the family values, children's wellbeing, and the society in general. Contrary to the constitutionally guaranteed secularism, one of the provided justifications was that all religious communities in Macedonia conceptualised marriage as a union of one man and one woman—an implicit reference to the call of the religious leaders from December 2010.

Prior to the parliamentary debate in September 2013, the government sent to parliament a letter in support of the changes. Besides repeating the arguments about the importance of increased protection, the government stated that such a constitutional definition was needed 'lest a legal lacuna remains which would allow space for various interpretations (Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2013, p. 2). This statement, however, misrepresented the reality: the Family Law left no space for interpretations. Already at the beginning of the debate, VMRO-DPMNE's deputies explicitly stated that without a constitutional definition of marriage, it would be much easier for SDSM, should it come to power, to legalise same-sex unions and adoptions by same-sex couples. Thus, it became clear that the real issue at stake was not the alleged legal lacuna, but the difference between the number of parliamentarians needed to change a law (42) and that needed to change the constitution (82).

As before, VMRO-DPMNE used deception to spread panic and advance its agenda. The proposal of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee to change the Family Law so that the provisions against domestic violence would also apply to same-sex couples was interpreted as a demand for legalisation of same-sex marriages. Furthermore, that action was portrayed as not being a genuine non-party initiative, but as orchestrated by SDSM. The Macedonian Helsinki Committee and other oppositional NGOs were additionally depicted as championing foreign interests and working in bad faith due to being funded by the billionaire George Soros through his Open Society Foundations—one of VMRO-DPMNE's oft-used ways for delegitimising the NGOs which publicly disagreed with its politics.⁷ In short, the parliamentarians and the public were time and again warned about the apparent threat which all dissenting voices posed to the Macedonian society and its traditions.

Despite all this insistence and many deputies' (some of whom were from the non-ruling parties) deeply worrisome homophobic utterances and/or lack of even basic knowledge of gender and sexuality related matters and terminology, the initiative did not obtain the required number of affirmative votes. Unlike before, VMRO-DPMNE's main coalition partner since 2008, the ethnic Albanian party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration), withheld its support. As DUI's deputies repeatedly stated during the debate, they, too, considered the traditional and religiously sanctioned opposite-sex marriage

⁷ Cf. the similar strategies of the authorities in Hungary recently (Trencsényi, Rieber, Iordachi, & Hincu, 2017) and of those in Croatia and Serbia in the 1990s (Stubbs, 2013).

the only possible form of marriage, but they were not interested in any minor and partial constitutional interventions. Portraying themselves as vigilant advocates of their constituency, the only changes these deputies were willing to support were the profound ones for the purpose of granting more rights and decision-making power to the ethnic Albanians (Helsinški komitet za čovekovi prava na Republika Makedonija, 2012; Sobranie na R. Makedonija, 2013a, 2013b; Staletović, 2016).

In late June 2014, less than a year after the first attempt, VMRO-DPMNE pushed again for a constitutional definition of marriage and cohabitation. At that moment, most of the opposition boycotted parliament in protest against the irregularities during the parliamentary and presidential elections in April 2014. This new proposal was put forward by the government, as part of a set of quite diverse constitutional changes⁸, unlike the earlier one, which only addressed marriage and cohabitation. The Prime Minister presented the changes as bringing new quality and higher standards to the country. Comparable to the discourse of modernisation which the government had employed for defending the restrictive abortion law, the notion of improvement was used to mask another intended introduction of a discriminatory or otherwise harmful policy (Miškovska Kajevska, 2018; Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2014a, 2014b).⁹ Although the proposed interventions did not address the issues which DUI had underlined during the earlier initiative for constitutional changes, this time its parliamentarians and government officials supported the proposal.

Parliament authorised the start of the procedure for changing the constitution in mid-July 2014. Subsequently, the government had ten days to formulate related draft amendments and submit them to parliament. When parliament received those amendments, it turned out that the government wanted to constitutionally define cohabitation, too. That intervention had not been previously discussed in parliament, i.e., it was not part of the document which had been approved the month before. So, all of a sudden, the draft amendment on marriage contained two parts: one defining marriage as a 'union exclusively between only one woman and only one man' and another doing the same regarding 'registered cohabitation, or any other registered form of life partnership' (Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2014c, p. 2). Prior to the related parliamentary session in late August 2014, the Minister of Justice had requested the opinion of the Venice Commission on the whole set of draft amendments, but even before that opinion was delivered, they were approved by parliament. In a self-contradictory manner the proponents resorted again to religion and tradition to underline the supposed natural and unchanging character of the opposite-sex marriage, and to justify the need to constitutionally protect it. Much more striking was the fact that, with the exception

of three deputies (two oppositional ones and one from a smaller member of the ruling coalition), the rest did not object to the unannounced and undiscussed extension of the amendment on marriage. By breaching the official legislative procedure, the government and parliament alike thus undermined democracy and the rule of law, all the while claiming that the requested constitutional changes served to improve the state administration (Sobranie na R. Makedonija, 2014).

After being approved, the draft amendments were subjected to a 30-day open public debate. Many (LGBT) human rights activists stressed—just like the Venice Commission would state later—that it was not necessary to constitutionally define marriage because the Family Law already contained the same stipulation, whereas the added second definition collided with the rulings of the European Human Rights Court. To obtain support against this constitutional change, the activists spoke in local and foreign media, and alerted their international networks and the diplomatic corps in Macedonia. After the Venice Commission had delivered its opinion in October 2014, the Minister of Justice held a press-conference in which he implied that the definition of cohabitation would be removed. Without referring to the objections made during the public debate, he expressed the government's willingness to respect the opinion of the Venice Commission. The second version of the draft amendments which parliament received in late December 2014 did not contain the definition of cohabitation (Duvnjak, 2014; Trajanoski, 2015; Venice Commission, 2014; Vlada na Republika Makedonija, 2014d).

The next relevant parliamentary session, scheduled for the second half of January 2015, was expected to end with the pronouncement of the constitutional changes. The parliamentarians from the ruling coalition approved the contents of each of the amendments, but when the final voting on the whole set was supposed to begin, there were fewer deputies present than required. As a result of the internal power struggles in DUI regarding, *inter alia*, the changes which the ethnic Albanians were to support, four of its parliamentarians decided to disrespect the agreement between their party leader and the leader of VMRO-DPMNE and leave the session. Due to this absence of a quorum the session was interrupted and has not been resumed since. In consequence, the constitution has remained free from a heteronormative definition of marriage (Sobranie na R. Makedonija, 2015a, 2015b).

4. Discussion: De-Democratisation as a Catalyst for Gender and Sexual Inequality

One of the reasons why the procedure for changing Macedonia's constitution has not been resumed was the disclosure in February 2015 of the mass illegal wiretap-

⁸ I do not address here the other proposed changes because they were not related to gender and sexual equality.

⁹ Another example is the purchase of dated and lower quality insulin for the diabetes patients which was announced as procurement of the 'most modern therapy' (Stojadinović, 2016).

ping operation run by the state intelligence service. The leader of SDSM revealed that around 1% of the country's population, i.e., around 20,000 people, had been wiretapped, including (prominent) members of the ruling coalition. After receiving the recordings of those intercepted phone, e-mail, and text communications, he publicly aired some of them. The recordings exposed the large extent of the ruling parties' abuse of power, that of VMRO-DPMNE in particular: mass forgery and sabotage of the electoral process and the electoral register, threats to people lest they vote for another party, physical violence against opponents, blackmail, extortion, corruption, as well as extensive control of the media, judiciary, police, and other state institutions (European Commission, 2015; Senior Experts' Group, 2015). In the 2016 progress report for Macedonia, the European Commission (2016, p. 8) expressed its 'concerns about state capture of institutions and key sectors of society', i.e., the fact that 'independent regulatory, supervisory and advisory bodies were not able to carry out their functions proactively, effectively and free from political pressure, leading to limited oversight of the executive'. Therefore, following Tilly's (2007, p. 20) categorisation of regimes' public politics, one can say that in the analysed decade Macedonia was a 'high-capacity undemocratic' state—an extent of state capture, infringement of procedures, and suppression of free choice which was unprecedented since the fall of the socialist polity.

This is not to say that the first 15 years of Macedonia's existence as an independent political entity were marked by a thriving development of democracy. Neither were the pre-2006 governments led by VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM exemplary proponents of the rule of law, a good functioning trias politica, and extensive citizen participation in the decision and law-making processes (see, e.g., the annual reports of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee¹⁰). Furthermore, between 1991 and 2006, the achievement of gender and sexual equality was far from a priority for the ruling parties.¹¹ They made no significant improvements in the form of, e.g., creation of an antidiscrimination law, institution of a constitutionally guaranteed equality of sexual minorities, opening up of marriage and cohabitation for same-sex couples, increased access to modern contraception, or incorporation of a comprehensive sexual education in the curricula. Depending on the issue, that non-action, i.e., the preservation of the status quo could either facilitate the realisation of gender and sexual equality (e.g., termination of pregnancy) or obstruct it (e.g., discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation).

After the parliamentary elections in 2006, though, the situation increasingly started deteriorating. VMRO-DPMNE's refusal to explicitly oppose the discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, and its objections to same-sex marriages and the struggle for women's

rights, formed a highly problematic political programme, which put roadblocks on the route to gender and sexual equality. This programme became even much more worrisome because it remained in place for a decade and was combined with an advancing de-democratisation. In other words, the gender and sexual Others were already put in a disadvantaged position, which significantly hampered their equal participation and treatment in the society. The state capture and the systematic suppression of dissent were already generally detrimental for democracy and the majority of the population, but they additionally prevented the already marginalised groups from freely exercising their rights and liberties.

The authorities did not stop at ignoring or discarding the criticism which was put forward by non-ruling parties and the few professionals, NGO activists and ordinary citizens who dared to utter their dissent. Even the concerns and recommendations of EU institutions and other supranational bodies were hardly taken into account. Misleading information was regularly communicated, such as the framing of the promoted regressive changes as modernisation. (A contradiction existed, though, in the utterances regarding the constitutional definition of marriage: marriage was to be protected from the 'modern-day challenges' by modernisation.) Moreover, utterances of discrimination, homophobia, and hate speech, as well as breaching of the official procedures became an everyday reality. Instead of leading to sanctions for the perpetrators, those occurrences became normalised.

In addition, the constitutionally guaranteed secularism was violated through the involvement of religious officials and politicians' recourse to religion for the purpose of justifying the proposed interventions. This means that, unlike in Croatia and Slovenia—two other post-Yugoslav states—where the initially clerical discourse of the opponents of gender and sexual equality has been secularised (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Kuhar, 2015), in Macedonia the initially secular discourse was clericalised. Based on the analysis of these authors, another difference between the contexts in question becomes visible. In Croatia and Slovenia, the main religious authority (the Catholic Church) and its NGO subsidiaries have been in the public forefront of the campaigning against gender and sexual equality, whereas the secular authorities—the government and parliamentary officials—have taken a secondary part. These roles were reversed in Macedonia: The secular authorities there were the key public opponents of this equality, while the main religious authority (the Macedonian Orthodox Church) foremostly conducted its advocacy efforts in the background. No extensive presence of religiously affiliated NGOs was visible. At the same time, comparably to Croatia and Slovenia (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Kuhar, 2015), deceptive information was used to impose heteronormativity and

¹⁰ The reports are available on the Committee's webpage: <http://www.mhc.org.mk/pages/reports>

¹¹ The decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1996 stemmed from the requirements of the Council of Europe, not the genuine engagement of the then Macedonian authorities.

multi-child nuclear families, and portray homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and abortion as a highly potent societal threat.

The addressed developments in Macedonia seem to fit within the broader mobilisation against gender and sexual equality across Europe—e.g., Austria, Croatia, France, Italy, Poland, and Russia—which is carried out by conservative political and religious forces (Kováts, 2017; Kováts & Põim, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018). However, unlike elsewhere, where the terms ‘gender ideology’ and/or ‘gender theory’ are more often than not employed to name the danger one (preventively) mobilises against, such terms were absent from the relevant discussions in Macedonia in the analysed decade. When the admission of new students of Gender Studies at the main state university was discontinued in 2013 and the start of the brand new Family Studies was announced, the provided justifications did not feature the above terms, but referred to the surplus of Gender Studies graduates on the labour market and the shortage of expertise related to the topics which would be covered by the Family Studies. The introductory text of their programme even stated that they were based, too, in the knowledge obtained by the Gender Studies (Fakulteti, 2013; Filozofski fakultet, 2013). This quite curious situation, which took place in the same year in which the restrictive abortion law was promulgated, deserves to be further explored in a separate analysis.

After the parliamentary elections in December 2016, VMRO-DPMNE’s animosity towards democracy became once more shockingly obvious. Although this party won the elections (by a narrow margin from SDSM), it did not succeed to form a government. VMRO-DPMNE’s diverse obstructions of the subsequent related procedures included the refusal of the head of the state, who had won the presidential elections as that party’s candidate, to grant the mandate for forming a government to the leader of SDSM. On 27 April 2017, after the SDSM-led parliamentary majority elected the new speaker, the supporters of VMRO-DPMNE, assisted by some of its deputies, stormed the parliament and (severely) injured several parliamentarians from SDSM and the ethnic Albanian political parties, as well as journalists. The President spoke of declaring a state of emergency—a situation, which would have enabled him and the other officials of the captured state to even more severely bypass the democratic procedures (Walby, 2015). Following intense international diplomatic pressure, the President and VMRO-DPMNE had to back down. In May 2017, SDSM managed to form a government. This gives space for optimism, although the system of unlawful control and coercion cannot be dismantled overnight. Furthermore, SDSM’s democratic record is far from impeccable and its support to women’s and LGBT rights inconsistent, whereas DUI, which remained in power as the main ethnic Albanian coalition partner, has never championed those rights. It remains, therefore, to be seen

how the situation in Macedonia will develop further, also in connection to gender and sexual equality (Denkovska, 2017; European Parliament, 2017; Helsinški komitet za čovekovi prava na Republika Makedonija, 2017; The Economist, 2017).

5. Conclusion

To better understand the legislative interventions in the area of gender and sexual equality in Macedonia, one should see them in connection to the wider practices of de-democratisation progressively undertaken between 2006 and 2017. Put differently, the discourses and activities against gender and sexual Others were not only a result of the decade-long rule of conservative parties, VMRO-DPMNE in particular, but also of their installation of a comprehensive suppression of dissent and de facto abolishment of the separation of powers. Given that democracy always involves contestation between political actors, whether from civil society or government (Walby, 2015), such a severe restriction of the possibilities for expressing contestation meant a severe de-democratisation of the Macedonian state and society in general.

Nonetheless, opposition to gender and sexual equality is not uniform and necessarily related to undemocratic processes, but has many varieties (Verloo, 2018). For example, it can be manifested in the form of street protests in France, articles and books in Germany, online violence in Sweden, and avoidance to implement policies by bureaucratic actors in the European Commission (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018). Far from negligible opposition can also flourish, thus, in contexts where democracy is (much) less endangered compared to Macedonia. However, when the institutional mechanisms for safeguarding against violence and discrimination, promoting and enforcing equality, and allowing space for overt expressions of dissent are seriously undermined, obstructed or even turned into auxiliaries of the parties in power, the struggle against the unfavourable trends becomes even more difficult. That is why the efforts to achieve gender and sexual equality cannot be detached from the efforts to maintain and improve democracy, transparency, and human rights and liberties in general.

The diverse forms of opposition to gender and sexual equality and their intertwinement with the larger political context require that scholars apply a broad and delicate lens for detecting that opposition and the factors which contribute to its strengthening or weakening. As the above example of the eventually unsuccessful attempt at constitutional changes shows, the promulgation of a new legislation or policy depends not only on the opinions and values which are promoted by the ruling parties, but also on the outcome of the horse trading between them, and the (unforeseen) actions of third parties.

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Article

Is Europe Cascading into Fascism? Addressing Key Concepts including Gender and Violence

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Abstract

Is Europe cascading into fascism? The answer to this question matters for understanding the opposition to gender equality projects in Europe. The article addresses some of the key concepts needed to answer this question. Is ‘fascism’ or ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ or just ‘neoliberalism’ the most appropriate concept to capture the turn to the right? The article compares the extent to which these concepts encompass ‘violence’ and ‘gender’. ‘Fascism’ is an important benchmark from European history, but Europe has not yet reached its levels of violence. The qualifier ‘authoritarian’ is not needed for ‘neoliberalism’ since it generates a trajectory towards violence. Some conceptual work is required in order to develop ‘neoliberalism’ to encompass ‘gender’ and ‘violence’, but there are bodies of work that support such a development. Including gender in analyses of the macro level changes occurring in Europe requires the concept of ‘varieties of gender regime’, which enables the conceptualisation of neoliberalism as gendered.

Keywords

Europe; fascism; gender; violence

Issue

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1. Introduction

Is Europe cascading into fascism? This question is becoming central to understanding the opposition to gender equality projects in Europe. This article addresses some of the key concepts needed to answer this question. Is the turn away from social democracy best thought of as fascism, or as an intensification of neoliberalism or as authoritarianism? How should variations in gender relations be conceptualised at a macro level, in addition to the meso and micro, so that they can be included in this discussion? How can violence, which is so important in the constitution of gender relations and the opposition to feminism and gender equality, be included in the conceptualisation of major social changes?

These questions are posed in the context of a turn to the right in Europe that opposes the gender equality project. This rightward turn could be benchmarked against the rise of fascism in Europe a century ago after

a financial crash, recession, cuts in government expenditure, and exacerbation of national/ethnic/religious divisions. Fascism is a multi-faceted far right project that includes opposition to gender equality and the use of violence to pursue its ends. However, are concepts other than fascism, such as neoliberalism or authoritarianism, more appropriate for today?

Debates on changes in neoliberalism (Bruff, 2014; Streeck, 2014) and the possibility of fascism (Robinson & Barrera, 2012) raise questions about the place of violence in trajectories of decline and the significance of gender and other inequalities beyond class. ‘Violence’ is a distinct form of power that is gendered. Addressing ‘Europe’ concerns not only political economy, but also the institutions that shape violence. Whether current developments entail the rise of fascism requires a clarification of whether the concept of neoliberalism sufficiently addresses violence as well as political economy. There are some indications that violence against women and mi-

noritized groups is increasing. But the concept and analysis of violence is often marginalised in theories of macro social change (Malešević, 2010; Walby, 2013). The article addresses the implications for macro level analysis of including violence in social theory so that gender can be fully addressed in current developments.

The significance of gender relations for these issues is now well established at micro and meso levels, with scholarship documenting and analysing changes in the gender equality project and gendered institutions (Abels & Mushaben, 2012; Ahrens, 2018; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Jacquot, 2015; Verloo, 2018; Waylen, 2007). At the macro level, there has been some development of the analysis of gender (Connell, 1987; Lewis, 1992; Lombardo, 2017; Walby, 2009). However, there remains considerable segregation of the mainstream and gender fields at the macro level of analysis. The purpose of the article is to contribute to developing a synthesis that will more adequately enable gender issues to be included in the debates about current societal transformation at a macro level of analysis.

2. Social Democratic, Neoliberal, Authoritarian or Fascist?

2.1. Introduction

The starting assumption is that it is possible to distinguish between different forms of society at a macro level and that these are gendered. Assessing which conceptual distinctions are most important requires consideration as to where the boundary between them should be drawn. The criteria for making this assessment include not only those used by the 'mainstream' but also the ability to capture distinctions relevant for 'gender', which requires addressing 'violence'.

There are at least three alternatives to conceptualising, at a macro level, the current turn to the right in Europe away from social democracy: neoliberalism; authoritarianism; and fascism. For the understanding of current changes, it is important to deploy concepts that can address violence as well as the polity, economy and civil society. Each of the macro concepts invokes a different positioning of violence in relation to other forms of power. Similarly, it is important to deploy concepts that can address gender and intersecting inequalities.

2.2. Neoliberalism

The concept of 'neoliberalism' has been deployed to signify right-moving projects and social formations (Harvey, 2005). But its relevance to the contemporary situation is weakened by its focus on political economy to the relative neglect of violence and by its focus on class to the relative neglect of gender and other intersecting inequalities. Can the concept be stretched so that it more adequately includes violence and gender, or should a different concept be used?

Neoliberalism is a political project, which has in some places become a governmental programme and in some a type of social formation. The social scientific approach to the analysis of neoliberalism as a project, governmental programme and social formation has typically been focused on political economy; but there are attempts to widen the concept. This raises issues concerned with the internal coherence of the concept, and its relationship with violence and with gender and intersecting inequalities.

The early articulation of neoliberalism in its own terms can be found in the work of Hayek (1944/2001) and Friedman (1962/2002). Neoliberalism draws on traditional liberalism in its central tenet that the purification of markets from interference is the best route to economic efficiency and political freedom; but goes beyond this in explicitly seeking the support of the state to achieve pure markets. It is important to take this seriously in its own terms as well as to analyse its contradictions (Gane, 2014). There is a fundamental tension between the rhetoric of seeking to remove state regulation of economic markets and the practice of utilising the power of the state to make markets. Despite the role of neoliberal beliefs about markets in the causation of the financial and economic crisis, these remains hegemonic within mainstream economics (Crouch, 2011), although heterodox approaches have long existed (Minsky, 1986/2008). There are variations in the development of neoliberalism in practice (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Ong, 2006; Peck, 2010), but market fundamentalism remains its core.

Applying the concept of neoliberalism to the European Union (EU), Streeck (2014) sees only a process of de-democratisation, increasing inequality, and the EU as having become a neoliberal machine. But, this depends on his use of a lens narrowed to class. This account of the EU is challenged when gender is brought into focus. Can the reach of the macro level concept of neoliberalism be widened to include gender and other inequalities to assist analysis of changes in the EU?

Most of the scholarship on gender and Europe has focused on the meso level of changes in specific gendered institutions (Cavaghan, 2017; Chappell & Waylen, 2013), although there are significant exceptions. Among the gendered macro-oriented analysis there are three approaches. The first treats neoliberalism as if it were contemporary capitalism and does not make significant distinctions between varieties of capitalism. It treats EU economic policy as if it is in evitable tension with EU social policy. This approach rejects, often implicitly rather than explicitly, the notion that there is more than one variety of capitalism. Since the premise here is that there are differences in the forms of capitalism, this approach is not further discussed. The second approach focuses on the gendered division of labour between domestic care work (or reproduction) and waged work (or production) and identifies variations in how this is organised at a macro level (and is discussed below). The third identifies distinc-

tive forms of gender regimes and includes not only political economy but also violence at a macro level (and is discussed and developed in the rest of the article).

The second approach to the macro level conceptualisation of gender in Europe has often focused on varieties of households, on whether there is a sole breadwinner or dual earners (Lewis, 1992) and the role of the welfare state in this (Jenson, 1997), or on the balance between production and reproduction in women's work (Elson, 2002). This challenged the mainstream account of welfare state regimes as led by class relations (Esping-Andersen, 1990), but has not become fully integrated (Emmenegger, Häusermann, Palier, & Seelick-Kaiser, 2012), despite empirical scholarship showing the complex inter-relationship of gender and class relations (Schäfer & Gottschall, 2015), and the significance of new forms of organisation of care involving markets as well as states (Gottfried, 2015). Attempts to gender European integration theory face similar challenges: on the one hand the empirical evidence of the significance of gender might be considered overwhelming (Abels & MacRae, 2016); on the other, in so far as the challenge pulls back from addressing the conceptualisation of the macro level (Bieling & Diez, 2016), it is not transformative of the mainstream. Hence, the analysis here draws largely on the scholarship that contributes to the re-gendering of the macro level (Lombardo, 2017; Mahon, 2010; Walby, 2009; Wöhl, 2014).

2.3. Authoritarianism

The significance of violence is a challenge to those who confine the concept of 'neoliberal' to political economy. Bruff (2014) responds to this challenge by arguing for the qualification of the term 'neoliberal' by 'authoritarian': 'neoliberal authoritarianism'. Wacquant (2009, 2010) addresses it by extending the concept of neoliberalism to include state coercion. However, neither Bruff nor Wacquant significantly address issues of gender.

There are well-developed literatures on violence against women (Krizsan & Popa, 2010; Weldon & Htun, 2012; Zippel, 2006), and on gender and security (Guerina, Chappell, & Wright, 2018; Kronsell, 2016), but neither have yet been integrated into mainstream accounts of macro level variations in society.

One response to the traditionally narrow definition of the concept 'neoliberalism' is to use the term 'authoritarian' in order to signal the significance of a coercive state, of violence and of the move to securitisation. Bruff (2014) develops a concept of 'authoritarian neoliberalism', thereby qualifying neoliberalism with the term 'authoritarian'. He argues that it is 'qualitatively distinct', citing the 'increasingly punitive nature of penal and criminal policy: under authoritarian neoliberalism dominant social groups are less interested in neutralizing resistance and dissent via concessions and forms of compromise that maintain their hegemony, favouring instead the explicit exclusion and marginalization of subordinate so-

cial groups through the constitutionally and legally engineered self-disempowerment of nominally democratic institutions, governments, and parliaments' (Bruff, 2014, p. 116). Bruff thus argues for the importance of coercion; and that this should be recognised by this concept.

The advantage of the concept 'authoritarian' is that it addresses the decrease in democratic depth that is occurring in the real world and the significance of the relationship between state and civil society in this change thereby opening the door to a consideration of the significance of coercion. However, the disadvantage of this formulation is that it de-links the development of coercion and de-democratisation from the project of neoliberalism, as if it were possible to have neoliberalism without these developments (Wacquant, 2009, 2010).

Wacquant (2009, 2010) extends the concept of neoliberalism to address the development a punitive criminal justice state. Rather than seeing the developing punitive nature of penal practices as either a 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001) or in tension with the rest of the state (Bourdieu, 1994), Wacquant interprets the turn of the state from penal welfare to a punitive approach as a core part of the neoliberal project. It is necessary to contain, control and punish the poor that are generated by the neoliberal project in government: 'a proactive penal system is...a constituent component of the neoliberal Leviathan' (p. 200). Wacquant understands his analysis as breaking away from a 'thin economic conception of neoliberalism' (p. 200); and that 'neoliberalism entails the enlargement and exaltation of the penal sector' (p. 211). Implicit in Wacquant's account is the notion that those who are imprisoned are the victims of the capitalist system. However, some of these imprisoned people are perpetrators of violence, including violence against women (Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2016) and against minoritized groups (Ray & Smith, 2001). The complexity of these multiple inequalities of gender as well as of class eludes Wacquant. This is despite a well-developed field on gender and violence (discussed below in the section on violence).

As Walby (2009, 2015) shows, there is a link between neoliberalism and violence because the increased inequalities generated by neoliberalism generate increased violence. Indeed, as Walby argues, neoliberalism, while purporting to shrink the state in relation to the economy, grows it in relation to violence, producing a larger and more coercive state, not a smaller state thereby producing the things it rhetorically claims to oppose. The conclusion is thus that since neoliberalism generates a coercive state, despite its rhetoric of promoting a small state; it is not necessary to qualify the term neoliberalism with authoritarian to capture this.

2.4. Fascism

'Fascism' is a further potential concept. Most analyses of fascism have been centred on Nazi Germany, extending to adjacent European countries in the middle of the

twentieth century (Mann, 2004). The potential application to the current period has been largely tentative (Robinson & Barrera, 2012).

Mann (2004, p. 13) defines fascism as ‘the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism’, thereby invoking five concepts: nationalism, statism, transcendence, cleansing and paramilitarism. Threaded through is the concept of violence, which is an instrument of the project of creating the purity of the nation-state. It includes violence from below, as well as by an authoritarian state. Mann’s account of fascism is centred empirically on mid-twentieth century Europe.

Robinson and Barrera (2012, p. 8) identify the ‘proto-fascist’ response to the current crisis as involving ‘militarism, extreme masculinisation, racism, the search for scapegoats (such as immigrant workers and Muslims in the USA and Europe) and mystifying ideologies’. They do not think that there is yet fascism in the USA or Europe, but that there are ‘fertile bases for projects of twenty-first century fascism’ (2012, p. 10). ‘States resort to a host of mechanisms of coercive exclusion: mass incarceration and prison-industrial complexes, pervasive policing, repressive anti-immigrant legislation, manipulation of space in new ways so that both gated communities and ghettos are controlled by armies of private security guards and technologically advanced surveillance systems, and ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity through petty consumption and fantasy’. These processes are linked to a ‘global capitalism’ associated with an expanded ‘global superfluous population’ (p. 16). ‘Criminalisation of the structurally marginalised and the militarisation of their control are major mechanisms of pre-emptive containment’.

The advantage of the concept is that it explicitly addresses the use of violence by the state and groups in civil society to pursue the goals of ‘purity’ that apply to all forms of social relations and inequalities, including nation, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and disability. It implies a total societal formation, not only a focus on the state, though that is often its main site of analysis. The disadvantage is that, for some, it is a term that is specific to time and place of Germany and Italy in the 1930s and its extension can be considered not only historically inaccurate but also ‘culturally’ offensive.

In Europe, the concept of fascism has resonance and utility. There may be no actually-existing European example today, but fascism in European history provides a point of reference and comparison for contemporary theorising.

2.5. Social Democracy

The fourth variety of society considered here is that of social democracy. It may be that it is more historic than currently developing, but it is important both to benchmark the past and to maintain an imaginary, or vision, of an alternative future. Social democracy can be concep-

tualised as a project, programme and social formation that is the ‘other’ to neoliberalism. Traditionally, the lead concepts have focused on political economy and class (Streeck, 2014), with violence and gender often left out of focus. However, there has long been a literature that has sought to demonstrate the significance of gender and feminism for the construction of social democracy (Durbin, Page, & Walby, 2017; Huber & Stephens, 2000; Mahon, 2010). The significance of feminism is often underestimated, partly because it is insufficiently visible in the public domain, and partly because of an overly restrictive definition of feminism that limits it to identity-based practices and omits broader coalitions between feminist and other progressive forces (Walby, 2011). Social democracy is an important ‘other’ to neoliberalism and fascism, and remains an important benchmark, even if few if any actually existing societal formations come close to its realisation today.

3. Violence

Violence has been increasing in Europe in recent years: the increased practice and salience of violence are part of the changes in Europe under assessment. Within the varieties of societal forms discussed in the previous section, violence might be considered core to fascism, routine in authoritarianism, collateral damage for neoliberalism, and less common in social democracy. Variations in society are constituted by variations in violence as well as in political economy. The assessment of the form of society is significantly dependent upon the extent and significance of violence. Violence is a constituent part of the gender regime; so, changes in gendered violence are changes in gender inequality. The increase in violence is one part of the threat to the feminist project of gender equality. Violence concerns not only crime, but also war, peace and security. The response of the state to violence and to perceptions of violence is part of the institution of violence. Integrating the insights from gender analysis about violence into the theorisation of macro changes in society is challenging. It requires addressing: the conceptualisation of violence, the link between violence and gender; and the link between variations in violence and other institutional domains.

3.1. The Concepts of Violence and Security

Violence is a core component of the concepts of crime, peace, war and security. There are several different forms of violence: inter-personal, e.g., violent crime; group, e.g., terrorism, genocide; state, e.g., capital punishment; harsh policing; inter-state, e.g., war. The concepts of violence and security overlap: in some disciplines, violence is the term most often used, for example, criminology and sociology; in others it is security, for example, political science and international relations.

Definitions of violence in use in the social sciences range from broad (Bourdieu, 1994; Galtung, 1996) to nar-

row (Collins, 2008). Broad approaches that effectively equate violence with other forms of power or harm make it hard if not impossible to analyse what causes violence, since the various concepts for power are merged into one (Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2014). By contrast, a narrower, more specific approach, enables analysis of the relationship between violence and other forms of power. The specificity of violence as a form of harm is that it involves the physical and involves intention (Walby et al., 2017). Violence is here conceptualised as an institution (Walby, 2009). Institutions embed practices associated with violence. An institution is a self-reproducing system; it reproduces regardless of the agency, intention or the individuals who make up the institution. Violence is an institutional domain in which diverse types of violence are inter-connected, approximately equivalent to institutional domains of economy, polity and civil society. For example, if the rate of one form of violence is high, then the rate of other forms of violence is also likely to be high. The institution of violence includes actions and reactions; practices and responses; deployment and regulation. States usually respond to violence in civil society and by other states. States may use violence to attempt to end violence, or they may deploy other repertoires of action.

The concept of 'security' can contain explicit or implicit reference to violence. Traditionally, the concept of security referred to inter-state relations and was focused on war. There are variations in the extent to which violence is used in externally facing security strategies; and the EU has developed a Security Strategy that is less dependent on violence than that of the USA (Smith, 2003). The concept of security has sometimes been extended to include non-state relations (Kaldor, 2007), internal relations concerning unnecessary harm and those on the boundary of internal and external relations (Bigo, 2006). Security strategies often contain theories of violence, defined narrowly or broadly: 'hard' security strategies more invoke violence than 'soft' security strategies. The ability to define a situation as in need of a security response is an important form of political power (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

3.2. Gender, Violence and Security

Violence and security are gendered. Within interpersonal violence, this has been addressed as gender-based violence and violence against women (Kelly, 1988; Walby et al., 2015; Walby et al., 2017); sometimes including analysis of the varied role of the polity (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, & Cavanagh, 2001), including its European dimension (Krizsan & Popa, 2010; Zippel, 2006). A significant body of literature on the significance of gender for security has developed, with special attention to the transnational level (Guerrina et al., 2018; Kronsell, 2016).

Violence is a constituent part of the gender regime: cause and consequence of gender inequality (Walby, 2009).

3.3. Variations in Violence and Coercion

Violence is endemic in society; but there are important variations in the rate of violence and in state responses to it. There is evidence of current increases in violence (Walby et al., 2016). Variations in rates of violence have been linked to: economic and political inequality (Merton, 1938); the modernisation of the state (Weber, 1922/1968); and crisis and social change (Gramsci, 1971).

Although there has been a long-run decline in violent crime, there is evidence of a current increase. There had been a long-run decrease in violence over centuries in Europe (though with some fluctuations), according to empirical data on homicide rates (Eisner, 2001; Pinker, 2011). However, there is also a recent increase in interpersonal violence and in terrorism. Violent crime has been increasing since the economic crisis of 2008, at least in England and Wales, driven by an increase in violence against women and domestic violence according to evidence from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Walby et al., 2016). There was a spike in hate crime immediately following the Brexit Referendum in the UK on 23 June, 2016, with a significant increase in on-line reports to police (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016).

Variations in state violence and coercion towards individuals are complex. Traditionally, it has been argued that the stronger the state and the rule of law, the less likely is violence between citizens; a process that has been increasing with 'modernity' as the state acquires a monopoly of legitimate violence in its territory (Tilly, 1990; Weber, 1922/1968). The link between modernity and violence is reinterpreted by Elias (1939/1994) as the development of individual self-control in individuals that is consequent on structural changes in the state. This link between modernity and self-control, which generates lower levels of violence, is apparently offered empirical support by Eisner (2001) and Pinker (2011) and is central to the theory of crime of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). The reduction in overt punishment by the state and its replacement with discipline is further developed by Foucault (1991). Foucault provides an account of a move away from a visibly coercive state (public executions) towards processes of disciplining in a range of institutions (from prisons to clinics) and most recently the self-securitisation of citizens.

The rate of violence is linked to levels of inequality. The association between violence and economic inequality is robustly established in empirical studies (Chiricos, 1987; Fajnzylber, Lederman, & Loayza, 2002; Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Pratt & Cullen, 2005). Violence is associated with a range of inequalities, including gender (Walby et al., 2016) and ethnicity (Ray & Smith, 2001). The rate of violence is linked not only to economic inequality, but also to political inequality. The rate of femicide (killing of women) is lower in countries where there is a higher proportion of women in parliament (Walby, 2009, p. 299).

Violence is an institution: practices of violence are interconnected and form a single institutional domain. There is a correlation between the level of different forms of violence: the more of one form, the more of other forms (Walby, 2009). Violence is an institutional domain that is shaped by the other institutional domains of economy, polity and civil society.

While the relationship between violence and inequality is robustly established, the directionality of this violence is challenging to many traditional theorisations of violence. The traditional assumption in criminology has been that violent crime is largely perpetrated by the disadvantaged against the advantaged (Merton, 1938). This has been challenged by evidence of the extent of violence against women (Kelly, 1988; Walby et al., 2014) and of hate crime against groups minoritized through ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability and other characteristics (Ray, 2011). Variations in use of violence by the state (including the police) are associated with the depth of democracy: the more democratic the less coercive (Mansley, 2014; della Porta, 1995). Making violence visible changes the perceived direction of the violence between the powerful and the weak, defined in relation to multiple regimes of inequality.

3.4. *Implications for Theorising Europe*

How is the increase in violence to be theorised in analyses of the turn to the right in Europe? Paying attention to the nature of the inequalities and to processes of democratisation and de-democratisation is important.

The long fall in violence in Europe is reversing, driven, at least in Britain, by violence against women since the economic crisis of 2008 and against ethnic minorities during the political crisis of 2016; further there is widespread perception of an increased threat of terrorism. This rise in violence and in the perception of violence is part of the turn to the right. The modality of the state response to violence is complex and contradictory: it has been changing towards a more punitive criminal justice system in response to violent crime and increased securitisation in response to terrorism; but it has also involved response to gendered democratic pressures to intervene against rather than ignore violence against women. Changes in violence and the state have a gender dimension (the increase in violent crime is driven by violent crime against women) and a national/ethnic/religious dimension (the scapegoating of immigrants and asylum seekers).

The explanation of this change requires a theoretical framework in which violence has a significant place and one that can address its strongly gendered and ethnic/religious/national dimensions. A theoretical framework in which there is a continuum between social democracy and neoliberalism could stretch to encompass violence and societal variation. The separate identification of a form of society centred on 'authoritarianism' is not necessary, since the trajectory of neoliberal-

ism includes the generation of coercive state capacity. The separate identification of 'fascism' is useful as a historical benchmark against which current developments can be compared.

4. Europe, Gender Regimes, and Society

Analysing changes in Europe concerning gender inequality requires theorising Europe as a society, not only a polity, or economy, or civil society, but also including violence. This also requires theorising gender at a macro level, as well as micro and meso levels.

Theorising changes in gender in Europe requires a theory of Europe as a society as well as a set of political institutions. Most current analyses of Europe focus on political institutions; although there are accounts of Europe that consider a broader range of social institutions. While Europe is often today theorised through the lens of politics or political economy, it was once understood as a wider set of institutions which included violence and civil society. Earlier discussions on the EU and violence focused on the emergent EU as a peace project (Haas, 1958; Hallstein, 1973); while today the EU has an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. The EU is restructuring in response to the crisis. This has major implications for gender and other inequalities, although these are rarely explicit in the official texts.

The relative neglect of inequalities other than class in analyses of Europe is beginning to be addressed, although there is a tendency for the literatures on gender and class to be segregated (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). It is important to address the nature and significance of the intersection of multiple inequalities (Verloo, 2006; Walby, 2009).

4.1. *Beyond Europe as Polity*

Much analysis of the EU focuses on its political institutions. This includes the debate on the tension between member states and the EU-level in the discussions on EU integration (Milward, 1992; Moravcsik, 1993), which has a significant gender dimension (Abels & MacRae, 2016; Lombardo & Forest, 2011). Additional institutions and dimensions to 'Europe' and to 'integration' need to be considered in addition to these political institutions (Boje, van Steenberg, & Walby, 1999; Zielonka, 2006).

4.2. *Beyond Europe as Political Economy*

The development of political institutions takes place in a wider environment, including political economy. The political economy of scale and globalisation at the intersection of geography and other social sciences (Brenner et al., 2010; Harvey, 2005) offers much to the analysis of Europe even if that is not always its substantive focus. The contribution of political economy is to reposition debates about states as affected by the wider restructuring of the political economy. European member states and

the EU are challenged to address global processes, not only national or regional ones. The greater mobility of global capital than labour shapes the balance of power and negotiated outcomes at the political level.

These debates tend to underestimate the significance of violence/security and of gender and other inequalities beyond class. This is despite a major debate on the changes in gendered divisions of labour (Lewis, 1992) and childcare (Mahon, 2010), which involves the structuring of the fiscal, which is of significance for the gendered welfare state.

4.3. *Europe and Violence*

With authority derived from the 2006 Treaty of Lisbon, the EU has been developing plans for ever deeper union that concern not only the Single European Market but also the European Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, which addresses violence and security. The European Commission (2017) *White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* offers options for potentially deepening cooperation in decision-making. This includes decision-making on security, on Schengen, migration, foreign policy and defence. While the European Commission (2017) pays little direct attention to equalities issues in these documents, they are of enormous significance for them because the subsidiarity boundary is gendered. The subsidiarity boundary is gendered, because the gendering of decision-making at the EU-level is different from the gendering of decision-making at member state level. So, changes in the location of the subsidiarity boundary will be affected by variations in the gender composition and priorities in these different locations.

The Treaty of Lisbon expanded EU competence to enhance an Area of 'freedom, security and justice'. These goals were to be met through a mix of 'mutual recognition' aided by limited harmonisation of laws and practices; and the creation of decision-making capacity at EU-level. These competences have been mobilised to harmonise and develop legislation (Directives) on issues concerning gender-based violence, especially where there is an identifiable cross-border element.

Whether the enhancement of these EU-level powers over violence will be matched by an increase in the depth of gendered democracy or not is in question. The current insurgency from the right make this restructuring of the EU a precarious moment from an equalities perspective. Progressive gender forces potentially make a difference to the outcome; but these are challenging times for the feminist project. The theorisation of the EU requires the inclusion of violence situated in the context of changes in polity, economy and civil society.

4.4. *Europe as Society*

The theorisation of Europe as society (rather than polity or political economy) has a long history. One of the most

important is Haas (1958), which focuses on the potential 'spillover' from one institution to another, that might lead to a form of European integration that is less prone to war and other forms of violence. From this perspective, the EU was invented so that never again would Europe experience war and holocaust. It was a project of intellectuals and politicians, of an epistemic community, jointly constructing a theory and a practice to realise this vision. The purpose of the EU was not to make money, but to make peace. The route to peace was circuitous. Although the target was clear—the nationalisms that had become militarised nationalisms in pursuit of states and purity, which were theorised as leading to war and holocaust—there was complexity in how the erosion of the nation-state projects was to be achieved. It was felt that there would be insufficient political support for such a project—the erosion of the nation-state—if it were to be directly proposed to the people of Europe in a democratic decision-making process. Instead, the project was to create the circumstances over the longer-term that would lead to regular crises that could only be resolved by ever closer union and which would generate the consent in civil society for this trajectory. Economic growth was not the end in itself. Economic unity was for a higher purpose, to generate the political conditions for the erosion of the nation-state project that had led to war and holocaust (Haas, 1958; Hallstein, 1969/1973). This approach entails a theory of society. It was not just a theory of political institutions. Not just a theory of political economy. Nor a free-standing theory of violence. Rather, a theory of society as a social system in which institutions of economy, politics, civil society and violence had mutual implications for each other. Within this approach to Europe as a potential society are ongoing debates as to the significance of different institutions for the whole, including that of the strengthening of democratic institutions (Habermas, 2012). While many of the mainstream texts on Europe as a multi-institutional society engage but little with the gender dimension, there are exceptions (Boje et al., 1999).

4.5. *Mainstreaming Gender into Macro Level Analysis of Europe*

Understanding changes in gender relations in Europe requires the utilisation of gender as a macro level concept as well as one at the meso level. Much macro level analysis of changes in Europe has used concepts and frameworks in which gender has been marginalised. The earlier discussion of concepts of neoliberalism, authoritarian neoliberalism, fascism and society democracy repeatedly noted the absence or marginal presence of gender relations. There has been much significant analysis of changes in gender relations at the meso level of specific institutions (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Waylen, 2007). But it is also necessary for gender to be addressed at the macro level of abstraction.

It is necessary to mainstream gender into the macro level concepts to improve the theorisation of large scale changes in Europe. This means mainstreaming gender into the debates on the varieties of society as social democratic, neoliberal, authoritarian or fascist. This means engaging with these concepts rather than inventing new concepts for variations only in gender relations. Developing macro level concepts that are specific to gender relations (for example, types of breadwinner regimes) is not a viable strategy for mainstreaming gender into macro level social theory. It is necessary to have concepts that grasp both the specificity of variations in gender relations and variations in other sets of social relations including class simultaneously.

The concept of gender regime, and the distinction between its varieties at a macro level developed by Walby (2009) offers a way forward.

The development of the EU does not only concern specific political institutions, but is part of the restructuring of the relationship between political institutions, economy, civil society and violence. This development restructures regimes of inequality, even if equalities issues are not foregrounded in the public debates. The restructuring of political institutions in times of crisis is not only 'normal' for the EU, but also written into the design of its architecture. This requires a theory of Europe as a society, not only as a polity or political economy.

To address this multiplicity of social relations it is necessary to revise the concept of social system using complexity theory, as in Walby (2009). In this approach, each system takes all others as its environment. This practice, derived from Bertalanffy (1968), simplifies the analysis of the intersection of multiple inequalities. This enables the rejection of the assumption that the systems are nested or in a hierarchical relationship to each other—that is a matter for investigation. Sometimes systems can be very closely entwined—coupled. As systems interact, they mutually adapt—both change, rather than a one-way causal effect. Systems do not necessarily return to equilibrium (negative feedback loops) after they have been destabilised (perturbed)—though they may. Sometimes systems may move further away from equilibrium (positive feedback loops). A small cause may have a large effect, especially if a system or interacting systems are unstable—changes can be non-linear and not proportionate. These are the insights and practices of complexity science, which make the analysis of multiple intersecting inequalities more effective (Walby, 2007, 2009).

Addressing the issues of violence and multiple inequalities requires a theory of society, not only of political institutions or political economy. A theory of society requires a theory of social systems, which is best developed drawing on the insights of complexity theory. If the concept of neoliberalism is to stretch to assist, it needs to encompass a theory of a neoliberal social formation (and a contrasting concept, such as social democracy, as its other); and the dynamics of class and gender must not be conflated.

5. Conclusion

It is important to retain the concept of fascism as a benchmark, at least in Europe. Europe is not fascist now. Whether it becomes so again is an open question.

The concept of neoliberalism is retained for the conceptualisation of contemporary Europe, with social democracy as its main 'other'. The concept of authoritarianism potentially had the advantage of drawing attention to coercion and violence, which are often left out of focus in discussions of neoliberalism that are centred on political economy. While it is useful to draw attention to the 'authoritarian' features of contemporary neoliberalism in Europe; this does not require revision of the term 'neoliberal'. Indeed, it is better not to treat authoritarianism as 'other' to neoliberal, since authoritarian practices by the state are a common outcome of the trajectory of neoliberalism. At the heart of neoliberalism is a contradictory stance towards the state: in rhetoric, it is reviled and the subject of claims that it will be reduced so that the market can be freer and thereby function more efficiently; while, in practice, it is recognised as the necessary instrument to develop markets. While state engagement in social welfare and security is reduced by outsourcing to the private sector, state coercive activities are expanded in response to the violence generated by increasing inequality. As the state reduces the scope of its traditional monopoly over legitimate violence by permitting the extraction of profit from 'security', it increases the likelihood of violence and the desire to address it through more security (Walby, 2015). This is a contradiction at the heart of neoliberalism. The concept of neoliberalism should be retained, since it makes this contradiction more visible than if an alternative concept, such as authoritarianism, is deployed. However, this does require theorists to develop a full theory of society, which includes violence; not one that is narrowly focused on political economy.

Most of the analysis of neoliberalism that engages with the social relations of inequality focuses on class inequalities; reference to other inequalities is minimal. Most of the analysis of non-class inequalities does not use the concept of neoliberalism or address the macro-level. This needs to change, so gender and other inequalities are included.

The approach here builds on Walby (2009) in treating inequalities as systems of social relations, as regimes of inequality. Each of these regimes of inequality is constituted by social relations in four institutional domains: economy, polity, civil society and violence. Each of these institutional domains is a system. This conceptual manoeuvre allows for each institutional domain to be constituted by multiple intersecting regimes of inequality, not just one.

Thinking about the future of gender equality in Europe and the nature and significance of projects opposing it, requires answering the question as to whether Europe is cascading into fascism. This requires: includ-

ing gender in macro level concepts of neoliberalism, fascism and social democracy; including violence in theories of society; and theorising Europe as a society not only polity.

While fascism is a benchmark, drawn from European history, against which current developments may be compared, it is not an appropriate concept to capture the nature of contemporary Europe. The concept of neoliberalism is helpful; but only if it is deepened beyond traditional political economy to include both the institution of violence and multiple inequalities beyond class. The dynamic interconnections between economy, polity, civil society and violence need inclusion in the theory, if the question is to be answered. In short, a concept and theory of society is needed, not just separate institutions.

To theorise Europe requires a theory of society. It requires a theoretical framework that facilitates the conceptualisation of variations in the forms of society. It requires a theoretical framework that engages with the interconnections between institutions of economy, polity, civil society and violence; not merely focused on one or two of these. It requires a concept and theory of 'Europe' as a society, not only of the political institutions of the EU.

The concept of neoliberalism has been useful in providing a focal point for analyses of changes in capitalism, but is under-developed for analysing current developments. While the theoretical framework in which the concept of neoliberalism is embedded has a grip on the processes of removal of democratically developed regulations on capital, there are only a few texts within this framework that analyse the implications of the rise in deployment of violence by the state and in civil society. Authoritarianism is a potential alternative, but its reach is relatively narrow partly because of its focus on the state. Fascism is a fiercer alternative. We are not yet there, since elections are still being held and violence has not reached genocidal levels. A potential trajectory towards fascism can be seen; but there is also resilience. This resilience can be under-estimated, not least because of the relative invisibility of feminism. The concept of neoliberalism is often deployed as if violence is not important; while those of fascism and authoritarianism, more explicitly recognise its relevance.

One of the features of current times is the increased salience of violence. The analysis of regimes of inequality, including those of gender, too frequently leave violence out of focus. The project of European integration is often analysed as if it were focused on economic growth, but it also significantly concerns violence and security. Theories of 'society' should include violence alongside economy, polity and civil society. Including violence in the theorisation of 'Europe' is necessary to answer the question of whether Europe is cascading into fascism. This requires conceptualising gender at the macro level of regimes as well as the meso level of institutions. This requires a renewed theory of society.

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Article

Gender Equality and De-Democratization Processes: The Case of Spain

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Abstract

Democracy is an ally of the feminist project and a necessary condition for its success. The European post-crisis context shows evidence of de-democratization processes that represent a remarkable challenge. This article investigates gender equality and processes of de-democratization in Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. It argues that neoliberalism, authoritarian shifts, and political corruption are three key dimensions of the processes of de-democratization in Spain that contribute to oppose gender equality. However, political contestation and feminist collective agency both in movements and institutions have played a key role in counteracting these dynamics. Civil society and feminist movements' struggles for democracy, equality and social justice, the role of new populist left parties in channeling some of the protesters' demands, gender equality institutions keeping gender on the agenda despite austerity cuts, and new local governments emerging from civic platforms after the 2015 elections have been effective in resisting attacks to Spanish democracy. A thorough revision of academic literature and other secondary sources helps to capture the specificities of this complex political setting.

Keywords

de-democratization; feminist project; gender equality; Spain

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1. Introduction

Democracy is an ally of the feminist project and a necessary condition for its success (International Panel on Social Progress, 2016). In European countries with recent democratic transitions such as Spain, it has fostered the reintroduction of women's citizenship rights after the dictatorship, the creation of gender equality institutions, and the development of a specific policy and legal framework (Bustelo, 2016). Reflections on the concept of *deep* democracy establish quality criteria that, if

put into practice, would intensify the positive impacts on gender equality (Tilly, 2007; International Panel on Social Progress, 2016; Walby, 2015). Yet, the European post-crisis context offers a rather different democratic scenario. Several member states have experienced unprecedented de-democratization processes that represent effective oppositions to gender equality, and a challenge for the feminist project (Aksoy, 2017; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017a; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Still, little is known about the specificities of this phenomenon across Europe and its gen-

¹ This article was written before the fall of Rajoy's PP conservative government in June 2018 due to a vote of no confidence promoted by the leader of PSOE socialist party Sánchez.

eral implications. In this article we study the case of Spain¹ in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis starting from the following questions: what is the relation between de-democratization and gender equality dynamics? And how does the feminist project counteract these processes?

Democratization and de-democratization are two sides of a political process. We argue that neoliberalism, authoritarian shifts, and political corruption are three key dimensions of the processes of de-democratization in Spain that contribute to oppose gender equality. Spain was at the vanguard in European gender equality policies previous to the crisis (Valiente, 2006), thanks to the leading role of some regional governments and the impulse given by the Zapatero socialist cabinet. Recent changes have nuanced this situation. The subordination to the EU neoliberal project of Spanish economic and welfare policies, the limitation of civil rights to freedom of expression and women's autonomy, and the breaches to the rule of law and embezzling of public money by political authorities are the indicators we use to operationalize the three dimensions of de-democratization.

While neoliberalism, authoritarian shifts and political corruption allow us to capture the regression in Spanish democracy, the analysis also shows how political contestation and feminist collective agency both in movements and institutions have counteracted these dynamics, pushing towards democratization. Civil society and feminist movements' struggles for democracy, equality and social justice, the role of new populist left parties in channeling some of the protesters' demands, gender equality institutions keeping gender on the agenda despite austerity cuts, and new local governments emerging from civic platforms after the 2015 elections have been effective in resisting attacks to Spanish democracy. A thorough revision of academic literature and other secondary sources helps to capture the specificities of this complex political setting.

The following two sections introduce our analytical framework and the three dimensions of de-democratization and gender that we consider in this article—neoliberalism, authoritarian shifts and political corruption. The subsequent section, before conclusions, disentangles de-democratization processes in Spain and their relation with feminist struggles for democratization.

2. De-Democratization and Gender: A Framework for Analysis

Democracy and gender equality are interdependent. 'The more democracy, the more chances for gender equality; the more gender equality there is, the more chances for democracy' argues Verloo (2016, p. 36). Comparative data indicate a correlation between democracy and the status of women's health, education, economic participation and political empowerment (Tripp, 2013). Democratic polities allow more freedom to civil societies, and this increases the influence of women's organiza-

tions on the state (Htun & Weldon, 2010). In turn, feminist movements' ongoing struggles and challenges to processes of domination and exclusion contribute to democratize the political space (International Panel on Social Progress, 2016). Democracies are also more likely to promote gender equality than autocracies due to the creation of citizens that express more egalitarian attitudes (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), and the existence of women's policy agencies and more state funds dedicated to gender equality policies (Tripp, 2013). It is therefore very relevant for the feminist project to detect shifts towards de-democratization in currently consolidated democracies.

Democracy, in classical political science procedural definitions such as Dahl's (1971), has to do with the dimensions of 'contestation' (freedom to contest the conduct of a government) and 'participation' (who is included in the possibility to control the government). Minimum conditions for democratic systems are to present at least universal male and female suffrage, free, fair, competitive, and periodical elections, political pluralism, multi-party competition, freedom of expression, and different alternative sources of information (Morlino, 2009). While formal features of electoral democracy are very important, theorists of democratic deepening propose interpretations of democracy that both incorporate and go beyond electoral processes. The notion of 'relational democracy' developed by Ibarra (2008) conceptualizes democracy as a set of relations between citizens and decisionmakers that aims at facilitating a greater convergence between citizens' demands and political decision-making. These relations include dynamics of autonomous social mobilization and more stable channels of local participatory democracy, whose limitation would indicate de-democratization. Gender scholars are active in the theory of democratic deepening with the argument that the feminist project requires deep democracy (International Panel on Social Progress, 2016, p. 33; Walby, 2015, 2009). In deep democracy, contends Verloo (2016, pp. 34–36), not only procedural criteria are important and need to be expanded for structuring inclusive democratic debates, but also the 'practices and outcomes' of democratic rules are essential to allow civil society's ongoing contestation of political power and demand to address 'newly politicized problems'.

In that regard, Morlino (2009) states that a quality democracy involves procedural, responsiveness and substantive dimensions. Procedural dimensions of democracy include the rule of law and accountability. The rule of law requires, according to Morlino (2009), the application of law to everybody, no areas dominated by criminal organization, no corruption in public administration and political parties, competent, efficient and responsible bureaucracy, efficient police that is respectful of freedoms, easy and equal access to justice and independence of judiciary from the influence of political power. Accountability takes place through elections, control of the government by the opposition in parliament, by the courts, and by activities of political parties, media and other

economic and social organizations. A quality democracy would also imply responsiveness to citizens' demands, full respect and expansion of freedom rights, and substantive equality in terms of civil, political, and social rights (Morlino, 2009).

Deep democracy requires state capacity to enforce its political decisions, according to Tilly (2007, p. 15), which means that a state is capable 'to supervise democratic decision-making and put its results into practice'. To study democratization and de-democratization as continuous processes, Tilly (2007, pp. 13–15) proposes four elements in the political relations between state and citizens that, read together, help to distinguish democratization from de-democratization: breadth, equality, protection, and mutually binding consultation. Breadth refers to wide political inclusion of people and their expressed demands; equality refers to extensive equality among categories of citizens in the translation of their demands in state action; protection is from the state's arbitrary action; and mutually binding consultation means that 'state agents have clear, enforceable obligations to deliver benefits by category of recipient' and there is no evidence that 'seekers of state benefits must bribe, cajole, threaten, or use third-party influence to get anything at all'. Thus, 'de-democratization', for Tilly (2007, p. 14), 'means net movement toward narrower, more unequal, less protected, and less binding consultation.'

Feminist approaches to democracy have contributed to develop visions of deep democracy from gender and other equality perspectives (Galligan, 2015; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017b). Key dimensions of democracy in these approaches include not only gender balance in political decision-making but also substantive issues of social justice. A gender democracy for Galligan (2015) comprises dimensions of inclusion and recognition of women as well as accountability of the state with respect to gender equality commitments. The depth of democracy, according to Walby (2015, pp. 115–117, 2009), includes not only procedures to secure representation of groups such as women and minorities through quotas, but also 'the governance of major public services, such as finance, health, education and care services, through procedures that are democratically accountable, rather than through procedures focused on increasing profits for private owners' (Walby, 2015, p. 116). Democratic control therefore requires state regulation of markets.

Collective agency is another dimension of democratization that is relevant in feminist debates. The theory of social movements has conceptualized social mobilization, alliances among different movements, and framing processes to explain political change and democratization (Tarrow, 2011) also in times of economic crisis (Della Porta, 2017). Feminist scholars have shown the democratizing role of feminist struggles for both regimes in transition to democracy (Tripp, 2013; Waylen, 2007) and de-democratizing regimes such as Erdoğan's Turkey (Aksoy, 2017) or Orbán's Hungary (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2017). They also show the role of intersectional alliances for de-

mocratizing the European public sphere (Siim & Mokre, 2013). Alliances can also be forged between movement and institutional actors. Feminist collective agency operates in state structures that enact gender equality policies and can promote the feminist project particularly when they are connected to feminist movements (McBride & Mazur, 2013).

Feminist struggles contribute to the project of deep democracy, argues Verloo (2016). The project of gender equality is intrinsically political in her view because it involves the ongoing struggle of feminists about the meaning of gender equality intersecting with other inequalities. Feminist struggles work for and at the same time need deepest forms of democracy because they challenge hegemonies and marginalizations within and outside the movement that can exclude groups and their demands from the debate. To accommodate these struggles, deep democracy requires not only formal rules but also effective equality practices and outcomes.

3. Three Aspects of De-Democratization in Post-Crisis Europe

The above debates tell us that democracy shows shifts towards de-democratization when procedural, responsiveness and substantive dimensions are not, or only partially, respected. In this article we limit our analysis to the following three dimensions of de-democratization that are relevant to understand gendered developments in the Spanish 2008 post-crisis context: *neoliberalism*; *authoritarian shifts*, and *political corruption*.

Neoliberalism implies processes of deregulation of the market and privatization of public services. This leads Walby to argue that 'the neoliberal project of deregulation is a project of de-democratization' (2015, pp. 117). Neoliberal logics of governance has led to the transference of state powers to non-elected state bodies, private enterprises, international organizations and financial institutions, with negative consequences for democratic control and management of public services in the interests of the population (Banaszak, Beckwith, & Rucht, 2003, pp. 4–7; Hozic & True, 2016). Walby states it clearly: 'the achievement of democratic depth requires the regulation of finance in the interests of the majority, not the minority' (2015, p. 117).

The European austerity agenda designed to enforce states' reductions in public spending includes measures that promote deregulation and liberalization of the labor market, through the reduction of labor rules, the decentralization of collective bargaining from state to enterprises, cuts in wages and in social policies (Busch, Hermann, Hinrichs, & Schulten, 2013). Neoliberalism has therefore promoted a reduction in the role of the welfare state in favor of the market, with detrimental consequences for gender equality, women, and equality policies in Europe (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017a; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Walby, 2015). This reduction of the redistributive and equalizing capacity of the state in favor

of the market has also consequences for deep democracy, leading to inequality and de-democratization (Tilly, 2007; Walby, 2015). Although neoliberalism creates problems for democracy in the absence of regulation, it is not always the opposite of democratization (for example, the argument of free market contributed to the adoption of the article on equal pay in the European Community Treaty of Rome, see van der Vleuten, 2007). However, in the context of the 2008 economic crisis neoliberalism has become more coercive and dangerous for democracy (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016).

It is precisely in the context of Europe's economic crisis that *authoritarian shifts* have emerged, representing another critical dimension of de-democratization. As Bruff and Wöhl put it 'it is impossible to understand the post-2008 period without a central role being accorded to increasingly authoritarian state practices at a range of scales' (2016, pp. 93). Although neoliberalism and authoritarianism cannot be automatically connected, in Europe's post-crisis context austerity politics have led to processes of de-democratization in EU's and member states' political and economic decision-making (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017a). EU's new economic governance regime has enforced strict rules of fiscal and monetary policies on member states that have bailed out failing banks. The new economic governance tools, that tie member states into a commitment to keep their annual budgetary deficit below 3% and their debt below 60% of GDP, challenge representative democracies by moving powers from parliamentary to executive branches of politics both at the national and supranational levels (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016).

By moving decisions on economic politics away from Parliaments to less democratic institutions, this neoliberal logic of governance has had gender consequences. It has reduced the spaces of formal politics that women had formerly achieved (e.g., gender quotas are more often found for legislative than executive bodies) and has 'insulated' decision-making from feminist political contestation (Cavaghan, 2017). Similarly, these forms of 'disciplinary neoliberalism' (Gill & Roberts, 2011, pp. 162) reshaped the state-market relationship by questioning the kind of services that are feasible and appropriate for public institutions to provide for or the subordination of the political agenda to the EU economic requirements that led Eurozone countries to adopt laws or even change their Constitution 'partially out of the reach of political debate and contestation' (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016; Elomäki & Kantola, 2017, p. 235). These neoliberal shifts disproportionately affected women, challenging gender regimes across EU Member States (Walby, 2015).

The *rise of authoritarianism* is also visible in the threats to women's and LGBTQI rights across Europe. Far-right political parties and movements have actively opposed same sex marriage and sexual and reproductive rights in several countries (Hodzic & Bijelic, 2014; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2017). Transnational movements against what they call 'gender ideology' challenge

liberal democracies by spreading conservative knowledge about gender roles and mobilizing to restrict civil rights and equality policies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Limitations to the rights of participation and mobilization are indicators of authoritarian shifts (Ibarra, 2008). Social movements' contestation has been undermined by the political restriction of academic autonomy in Hungary and Turkey—with a specific challenge to gender and sexuality studies—, or the Spanish 'gag law' designed to criminalize social contestation (International Panel on Social Progress, 2016). These phenomena contribute to undermine the rise of feminist activism witnessed in recent years.

Political corruption represents a third critical dimension of de-democratization. Good quality democracy requires a normal functioning of the rule of law, which relies not only on the effective application of the legal framework but also on the pre-eminence of the common good as a guiding principle of government (Morlino, 2009). Corruption subverts both premises by yielding 'the supremacy of particular interests in public decisions and, thus, the exercise of authority for the sake of a few' (Villoria, Jiménez, & Revuelta, 2014, p. 198). In so doing, it has deep implications for other democratic dimensions such as responsiveness to citizens' demands or substantive equality.

Feminist scholars have analyzed the genderedness of corruption. Initial studies hypothesized that women's risk aversion and their more ethical behavior lay behind the correlation between increased female presence in the political arena and lower levels of perceived corruption (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2015). Both experimental and non-experimental studies have nevertheless problematized this relationship. The inconsistency of the results obtained as well as the explanatory capacity of other variables related to the quality of democracy, stressed the need for a less 'essentialist' perspective (Goetz, 2007; Sung, 2012). Feminist institutionalism provided here the analytical tools to adopt a non-individualistic approach to the study of corruption (Johnson, Einasdottir, & Petursdottir, 2013). Informal rules and 'logics of appropriateness' shape women's capacity to engage in non-honest behaviors (Frank, Lambsdorff, & Boehm, 2011). As political outsiders, they lack access to the all-male networks through which corruption functions. More importantly, this phenomenon becomes the process 'through which typically male-dominated elites transgress proclaimed values of accountability, transparency, and equality' (Johnson et al., 2013, p. 196).

The gendered effects of corruption are multidimensional. Women suffer a greater impact of these practices, as they have a more direct contact with the public sector and are more vulnerable to inefficient public services (Stensota, Svensson, & Wängnerud, 2015). Due to this, they report higher levels of victimization (Villoria et al., 2014). Political corruption also undermines the effectiveness of gender equality policies. While budget cuts that are connected to the squandering of pub-

lic funds are likely to hit this policy area first, due to a general lack of prioritization of gender equality (Lombardo, 2017a), corruption also jeopardizes policy strategies such as gender mainstreaming and electoral quotas. Clientelism has proved to be detrimental to women's political recruitment, as the pre-eminence of informal networks tends to reproduce male dominance in political parties (Bjarnegård, 2013). Similarly, the implementation of gender equality measures included in public procurement regulations remains ineffective if corrupted practices are in place.

4. Disentangling De-Democratization and Democratization Processes in Spain

This section disentangles the three de-democratization dimensions we address in this article—neoliberalism, authoritarian shifts and political corruption—in the case of Spain, with reference to their gender and democratization dynamics.

4.1. Neoliberalism

The neoliberal EU and Spain's political response to the economic crisis in terms of austerity negatively affected democracy, social rights, and gender equality in Spain. Neoliberal de-democratization hit the Spanish Constitution in 2011, when the failing banks crisis was transformed into a public debt crisis. Following strong EU pressure from the European Central Bank, through a letter to former Prime Minister Zapatero including an agenda of imperative reforms, the socialist government changed the Constitution by committing Spain to limit its budget deficit within the EU and member states established targets, in the middle of August, through an emergency procedure with little parliamentary debate (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016; El País, 2014).

Since 2011, the EU and Spain's austerity politics in response to the crisis through National Reform and Stability Programs has promoted a neoliberal agenda of cuts to public budgets and welfare policies, deregulation of the labor market, tax increases, liberalizations and privatizations of public services (Lombardo, 2017a). In relation to gender equality policies, this neoliberal turn led not only to the restructuring and dismantlement of gender equality institutions, but also to a significant decrease in the government's budget dedicated to gender equality policies at all governmental levels, reaching less 34.1% at the central level in the 2009–2013 crisis period (Paleo & Alonso, 2014). Governmental funding dedicated to policies against gender violence has been decreasing from 2008 onwards, with the budget laws continuing this trend with 22.5% in 2016 and freezing funds in 2017 (Gobierno de España, 2016). The Spanish welfare state suffered from budget cuts in education, care, social assistance, family policies, and health (Pavolini, León, Guillén, & Ascoli, 2015). The universality of the health system was attacked through the cancellation of primary care for

undocumented migrant people (except for emergencies, children, and pregnancies), that the conservative government enforced through the Royal Decree 16/2012 (Lombardo, 2017b).

As Tilly (2007) and Walby (2015) argue, the restriction of social rights and the diminishing governance of major public services, by reducing the intervention of the state in the correction of inequalities produced by the market, through redistribution via democratically accountable procedures, has negative consequences for the quality of democracy. Yearly reports on the quality of democracy in Spain's post-crisis context show that the experts' evaluation barely reaches the mark of 5.2 in a 0–10 scale due to the restriction of social rights and the inequalities that the system produces (Fundación Alternativas, 2015). Data from European and national surveys show that Spanish citizen's dissatisfaction with democracy has increased abruptly during the crisis, not only due to economic hardships but also due to 'the political management of the crisis' and the 'intervention in democratic processes of national and international institutions and markets, whose legitimacy is questioned' (Fundación Alternativas, 2015, p. 26).

Democratization and gender dynamics show women's resilience and feminist and civil society struggles against neoliberal austerity politics. Despite the worsening labor market conditions that forced them into more exploitative situations, the Spanish gender regime is not becoming more 'domestic' yet. Spanish women's activity rate is still high—53.4% in 2017 (INE, 2017)—thus showing that women are not 'going back home' (Lombardo, 2017a). Anti-austerity struggles in Spain connected the defense of social rights and democracy from the beginning of the protest of the *Indignados* movement on 15 May 2011. The movement, that continued through 'waves' of civic activism, demanded 'real democracy', criticized austerity measures, and supported welfare policies such as public health, education, housing, and gender equality (Calvo, 2013; Cruells & Ruiz, 2014). Feminists have gendered the *Indignados* movement and have led important platforms such as the Platform of people affected by house evictions (PAH) headed by Ada Colau, who would be elected mayor of Barcelona in the 2015 municipal elections.

Feminists also developed their own anti-austerity struggles, through the organization of feminist strikes to defend a broader concept of both productive and reproductive work, such as the General Women's Strike that in 2018 mobilized 6 million women (see La Vanguardia, 2018). Finally, austerity pushed feminist organizations in Spain to intensify their state-level mobilization strategies, opening the space to greater democratization. By 2008 six editions of UN Shadow reports had been issued by feminist organisations worldwide, a practice that had begun in 1993. It was not until then that a group of 17 Spanish feminist organizations drafted their own Shadow report for the first time. Their second UN Shadow report from 2013 created a wider platform of

more than 50 feminist organizations that through a two-year participatory process produced a Shadow Report that was signed by 277 Spanish feminist organizations (San José, 2015). The UN used this Shadow Report to criticize the Spanish government for the deterioration of gender equality in the last years and to urge the government to comply with its international commitments (Lombardo, 2017a; Plataforma CEDAW Sombra-España, 2015). Institutional collective agency at the regional level has played an important role too in keeping gender equality on the agenda, as shows the maintenance of budgets dedicated to gender equality in times of austerity by women's policy agencies of the Basque Country and Andalusia (Alfama, 2017). Feminist agency in movements and in some regional institutions has thus been crucial for democratization.

4.2. Authoritarian Shifts

The construction of an 'emergency' situation to face the economic crisis in Europe has moved the Spanish government to take decisions that are considered authoritarian shifts, such as the aforementioned fast constitutional reform to limit budget deficit (Bruff & Wöhl, 2016). The quality of Spanish democracy has decreased even further under conservative ruling. As Villoria et al. (2014) argue, the key factor explaining differences in the quality of government among European regions is the historical development of effective institutional constraints (parliaments, courts, media) to the power of the executive. These constraints have weakened in Spain from 2011 onwards. During the first term of the conservative Prime Minister Rajoy, his cabinet broke the record of the number of initiatives approved by Decree-law (García De Blas, 2015). This type of norm, that the Constitution foresees for cases of 'extraordinary and urgent need', implies shorter periods of debate in parliament and the impossibility for the opposition to present amendments. The crisis context was used as an alibi to circumvent the legislative branch and reform key policies such as taxation, employment, and access to healthcare.

Similarly, the conservative government used its majority to undermine the capacity of parliament to effectively control the government. From 2011 to 2015 the *Partido Popular* [Popular Party] (PP) rejected up to 70 petitions of the opposition to enquire the prime minister in parliament. Rajoy also refused to properly address the press during that period, declining to be present in press conferences and to answer questions. He remained thus rather unaccountable not only for the unpopular austerity decisions taken during the economic crisis but also for the numerous corruption cases that affected his party. Weakened constraints to the executive branch and less accountability were not only detrimental to democracy but also to gender equality. This is due respectively to the fact that legal gender quotas in Spain promote women's

access to the legislative but not the executive branch, and that the Prime Minister's lowered accountability reduced opportunities for the opposition and the press to question the government's budget cuts to welfare and gender equality policies.

Lack of accountability was only one aspect of de-democratization. The restriction of freedom of expression, participation, and other human rights through the 2014 'Law of protection of citizens' security', or 'gag law' as civil society renamed it, has exposed the government's undemocratic reaction against the social contestation that occurred in Spain from the *Indignados* movement onwards. The 'gag law' limits the freedom of expression, association, protest, and information, by establishing administrative sanctions with high fines for in-compliant actors, by increasing police powers and their testimony in trial as compared to affected citizens, or by limiting the freedom of information and collection of proof about possible police abuse (Gobierno de España, 2015). This doubtfully democratic law, that has caused citizen and media sanctions² and self-censorship, has also had direct gender impacts due to its effects on the mobilization of feminist movements and the platform of people affected by house evictions. Moreover, it has triggered protests by sex workers' associations since the increased powers given to the police have promoted a boost in their abusive behavior and sanctions to sex workers on the basis of the law's articles that punish disobedience or resistance to authority—for instance, when they resist to show their identity documents (Borraz, 2016). Authoritarian shifts also showed in the Catalan secessionist tensions of 1st October 2017. The police' disproportionately violent attacks against Catalan citizens voting in a referendum for independence (which the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional) injured hundreds of people and was criticized by the Human Rights organizations (see Jones & Burgen, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Conservative attacks to women's sexual and reproductive rights in Spain have mostly been perpetrated by the main conservative party in alliance with 'pro-life' grass-roots organizations. The PP government, elected in 2011, presented a bill to restrict the right to abortion by reforming the progressive 2/2010 law on sexual and reproductive health approved under former socialist ruling. The 'Bill of protection of the life of the embryo and of the rights of the pregnant woman' would make abortion illegal and provoke a deterioration of women's autonomy and health. Strong and continued mobilization of the Spanish feminist movement, alliances with international actors, and internal divisions in the conservative party led the prime minister to withdraw the bill and forced the resignation of the minister of justice that proposed it (El País, 2014; Lombardo, 2017a; Alonso & Paleo, 2017). The struggle to defend the right of abortion was a success story for the feminist movement and for democracy, since it showed the importance of political contes-

² Under the new 'gag law', from July 2015 to December 2016, the Spanish police issued more than 22000 and 16000 fines respectively for disrespect and disobedience to police officers (see Borraz, 2016).

tation for defending women's civil rights (Alonso, 2015; García, 2015). Still, young women's rights were restricted through the 2015 reform of the current abortion law so that women under 18 will need to obtain their parents' consent to have an abortion.

Moreover, pro-life organizations were very successful in seizing the multilevel opportunity structures offered by the Spanish quasi-federal state (Alonso & Paleo, 2017). At the time the socialist cabinet drafted Law 2/2010, these grass-roots groups presented 'Citizens Legislative Initiatives'³ in all the Autonomous Communities, claiming the need for policies to support pregnant women and to provide alternatives to abortion. Regions governed by PP approved pro-life laws and policy plans that stated a public duty to protect the life of the un-born and to set up a network of assistance to pregnant women in vulnerable positions. In these regions, the few economic resources that were dedicated to gender equality policies are now destined to policies that depict women as mothers and to these very same organizations that oppose feminist and LGBTI movements (Alonso & Paleo, 2017).⁴ More importantly, nowadays these groups enjoy direct access to women seeking advice on their sexual and reproductive rights, undermining in practice state-level policies that grant women an informed decision in a safe environment. The conservative political discourse on sexual and reproductive rights in Spain's regions produces knowledge about traditional gender roles and restriction to women's autonomy, which implies a retrocession for gender equality (Verloo, 2017).

Dynamics of democratization point at the role of political contestation as vital for democracy (International Panel on Social Progress, 2016; Walby, 2015). The *Indignados* movement and the following waves of social and feminist protest brought back political contestation in Spain. The emergence of new political parties such as *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* introduced more pluralism in the Spanish two-party system of PP and *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* [Socialist Party] (PSOE). The new parties not only allow broader institutional channeling of citizens' demands but also demand greater accountability to a government used to govern in absolute majority. The alliance of *Podemos* with civic platforms at the 2015 local elections (e.g., *Ahora Madrid*, *Barcelona en Comú*) has allowed people from civil society and not only party apparatus to enter representative institutions. By opening institutional channels to represent some of the *Indignados* movement demands (Calvo & Álvarez, 2015), the new political actors could affect the agenda of civil rights restrictions of the last decade. One example is the opposition parties' proposal of reform of the 'gag law' started in March 2017.

These political changes have had important gender effects. The representation of women in the 2015 gen-

eral elections was the highest in Spain's democratic history, reaching 39.4% in Congress, due to the adoption of voluntary zipper-system candidate lists in the PSOE, *Podemos*, and *Izquierda Unida* [United Left] (IU) parties (Lombardo & Verge, 2017). The victory of civic lists in alliance with *Podemos* party in the 2015 local and regional elections led to the renovation of local governments through civic lists in towns such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia or Santiago. It also provoked the election of female progressive mayors coming from civil society in Madrid and Barcelona and the opening of a window of opportunity for gender equality policies. In the municipal government of Barcelona, for example, a new equality institution was created, the Department of Feminisms and LGBTI, led by gender mainstreaming and intersectionality experts. Policies have aimed at counteracting intersectional inequalities that tend to increase in times of crisis through measures such as the Plan for Gender Justice (2016–2020) or the Strategy Against the Feminization of Poverty and Precariousness (2016–2024) (Lombardo, 2017b). Similarly, new leftist governments in regions like the Balearic Islands and Valencia prioritized reinstating women's sexual and reproductive rights and repealed the laws and plans supported by pro-life organizations (Alonso & Paleo, 2017).

4.3. Political Corruption

The post-2008 period is characterized by the rise of corruption as a key political problem for Spanish democracy. In 2015, the country reached its record and was placed 41 in the International Transparency's Corruption Perceptions Index (0 highly corrupt, 100 very clean). By that point, scandals involving the main state institutions—from the monarchy to the regional governments and the main parties—were central to the political debates. National surveys reflected indeed that citizens placed 'corruption and fraud' (42%) and 'politicians, political parties, and politics' (29.9%) as the main problems of the country just below 'unemployment' (69.6%) (CIS, 2016). Corruption has provoked the most significant decline of institutional trust amongst European countries (Torcal, 2014), which affects the three government branches. Structural problems of Spanish democracy such as the 'politicization' of the judiciary, the lack of control over party finances or the need for more transparency policies became more acute (Group of States against Corruption [GRECO], 2016), gathering attention also from the EU institutions, which included anti-corruption measures as part of the country's Stability Programme (European Commission, 2017).

This state of affairs has had significant gendered implications. First, the increased perceived level of corruption has shown remarkable potential to erode the pub-

³ The Spanish Constitution foresees the possibility for citizens to gather a particular number of individual endorsements for the submission of a bill that would be then debated and considered for approval in Parliament. Pro-life organizations pioneered the use of this participatory device in many Spanish regions.

⁴ In the region of Galicia, for instance, pro-life and religious organizations, in 2016, obtained 77% of the funds devoted to the services to support pregnant women (Alonso & Paleo, 2017).

lic support for the welfare state. Studies have revealed that although Spaniards endorse key social policies such as education and health, they show increasing skepticism about greater levels of taxation and about public spending in non-priority areas—where gender equality policies are likely to be included (Calzada & Del Pino, 2016). Existing data confirm citizens' fears over inefficient public spending. Recent figures by the National Commission for Market and Competition (CNMC) estimate the impact of corruption practices related to public procurement on an extra cost of 47,500 million Euros—around a 4.5% of the GDP (Navas, 2015).

As the literature predicted, women are less likely to have access to the *clientelist* networks involving top businessmen and politicians. Data gathered by the judiciary confirm that amongst the 1,378 people that were brought to court between July 2015 and September 2016 in relation to corruption, 77% were men (General Council of the Judiciary, 2017). Women not only suffer the effects of the under-funding of the welfare state, but also lack access to these male dominated networks, based on homosocial capital (Bjarnegård, 2013), through which public money is (re)located without any democratic scrutiny. Moreover, these practices of awarding public contracts in exchange for black money—to illegally fund the party and/or its members—have serious implications for gender mainstreaming practice. The Spanish equality framework, including the national 'Law 3/2007 on Effective Equality between Men and Women', establishes the duty of public institutions to enact equality clauses in public procurement related contracts and regulations. Corruption has, however, undermined this attempt to incorporate gender equality measures in the private sector.

As a key preoccupation of the Spanish population, corruption has also been at the heart of social struggles for democratization. Fueling the *Indignados* movement, whose indignation was targeted at corrupted politicians that were not perceived as good representatives, it has inspired political discourses against the establishment. Indeed, *new politics* in Spain, both at the right and at the left, cannot be understood without the allegations against the *old parties*—PSOE and PP—and their close connection to political scandals. Here, *Podemos* holds the more critical discourse and places Spain close to a 'mafia state', where the institutions have been subordinated to the interests of the PP and the economic elite, serving as an effective tool for the illicit funding of the party and its members, and the control over the allocation of public spending for the benefit of clientelist networks. The party has proposed, on 19 May 2017, a vote of no confidence on the PP government on grounds of these corrupted practices that disrespect democracy and increase inequality (Riveiro, 2017). Up to 800 public officers of PP are currently being sued for corruption, including charges based on their participation in organized crime—in cases such as *Gürtel* or *Púnica* (Mira, 2017).

Feminist struggles have NOT remained aloof to this key dimension of de-democratization. The women's

movement enjoyed a leading role in anti-austerity platforms that have defended the public sector from privatizations that tend to place public services under the control of the same companies involved in corrupted practices (Lombardo, 2017a). Women also actively participated in civic platforms that contributed to prosecute these activities such as *15M Pa Rato*—against corruption in the finance sector—or the *Platform Against the Privatization of the Isabel II Canal*—to protect the public water supply in Madrid from the embezzlement of public money. With similar aims, some regional and local governments have adopted public procurement regulations that allowed re-instating gender equality clauses, which are particularly advanced in terms of gender mainstreaming, especially in Basque and Catalan equality institutions (Diz, 2017).

5. Conclusions

De-democratization processes oppose the feminist project in Europe. Feminist analyses contribute to disentangle these setbacks, which have significant implications not only for the procedural and substantive components of a *deep* democracy, but also for the situation of women in Europe. This article has analyzed the relation between gender equality and processes of de-democratization in Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. It argued that *neoliberalism*, *authoritarian shifts* and *political corruption* have been detrimental to Spanish democracy and gender equality. The subordination of the common good to the EU neoliberal project, the limitation of civil rights to freedom of expression, mobilization, and women's autonomy, breaches to the rule of law or the embezzling of public money by political authorities undermine procedural and substantive democracy. Such phenomena not only affect the state capacity of effective democratic control of decision-making and of putting its results into practice in Tilly's (2007) terms, but have significant gendered impacts. These include the dismantling of key public services, including gender equality policies, the restriction of women's sexual and reproductive rights, and the ineffective implementation of gender mainstreaming. Combined they have undermined progress made in the Spanish equality policy and legal framework in the previous decade.

However, collective agency has played a key role in counteracting these dynamics and re-democratizing the political space in Spain. Civil society and feminist movements' struggles for democracy, equality and social justice, have been effective in protecting public services from privatization, bringing corrupted politicians to justice or assuring women's access to safe abortions. They also triggered the most significant change in the Spanish party system in decades, opening opportunities for the rise of left-wing party *Podemos*, and especially of local governments emerging from grass-roots platforms, which are currently the *avant-garde* in the implementation of gender equality policies in Spain. Moreover, gen-

der equality institutions in some regions have still prioritized gender equality despite austerity. The Spanish multilevel structure provided opportunities to circumvent the PP majority at the state level (Alonso & Verge, 2014) and partially reverse the setbacks in gender equality policies of the last decade.

Collective agency has thus offered political opportunities for counteracting opposition to feminism and putting forward visions of a deep—and feminist—democracy. Yet, the potential for a deep democracy is based on the interdependent relation between democracy and gender equality. To be able to express their democratizing action, feminist and social movements need rules and practices that do not restrict their rights and possibilities of political contestation. It is to be seen whether the dynamics of de- and re-democratization will safeguard Spanish democracy and gender equality in these internationally hard times.

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Article

Towards a Conceptual Framework for Struggles over Democracy in Backsliding States: Gender Equality Policy in Central Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Trends of de-democratization across Europe and the Americas are emerging, along with opposition to gender equality and threats to previous gender equality policy gains. Yet de-democratization has been barely analysed through the lens of gender equality, and so far, efforts to systematically analyse the implications for inclusive democracy and the representation of gender interests are lacking. Backsliding in gender policies, and new forms of feminist engagement with hostile states and publics, also raise new challenges to the literature on gender and politics. In this article we explore gender equality policy backsliding in fragile democracies. Backsliding and de-democratization processes in these contexts pose a series of important challenges to how we have thought about gender policy change in progressive, mainly Western democratic contexts until now. We propose a conceptual framework discussing these two conceptually interesting realms: backsliding in gender equality policies, and feminist responses to backsliding. We illustrate our framework with empirical observations from four backsliding or temporarily backsliding Central and Eastern European countries: Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. With our article we aim to contribute to the understanding of gendered aspects of de-democratization both in gender and politics literature and in mainstream democratization literature.

Keywords

backsliding; Central and Eastern Europe; democracy; feminism; fragile democracy; gender; resilience; women's movements

Issue

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1. Introduction

The last decades since the 1995 Beijing Women's World Conference can be seen globally as years of significant progress in the adoption of gender equality policies in fields as diverse as political participation, labour markets, care and violence against women. Yet, this progress is currently under attack. Trends of backsliding and de-democratization have emerged across Europe and the Americas, mainly coinciding with the recent economic and financial crisis. We see articulated opposition to gender equality and threats to previous gender equality policy gains. This raises new challenges for the literature on

gender and politics. Women's rights are particularly vulnerable in fragile and nascent democracies where such rights have been more recently established and where the space of civil society actors to defend such rights is limited and even shrinking (Baker et al., 2017; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Rutzen, 2015). While significant attention has been devoted to democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Greskovits, 2015), there is a striking lack of research into the gendered aspects and implications of democratic backsliding.

In this article we propose a conceptual framework to analyse and reveal the consequences of these processes for inclusive democracy. The quality of democracy can

be assessed on the degree of its inclusiveness and representativeness of societal interests, and more specifically its responsiveness to women's interests (McBride & Mazur, 2010, p. 10). We ask: what does backsliding mean for gender equality policies and what are its implications for women's rights? How do feminists respond to and resist backsliding? And how can we capture the impact of feminist resistance in changing largely hostile contexts? To develop our conceptual framework we use empirical illustrations from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, which has been at the forefront of backsliding in gender equality policies in recent years (Kikas, 2016; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Selewa, 2016). We focus on Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, which exhibit particularly strong but also diverse patterns of retrenchment: some radical, others incremental, some ongoing over long periods of time, others stopped by impressive patterns of civil society resistance (Kikas, 2016; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Selewa, 2016). We do not use our empirical cases to explain causality in a neat comparative model, but rather to stipulate patterns of backsliding where those emerge, and feminist responses to it. The patterns we witness may not only be typical for the region, and so could provide important lessons for understanding mechanisms of gender equality policy backsliding and responses to it in other parts of Europe and beyond¹.

In the first part of the article we develop a conceptual framework to map the implications of current attacks on gender equality and women's rights on gender equality policies and political representation of women. Across the CEE region we see official political discourses changing from positions that were either largely supportive or silent on gender equality to openly challenging previously adopted and accepted gender equality policy positions (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Do such discursive attacks translate to policy dismantling? We build on public policy literature on policy dismantling, recent work on democratic backsliding, and studies in gender and politics explaining progress in gender equality policies to explore the conditions of decline and reversal of gender equality policies and their impact on the political representation of women.

In the second part of the article, we turn to the drivers of gender equality policies, namely women's rights activists (Beckwith, 2013; Htun & Weldon, 2012; McBride & Mazur, 2010), to ask: how does democratic backsliding affect the voice and standing of women's rights advocates? The participation and inclusion of women in the realm of politics are key to struggling against persisting inequalities. Fair and free elections can only serve this to a limited extent. For underrepresented groups, such as women, inclusive democracy also means empowerment and inclusion in policy and governance processes through civil society organizations represent-

ing the voice of such groups. The widely documented closure of civic space (Baker et al., 2017; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014) disempowers women's organizing. It thus makes it difficult for women to prevent the reversal of rights and dismantling of gender equality policies, and to contest the promotion of legislation and policies detrimental to gender equality. We use empirical observations from women's activism in the four backsliding CEE countries to explore patterns of response and resistance to increased state hostility.

2. Backsliding of Gender Policies

Democracy scholar Bermeo defines democratic backsliding as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (2016, p. 5). Greskovits takes a less institutional approach by defining it as a "destabilization or even a reversal in the direction of democratic development" (Greskovits, 2015, p. 28). Both view backsliding as an ongoing, gradual process rather than a turning point that can be clearly identified in time. Others link democratic backsliding to a cultural backlash against ongoing social changes including progress in gender equality (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016; Norris, 2016). Yet, most de-democratization writings concentrate on more general institutional aspects of democracy and pay less attention to backsliding in terms of representativeness and inclusiveness of democracies (Tilly, 2007; Walby, 2015). In order to capture these dimensions there is a need for a more comprehensive conceptualization of democratic backsliding that takes into account regression in gender representativeness. We suggest that Pitkin's (1967) classic distinction between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation can best capture the dimensions of inclusive democracy and serve as a useful starting point to comprehensively conceptualize gender equality backsliding. Descriptive representation can be captured through inclusive policy processes, substantive representation can be analysed by looking at policy content, while symbolic representation can be analysed through discursive construction of women's and gender equality issues by critical political actors. We use various bodies of literature to develop a concept of backsliding along these three dimensions.

Policy literature mainly operates on the assumption of institutional stability and incremental policy change, and there is far less extensive discussion on policy dismantling and reversals (Bauer, Green-Pedersen, Héritier, & Jordan, 2012; Bauer & Knill, 2014). More recent literature focuses on policy dismantling but neglects to look at two aspects that are important for gender policies: changes in inclusive policy processes, and changes in symbolic representation. Bauer et al. (2012) define policy dismantling as:

¹ Data for our analysis comes partly from our previous comparative project focusing on the development of policies against violence against women in these countries. This data is complemented with desk and media research and interviews with feminist activists and femocrats conducted in the four countries.

A change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity. It can involve changes to these core elements of policy and/or it can be achieved by manipulating the capacities to implement and supervise them. (p. 4)

Bauer et al. conceptualize dismantling along two dimensions: policy density and intensity. Density refers to changes in the number of policies in a given policy field, while intensity refers to the depth of intervention (2012, p. 34). Qualitative erosion of policies such as reframing and/or co-optation of content (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Stratigaki, 2005) are particularly fundamental problems in the field of gender policies and could be seen as an aspect of changes in policy intensity.

In recent years, two strands of literature have developed that address backsliding in the realm of gender equality. Firstly, increased (discursive) opposition to gender equality mobilized by a broad range of conservative, nationalist and religious actors has been widely discussed (Kovats & Poim, 2015; Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018). Explicit opposition to gender equality principles is a form of backlash that particularly challenges morality and sexuality aspects of gender equality through political statements and in some instances also through policy proposals. We see here backsliding in symbolic representation of gender equality.

The second strand of literature focuses on the politics and policy reversals following the economic crisis in Europe and discusses how the crisis has strengthened neoliberal trends and has led to backsliding in the context of gendered austerity measures (Bettio et al., 2012; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Walby, 2015). Austerity measures have resulted in increasing social inequality and discrimination against women (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2013). While anti-discrimination policies and other legal instruments remained in place, cuts were prominent in budgets and institutional frameworks, and have led to a decreased inclusion of women's groups. Backsliding is captured here both in terms of substantive and descriptive representation.

These bodies of literature point both to stability and to vulnerability in terms of institutional frameworks, implementation and accountability, and to discursive threats to gender equality objectives. They also indicate issue specificity within the wider range of gender policy issues. It has been argued earlier that various gender equality policy sub-issues are characterized by different policy dynamics, including diverse patterns of actor dynamics, different dynamics of political representation, institutional friction and veto points, and that this may result in differences in policy attention (Annesley, Engeli, & Gains, 2015; Htun & Weldon, 2012; McBride & Mazur, 2010). Morality issues such as sexual and reproductive rights are particularly sensitive to contestation (Kovats

& Poim, 2015; Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Class-based issues emerge as a topic of political struggle in the context of the economic and financial crisis (Bettio et al., 2012; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2013; Krizsan & Zentai, 2017). Legal frameworks embedded in European Union (EU) norms may be less prone to backsliding.

While these two strands of literature provide important insights, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the implications of discursive attacks on gender equality policies, and the scope of policy backsliding. In the next section we develop a conceptual framework for analysing gender policy backsliding. We combine ideas on policy dismantling and democratic backsliding with ideas about discursive opposition to gender equality, thus covering aspects of backsliding in terms of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation.

2.1. A Conceptual Framework for Analysing Gender Policy Backsliding

Certain patterns of backsliding in gender policies emerge, but it remains unclear how systematic these patterns are and what they imply for inclusive democracy and the representation of gender, particularly in the context of fragile democracies. Better conceptual work is needed to bring various dimensions of backsliding together in a sound conceptual framework (Goertz & Mazur, 2008).

Gender equality policy progress is often measured along two criteria: the framing of policy content along the lines of women's movement framing, and an inclusive policy subsystem integrating women's movement actors (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; McBride & Mazur, 2010). We complement this framework with other elements from the previously discussed literature. From the policy dismantling literature, we take the observation that policy termination is rare and that we need more gradual measurements of change towards erosion or dismantling. We also borrow the idea of backsliding as a process rather than a fixed turning point in time. From the gender and politics literature we take the emphasis on framing of policies, the erosion of accountability mechanisms, and the symbolic importance of openly oppositional policymaker discourses which delegitimize gender equality policies and represent gender issues in exclusionary ways. We propose to define backsliding in the field of gender equality policies with reference to the substantive normative content of gender equality as a benchmark. But we see gender equality as an empty signifier, the meaning of which may differ depending on political, social and cultural contexts (Lombardo et al., 2009). To use a substantive but contextualized approach, we define backsliding as states going back on previous commitments to gender equality norms as defined in their respective political contexts.

We operationalize policy backsliding in the field of gender equality along four complementary dimensions which also correspond to symbolic, substantive and de-

scriptive aspects of representation (Pitkin, 1967): 1) discursive (de)legitimation of gender policy objectives; 2) dismantling and reframing existent policies; 3) undermining implementation; and 4) erosion of accountability and inclusion mechanisms. This multi-dimensional framework allows us to examine how backsliding patterns vary across specific gender equality issues and across countries, while it also allows for a gradual rather than a dichotomous approach to backsliding (Goertz & Mazur, 2008). Below we elaborate on each dimension and provide some empirical illustrations of it.

2.1.1. Discursive Delegitimation of Gender Equality Policies

A widely noted and prominent aspect of policy backsliding is changes in official political discourses from positions largely supportive or silent on gender equality to statements that openly challenge gender equality objectives, often going in opposition to a country's formally adopted and accepted policy positions (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Oppositional statements on gender equality made by high-level political actors who are part of the governing structure or governing political party question the legitimacy of gender equality as a goal and discredit existing policies. Backsliding here means increasingly hostile policy processes, where anti-gender equality positions negatively influence how policies are perceived and implemented.

A particularly strong example of discursive opposition is in Poland where, since the end of 2015, the populist right-wing government has used a strong anti-gender equality rhetoric in which 'gender ideology' features as a major threat to Polish society and Catholic family values. Statements that challenge gender equality are issued on a regular basis by government officials. Similar statements are also issued occasionally by government officials in Croatia (Kikas, 2016), and more recently in Hungary as well (Felix, 2015).

2.1.2. Policy Dismantling and Reframing

Backsliding may take the form of dismantling existing policies. However, more often changes take place by amending policies so that their priorities or objectives change. Backsliding may occur when a policy problem is radically reframed so that the new frame contrasts with gender equality meanings or allows for contrasting interpretations. Reversal of policy frames may also happen when gender-sensitive issues present in the diagnostic or prognostic frames of policy regimes disappear. Reframing existent policies from targeting equal opportunities to, for example, protecting family values or refocusing care around the family unit, while allowing for their continued operation, is a pattern that can be observed to reverse progress in gender equality policy regimes (Krizsan & Zentai, 2017). An example of this is Croatia where a new Criminal Code adopted in 2011,

and entering into force on 1 January 2013, removed the specific prohibition of "violent, abusive, or particularly insolent conduct" within a family (Article 215A). Family relations were kept only as an aggravated circumstance for other, more severe criminal offences, such as injuries, severe and extremely severe injuries, threat or coercion (Manjoo, 2013). Repealing these specific domestic violence provisions means that domestic violence offences can now only be prosecuted as misdemeanours, as the coercive control element is no longer part of the Criminal Code (Advocates for Human Rights & Autonomous Women's House, 2015). In addition, a new Family Law was drafted to "support traditional family values" (Stubbs, 2016). The Law contains provisions that oppose gender equality and disregard the power dynamics in domestic violence, such as mandatory mediation in divorce cases, serious consequences for a parent who "refuses to cooperate" in raising children, and fines for parents who prevent contact with children. Furthermore, the term "domestic violence" was replaced with the ambiguous "highly conflictual relations". The new Criminal Code and the Family Law brought the family protection framing to the level of statute. The Constitution of Croatia was also amended following a popular referendum in 2013 initiated by conservative actors, but tacitly supported by the government, to limit family and marriage rights to heterosexual couples.

2.1.3. Undermining Implementation Arrangements

Reversal and dismantling of policies can also take place at the level of the institutional design of a policy regime. Institutional design may include mechanisms such as coordinating authorities, intergovernmental and other partnerships, networks of private and public entities, and contractual relationships. Policies can be abandoned by not continuing their ongoing programmatic processes or made impossible by defunding. The literature about the gendered implications of austerity measures points to stalling strategic programming processes, closing gender equality institutions or cutting funds that make their operation feasible (Bettio et al., 2012; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Krizsan & Zentai, 2017).

Dismantling of institutional arrangements is a relatively easy and low-key form of rolling back policies. One illustrative example is the Hungarian case where, starting from 2010, the Fidesz government dismantled most of the gender equality structures put in place under the previous government. The gender equality unit was closed and re-established with only two people on board, under the deputy state secretary for Family and Population Policy. This implied both a downsizing and reframing of gender equality policy objectives into family policy objectives. The consultative Gender Equality Council has not been convened since 2010. The implementation of the 2010 National Gender Equality strategy was immediately stalled after the elections, and no activities were launched under it by the new government. Funds were

diverted from gender equality objectives towards objectives opposing it. For example, money coming from the EU's PROGRESS fund was used for an anti-abortion campaign in ways that were challenged by EC Commissioner Viviane Reading (Euractiv, 2011).

2.1.4. Erosion of Inclusion and Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability processes especially by means of inclusive policy making and consultation processes including women's rights advocates are a critical element in the field of gender policy progress (Ferree & Gamson, 2003; McBride & Mazur, 2010). Policy inclusion is seen by gender and politics literature as a policy outcome in itself, but also as a factor securing more equitable representation for gender interests. As such, reversal on policy inclusion has consequences for the backsliding of gender policies. Gender equality policies may be undermined if women's rights advocates are not meaningfully involved in policy processes beyond agenda-setting (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Essential elements identified in backsliding in the context of the economic crisis are the breaking of accountability loops and de-democratizing of policy-making processes (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Krizsan & Zentai, 2017; Walby, 2015). The most direct challenge is dismantling formal consultation structures such as councils or committees established for sustainable communication between civil society groups representing gender equality and governments. Formal consultation mechanisms have been particularly hit in Hungary, Romania and Poland. In Romania, even parliament was side-lined by decision-making through executive orders. Formal consultation processes have also been curtailed by selective access to consultation based on government preferences. Selective inclusion of civil society actors has led to the exclusion of rights-based groups from consultation and their replacement by alternative groups in Hungary (Krizsan & Zentai, 2017), Croatia and Poland.

2.2. Dismantling Patterns and Strategies

The advantage of using a multi-dimensional framework is that it enables a detailed and systematic analysis of various dimensions of backsliding across countries, and specific gender issues. In general, we expect that backsliding will affect some policy areas more than others, i.e., backsliding will be more prominent along some of our four dimensions in some gender policy issues. In addition to this, we expect to find variations between countries related to specific strategies that politicians may employ in each context. Bauer et al. (2012) point to four different dismantling strategies. Active dismantling is the most visible form, where politicians clearly and openly express their wish to dismantle or end a policy and take actions to do this. Secondly, and in contrast to active dismantling, politicians may claim their intention to dismantle,

but these declarations are not acted upon or serve some other objective, and hence remain symbolic. Thirdly, dismantling decisions may be moved to another political arena, by manipulating the organizational or procedural basis of a policy or transferring the policy to another government level or to a (newly established) agency. Finally, the subtlest strategy is dismantling by defaults, where governments simply do not enact or execute policies, which may lead to policy extinction. Change is made without formal decision; it has little visibility but may affect policy instruments, institutional structures, or accountability mechanisms. Bauer et al. propose that dismantling strategies depend on the political ideology and preference of politicians, but are also situational, so depend on available opportunities and constraints, and public and political support or opposition.

The typology is a useful starting point to think about dismantling strategies, but we propose to add some more elements to it. First, we consider the pace of dismantling as an additional essential element. Processes of dismantling can be rapid, which is often related to drastic cuts, or more incremental, which comes from low-key, small, "under the radar" forms of dismantling. Second, we consider that strategies will be issue-specific and entail different rationales and justification. We contend that the type of dismantling strategy chosen to roll back gender equality policies creates specific opportunities and constraints for feminist activists to respond or resist. Low key, incremental processes of policy backsliding remain largely invisible to the wider public and may therefore be more difficult to address than radical and drastic cuts openly announced by governments. Visible forms of dismantling are more likely to generate protest from a wider public and help activists to orchestrate massive protests to oppose government plans. Yet, feminist counter-strategies also depend on the extent of direct hostility or repression. This is a point that is left undiscussed in the policy dismantling literature and where we need social movement literature to better understand opportunities and constraints to respond to and/or struggle against policy dismantling.

3. Backsliding States and Feminist Resilience

The emergence of openly hostile and closing states presents new challenges to women's rights groups in the CEE region. Along with Ferree and Mueller (2004) we propose the use of an open and broad definition of women's movements as mobilizations based on appeals to women as a constituency, and thus as an organized strategy. With them we define feminism as the broad goal of challenging and changing unequal gender relations: "whether or not individuals or groups choose to call themselves feminist, their goal of empowering women should be considered feminist" (2006, p. vii). This open framework allows an examination of the different forms and faces of women's organizing for gender equality within and across countries.

Hostile states can hinder movement actors in stepping up against gender policy backsliding. During the democratization period, women's rights groups strongly relied on transactional activism (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Tarrow & Petrova, 2007) rather than grassroots activism to pursue gender policy change, meaning that they focused on networking with other organizations, including state actors. It is through strategically chosen patterns of engagement with the state and with other civil society actors that gender policy progress could take place across the region (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Movements with diverse organizational patterns that combined insider and outsider strategies to engage the state were the most successful in gendering adopted policies (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). The increased hostility towards critical civil society organizations in general, and towards women's rights organizations in particular, blocks earlier successful strategies of engaging the state. Networking with state actors is marginalized or becomes impossible. Preliminary evidence suggests that women's organizations are side-lined, persecuted or co-opted by governments. This is in line with findings of other studies on civil society and protests in backsliding or (semi-)autocratic states.

3.1. Government Hostility to Women's Organizations

Governments moving towards authoritarianism often use methods of control to suppress civil society organizations they perceive as threatening. These methods may include the creation by the state of seemingly civic organizations, often referred to as GONGOs, to influence the realm of civil society in a way that directly supports state power (Doyle, 2017); co-optation by using the reliance of independent organizations on state funding or cooperation to control their activities; and repressive or even violent actions ranging from disproportionate auditing as a means of control to policing and violence, which limit and disempower organizations (Baker et al., 2017). These three forms of state hostility are also visible in the CEE region and limit the space for women's organizations to cooperate with the state or act as critical outsiders.

In Hungary, Poland and Croatia we find governmental strategies to defund women's rights organizations and redirect public funds to alternative, government-friendly women's organizations. Women's rights groups in Hungary have seen an unprecedented absence of funding under the Fidesz government, including the blocking of funding by non-state donors such as the Norwegian Civil Grants (TASZ, 2016). In the meantime, funding has been increasingly directed towards conservative women's groups and family protection groups. In 2013 an alternative coalition (Association of Hungarian Women) was launched to challenge the place of the Hungarian Women's Lobby in the European Women's Lobby and to delegate a representative to the European Institute for Gender Equality. Similarly, in Poland, government officials like the Plenipotentiary for Civil Society

and Equal Treatment have stated that they seek to develop a cadre of "conservative" NGOs that can focus on topics such as women's and family issues, discrimination, and refugees/migration from a traditional perspective. The government created a competing organization, the Confederation of Non-Governmental Initiatives of Poland, that will presumably become the coordinating body of the new community of government-organized NGOs (Human Rights First, 2017, p. 16). In Croatia, the women's movement's insider status has been severely limited since 2011, when actors and rhetoric opposed to gender equality strengthened and governmental allies disappeared. Women's groups are now rarely invited to the negotiation table to discuss policy changes, though remain external critics to the process (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Family protection, men's rights and other conservative groups have infiltrated consultative mechanisms, frequently blocking policy progress. Previously successful patterns of cooperation between women's rights groups and the state have faltered.

Co-optation of women's rights groups has been particularly used in contexts where formalized state funding has been available for services provided by women's rights groups. In Croatia tension emerged between women's rights groups around issues of autonomy from versus cooperation with the state, funding, and definitions of domestic violence back in 2005 (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). This tension was overcome, to some extent, in domestic violence policy mobilizations during 2008. After 2008, however, the movement fragmented once again. Leadership issues also struck the initially successful Women's Network. It is this dense (Mamula, Vukmanić, Zore, Stanić, & Hojt, 2010) yet fragmented women's movement that had to face the increasingly hostile context and state closure. One strategy used by the state to restrain women's groups, de-fund them or coerce them into cooperation was to tender funding available for services for victims of domestic violence. Tendering needed extremely high investment of resources by women's groups as well as conforming to complex protocols that were often contrary to feminist principles (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, Autonomous Women's House, Zagreb, & Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, 2012). Conditionality imposed on women's groups and resulting patterns of dependency have long been discussed (Alvarez, 1999; Ghodsee, 2004) in relation to neoliberal states. A move towards replacing previously earmarked state funding with tendering is a relatively recent phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe, but has gained new relevance as it has emerged together with state hostility to and closure towards women's rights groups.

Repressive actions against women's rights groups can range from regulatory tools such as excessive auditing and surveillance to more violent and repressive tools such as police searches, raiding of offices, holding computers or even arrests of activists. They limit activism both by means of threat but also by demanding unrec-

essary and mostly unavailable resources for handling excessive auditing. From 2013, waves of auditing and raids took place in Hungary against several rights NGOs (women's rights, LGBT, civil rights) funded by the Norwegian Civil Fund. Auditing procedures ran for years and were closed down without any findings of irregularity (TASZ, 2016). In a similar vein, in 2017 the Polish government began a financial review of targeted "liberal" NGOs, requiring many to produce documents in an audit-like procedure for the first time. It ordered several organizations to return grant money, while withholding funding from others (Human Rights First, 2017, p. 5). The police raid on the offices of the main women's rights organizations in several Polish cities in October 2017 also exemplifies this kind of threat and repression. The timing of the raids, one day after women's organizations had staged anti-government marches to protest the country's restrictive abortion law, suggest they are a tool of intimidation (The Guardian, 2017).

3.2. *Movement Resistance and Survival*

Emergent state hostility towards women's rights advocates has consequences for how women's movements can maintain their role in promoting democratic representation of women's interests. Movement capacity and movement strategies of engagement with the state are dimensions we previously took (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018) to conceptualize movement influence on policy-making. Both dimensions are affected by the forms of state hostility discussed above. How do women's movements respond to this? Social movement literature is remarkably silent about movement strategies under conditions of democratic backsliding. Literature on responses to the economic crisis points to instances of demise and failure of movements, but in some cases also to revival and maturing and the emergence of innovative forms of resistance (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Krizsan & Zentai, 2017). Feminist resilience and responses to backsliding will on the one hand depend on the capacity of women's movements and their strategies of state engagement before backsliding, and on the other hand on the modes and strategies of policy dismantling used by governments, to which movements react. Movements may react differently to active and symbolic dismantling than to dismantling by default.

Empirically, we see divergent patterns of feminist resistance to policy backsliding and state hostility emerge in the four countries, and various ways of feminist coping with the context of hostility to gender and de-democratization. We identify three strategies: disruptive protest, new patterns of coalition building, and abeyance and demise.

3.2.1. Turn to Grassroots and Disruptive Protest

Women's movements traditionally use less obtrusive persuasive strategies, including participation in consultation

processes or lobbying policymakers (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Yet, in the context of state hostility and closure, more disruptive repertoires are required. These may result in more radically framed claims that are less open to negotiation and also require different movement capacities and infrastructure (Andrews, 2001). The strength and capacity of movements before the period of backsliding will make a difference to whether such capacity is available. Movements with diversified capacities (Andrews, 2001) might be in a better position to turn to confrontational strategies.

The capacity and resilience of the Polish women's movement is well illustrated by the massive protest against the government's proposal for even more restrictive abortion regulations in October 2016 (Davis, 2016), which ultimately led to the withdrawal of the proposal. It also demonstrates the ability to successfully connect feminist issues to wider democracy and human rights concerns and mobilizations. Revival and diversification of the Romanian women's movement and its strategies around the time of the economic crisis (Popa, 2015) is another example of resilience. New actors—including young feminists, professional women, as well as minority women's groups, in particular Roma women's advocates—entered the field of women's rights activism. This sparked new debates that engaged more radically with feminism and introduced more disruptive forms of activism.

3.2.2. New Patterns of Coalition Building

In the contexts of de-democratization, gender equality has come under attack together with other democratic values, human rights and rights of other vulnerable groups. These common external threats may forge new coalitions (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) and contribute to overcoming divisions (Borland, 2010). Women's movements in CEE countries were rarely part of democratization movements and good working relations with other rights groups are the exception rather than the rule (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). In Hungary, links between the women's movement and wider democratization processes and protests were very weak throughout the last decades and remained incidental even in the context of anti-democratic threats from the government. The women's movement remained largely disconnected from wider human rights and democratization protests; they were neither invited to join nor were interested in joining these platforms. Further, women's rights claims were rarely backed by these groups, except for some support from international rights groups, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

Romanian mobilization in 2012 and Polish protests in 2016 show the importance of connecting women's rights-related protests to wider pro-democracy political protests in order to prevent the erosion and reversal of existing gender equality achievements during this continuing wave of de-democratization in the region. In Poland the protest against restricting abortion extended well be-

yond feminist constituencies, thus integrating feminist claims into a wider pro-democracy agenda. In Romania, a coalition with diverse rights groups and integrating women's rights in the wider pro-democracy protests strengthened feminist claims and facilitated policy success in blocking further backsliding and adopting new progressive legislation on domestic violence (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). Thus, the politicization of women's rights as an integral part of democratic achievements to be defended—and not just by women's rights groups—emerges as a successful strategy in the Romanian and the Polish cases.

3.2.3. Abeyance and Demise

While threat and opposition can reinvigorate and strengthen resistance, if it is systematic and long term, it may incapacitate weaker and more institutionalized movements. Abeyance (Taylor, 1989) is a response that can emerge in such cases. Abeyance is like a last resort, when a movement is barely able to openly challenge the state or function as usual. It is a state of survival in which a social movement manages to sustain itself and mount a challenge to authorities in a hostile political and cultural environment (Taylor, 1989). Abeyance structures promote movement continuity by sustaining organizational infrastructure from which a new protest wave may emerge in a different political environment. A move away from political activism towards academic feminism, organizing workshops and small group discussions is also a strategy that may be used, and is a familiar ground for many women's movements in CEE.

We observe a decline and even demise of women's movements, which needs to be analysed more systematically. In 2016, the state of the previously weak and underfunded Hungarian women's movement organizations can be characterized as abeyance. Hungary had few women's movement organizations, and these were mainly based on highly educated, elite activists and primarily, though not exclusively, centralized in Budapest. Though their activities were relatively diversified they were rarely able to mobilize large protests and could not establish long-term alliances with state actors. The state has never provided meaningful financial support for women's groups, neither at the national nor municipal level, and foreign funding has also been weak (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018). The right-wing populist Fidesz government blocked communication almost entirely, cut state funding, and restrained foreign funding. This ultimately forced most women's groups out of business by 2016 and limited resistance to a few isolated activists, academics and MPs.

4. Conclusion

In this article we have aimed to contribute to recent debates on de-democratization. We argue that gender aspects of de-democratization processes are generally

overlooked and their inclusion is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of democratic backsliding for women but also for other marginalized groups. Along with McBride and Mazur we claim that the quality of democracy can be assessed on the degree of inclusiveness and representativeness of societal interests, and more specifically responsiveness to women's interests (2010, p. 10). We propose a conceptual framework to capture the implications of recent attacks on gender equality for policy and for women's rights advocacy, and more generally for inclusive democracy and the representation of women in politics. To this end we use Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive, substantive and symbolic elements of representation. We propose two arenas where gendered aspects of de-democratization can be captured: backsliding of gender policies, and changes in feminist engagement with the political realm.

To map backsliding in gender policies we elaborate a conceptual framework starting from policy change and dismantling literature and gender and politics literature. We distinguish four dimensions of gender equality policy backsliding: discursive de-legitimization of gender policies, policy dismantling, undermining implementation, and erosion of inclusion and accountability mechanisms. We see these dimensions as interrelated and complementary. Just like descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013), these dimensions need to be seen together to capture the full spectrum of gender policy backsliding and its implications for the political representation of women. We propose that backsliding needs to be understood to mean more than just the removal or dismantling of policies, to include subtle and gradual reframing, or the undermining of implementation capacities such as institutions, planning or budgets. For backsliding to occur it is not necessary that all dimensions are present simultaneously. Backsliding may be present in only one dimension, and not in others. We contend that presence of reversal in one aspect can be expected to lead to further backsliding in the policy regime. Discursive de-legitimization of policies, or broken accountability, may ultimately result in a change of policy framing or institutional arrangements. Based on our empirical observations we expect that de-legitimization is a key element in current processes of backsliding, and formal policy consequences may not follow directly and immediately. Backsliding appears to affect implementation and institutional arrangements that support policies, and consultation mechanisms involving women's rights advocates. A systematic analysis, applying our framework, is necessary to know what dimensions are most affected and what specific gender equality policy issues are most vulnerable to which aspects of backsliding.

The other arena where gendered aspects of de-democratization can be identified is engagement of feminist activism with the political arena. Our framework suggests that backsliding mainly leads to decreased inclu-

sion of women's rights advocates in policy processes. For women, and other groups that are underrepresented in formal politics, alternative forms of representation such as consultation and inclusive policy processes are crucial. We see this space declining through marginalization or exclusion from consultative platforms, decreased funding or outright persecution of groups. Yet, backsliding and attacks on gender equality could also have reinvigorating effects on feminist mobilization. Diversification of organizational forms, mobilization strategies and funding may be new forms of engagement. We argue that the blocking of institutional channels of representation through policy consultation forces feminists to seek other non-institutional channels like confrontational street protest. In particular, mass protests and building new inclusive coalitions are important tools to draw attention to the underrepresentation of women. More of these grassroots initiatives may also lead to new innovative forms of activism that might previously have been non-existent in the fragile democracies of the CEE region. At the same time, if movements are not able to generate such massive support they more likely turn to abeyance tactics.

Strategies of resistance will partly depend on the patterns of backsliding. Active dismantling of policies will more likely generate disruptive protests and wide coalitions of protest. Meanwhile, high levels of mobilization and active coalition work in ideologically inconsistent coalitions are difficult to sustain over the long term, in cases of incremental backsliding. Gradual and subtle forms of backsliding make feminist responses more difficult as they require evidence to pinpoint the change and communicating this in order to mobilize constituencies and bystanders. Also, gradual backsliding makes it necessary for movements to be able to sustain their activity over a longer time, while resources are declining.

Our framework for analysing women's movement resistances can show emerging possibilities for re-democratization by strong articulation of protest, and by forging new alliances. It also opens opportunities for identifying patterns of re-gendering or gendering democracy in certain cases where feminists failed on previous occasions. Research on feminist activism may inform analysis of activism of other marginalized groups in contexts of de-democratization.

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Conflict of Interests

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Article

Gendered Strategies between Democratization and Democratic Reversal: The Curious Case of Turkey

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Abstract

The processes of democratization or democratic reversal have serious implications for gender equality regimes. Although the gender and transition literature has extensively examined the relation between democratization and gender, it only recently began to question how the changing dynamics of democratic reversal influence gender politics and policies. While women's participation and representation in the formal arena of politics has been the primary object of theoretical discussions, the research rediscovers the power of the informal arena. To find tentative answers to the newly developing research agenda, this article employs the case of Turkey. To this end, the article examines the gendered strategies of four groups of organized women (feminist, Kurdish, Islamist, and Kemalist women's organizations) engaged in strengthening women's rights and gender equality. It first questions how, and to what extent, organized women *engendered* democratization process and then sheds lights on the shift in their strategies to respond to the increasingly authoritarian and conservative Islamist political agenda of the ruling Justice and Development Party. Drawing on empirical findings, the article aims to inform the theoretical debates on the analytical relation between democratic reversals and gender rights regimes.

Keywords

democratic reversal; democratization; gender politics; Justice and Development Party; organized women; Turkey

Issue

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1. Introduction

On 5 June 2016, at the opening of the new building of the *Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği* (KADEM) [Women and Democracy Association], Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asserted that “a woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house—however successful in her work life—is deficient, and is incomplete” (The Guardian, 2016). He further recommended that women should have at least three children, which he frequently mentions in his public speeches. These statements were one of the latest in a series of controversial remarks that impose conservative family values and norms on women. Erdoğan repeatedly declared that he does not believe in equality of women and men because they are biologically different and have differ-

ent societal roles (The Guardian, 2014). Women's rights advocates have claimed that Erdoğan's remarks create a climate in which intimidation, discrimination, and abuse of women became normalized. The growing social conservatism, which is not unique to Turkey, is utilized to legitimize the reconfiguration of the political rule under the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) [Justice and Development Party].

The ruling AKP, which came to power in 2002, pursued a series of political and economic reforms. After a period of a democratic progress, the AKP began “to cement its own hold on power” (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012, p. 86) and to restrict the leeway for the democratic opposition, civil society, and the media. Turkey's imperfect democracy turned into a form of “competitive authoritarianism”¹ (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Öniş, 2013). With

¹ Levitsky and Way state that in competitive authoritarian regimes formal democratic institutions (e.g., free and fair elections, political rights and civil liberties) are viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. However, incumbents violate those rules so frequently that it creates an “uneven playing field” between government and opposition (2002, pp. 52–53).

the rise of authoritarianism, patriarchal notions and conservative family values have become more salient in the AKP's political discourse on women (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Altunok, 2016; Güneş-Ayata & Doğançün, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2015, 2016). The patriarchal control of gender relations leads to a perpetual conflict between the government and women's organizations struggling for women's equal rights. Thus, the article aims to examine the strategies of women's organizations in the process of democratization and democratic reversal under the conservative political agenda of the AKP. Drawing on the arguments of "democratization from below", the article argues that organized women play a substantial role in negotiating gender issues and responding to negative changes in gender policies in a political environment, where anti-democratic and anti-gender sentiments are on the rise.

The article examines the strategies of organized women in Turkey defending gender equality. Although the concept of gender equality can have multiple meanings in different political contexts (cf. Verloo, 2007), here it refers to formal equality, in which all women and men have similar opportunities to participate in politics, economy, and society. By employing a qualitative analysis, the article aims to shed light on the role of organized women in defying the conservative and authoritarian gender discourse and practices of the AKP. The findings on Turkey may provide valuable insights into the newly emerging field within the gender and politics scholarship dealing with backsliding in gender equality in the context of de-democratization and democratic reversal.

2. A Gendered Approach to Democratization and Democratic Reversal

The concept of democratization encompasses two discussions: 1) how to define democracy, and 2) what are the favoring and disfavoring conditions of a democratization process. In line with the mainstream democratization literature, the article employs a mid-range definition of democracy—a procedural understanding of democracy—that focuses on the institutions and rules of democracy. Although the conducive factors that facilitate democratization and the consolidation of democracy are still disputed in democratization studies, the main consensus is that the democratization process is not an irreversible condition. In other words, democracies can always become weaker or stronger (Diamond, 1997; Linz & Stepan, 1997). Thus, the literature deals with both directions within the process of democratization; i.e., transition to democracy and democratic reversal.

In recent years, countries around the globe experienced democratic decline, and even suffered democratic reversal. Since citizens think that governments do not substantially represent their interests, they are tempted either to support populist leaders with weak democratic credentials (Ottoway, 2000), or to mobilize for a better democracy (Diamond & Plattner, 2015). As Freedom House claims in its 2017 report, "the dual threat"

to democracy, i.e., rising populism and authoritarianism, challenges the progress made in political rights and civil liberties globally. This anti-democratic wave has far-reaching consequences for women's rights and gender equality, too. We already witness a strengthening of anti-feminist politics and anti-gender movements, growing online violence against women in politics, and the perennial problem of domestic violence against women (see introduction of this issue). While the "malestream democratization literature" (Waylen, 2007) seeks to understand reasons behind democratic reversals, it completely ignores the gender perspective of the phenomenon. Gender and politics scholars thus began to investigate to what extent these anti-democratic and anti-gender developments represent a threat to the achievements in gender equality regimes and to gender relations (e.g. this issue). But further research is needed to examine how exactly democratic reversal affects women's rights actors both in- and outside of formal politics and how they should resist and counteract de-democratization processes.

To investigate the negative developments in gender policies, gender and politics scholars studying more gender equal societies of the West focus mostly on the formal arena of politics (executive, legislative, and judiciary bodies) in shaping the nature of institutions and processes. Waylen, for instance, suggests changing the institutions of democracy "to promulgate democracies with enhanced levels of participation, representation and legitimacy" (2015, p. 498). To this end, scholars suggest introducing gendered institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas, or to strengthen state's women's agencies in order to increase women's participation and representation and thereby hinder the crises in democracies (e.g., Krook & Messing-Mathie, 2013; Waylen, 2015). Nevertheless, how to resist reversal in democracies and how to prevent backsliding in gender policies and laws remain to be resolved in the literature. Since trust in democratic institutions is declining, but public interest in "doing politics" has been rising (Diamond & Plattner, 2015), it is time for scholars to reconsider and re-examine the informal arena of politics, especially civil society, which is "an area of contesting projects" (Walby, 2011, p. 6). The collective, autonomous, and voluntaristic character of civil society provides women and men with the opportunity to voice and mobilize for their gendered demands. In line with gender and politics scholars studying developing countries with less gender equality regimes (Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East), we can argue that within the civil societal space, organized women not only have the chance to monitor state's gender policies but also to resist negative changes and backsliding in policies and laws. Although a great deal of the literature on social movements examines women's organizing in civil society, its main interest remains the aims, internal characteristics, and framing of their demands (Waylen, 2007, p. 51). This is not sufficient to examine the interaction of organized women

with state institutions and the political context. Thus, a thorough gendered examination of democratization and democratic reversal needs to consider women's agency in the informal arena of politics, without ignoring the interaction with the formal arena. To this end, the article pays particular attention to women's civil society organizations (CSOs) and their interaction with state institutions in formulating gender policies and in rejecting anti-feminist policies and regulations that are detrimental to gender equality.

In this article, I will focus on four groups of women's organizations that reflect the dominant political cleavages in Turkey: feminist, Kurdish, Islamist, and Kemalist women's CSOs. Most of the scholarly literature on women's organizing in Turkey refer to these four groups and examine them, albeit to different extents (e.g., Arat, 2008; Bora & Günal, 2007; Coşar & Onbaşı, 2008; Diner & Toktaş, 2010; Marshall, 2009). For each group, I selected three organizations that are each highly influential and representative within their groups, and that are not dependent on political parties.² The study deployed a qualitative analysis and collected the empirical data mainly from the primary sources. First, I conducted twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the executive members of the selected women's CSOs and feminist academics during research trips between 2010 and 2012. Second, in October 2016, I met academics and women's rights activists from different women's groups in a research workshop organized by University of Bremen. There, I had the opportunity to discuss how women's groups resist the recent conservative gender politics of the ruling AKP. Third, to supplement the data, I reviewed publications, public statements, and interviews in newspapers and social media accounts of the selected women's CSOs. Fourth, the study profited from the grey literature, i.e., the surveys and reports of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies and of national and international research institutes to identify state's projects and policies related to gender issues. In doing so, I applied process tracing, and textual analysis of these data. The evidences obtained from the state's reports were compared with the reports conducted by autonomous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to verify or falsify the findings. Secondary sources, e.g., the journal articles on gender issues and gender politics in Turkey, provided me with further data. In the following, first, the trajectory of Turkish democracy will be delineated. Thereafter, organized women's strategies will be examined in the context of democratization and democratic reversal.

3. Women's Organizing, Democratization, and Democratic Reversal in Turkey

In democratization studies, Turkey constitutes an unusual case. Although the transition to multi-party politics

had been accomplished seven decades ago, Turkey failed to consolidate its democracy based on a pluralistic and inclusive political order (Öniş, 2013). During these seven decades, Turkish democracy was punctuated by numerous breakdowns and restorations, which were caused by the military's direct or indirect interventions (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997). In this military-dominated political space, civil society was considered a way of resisting the strong state and of incubating pluralistic society in Turkey. As the literature on women's movements in Turkey acknowledges, organized feminist women were the first group within civil society that had the courage to challenge the military dominance and voice their demands for more freedom, democracy, and gender equality (e.g., Arat, 2008; Bora & Günal, 2007; Diner & Toktaş, 2010; Marshall, 2009).³ From the mid-1990s on, the public visibility of feminists encouraged women from other oppositional movements to mobilize around women's issues, especially from the Islamist and Kurdish movements. Feminist organizing was important in the development of diverse women's movements within the illiberal political space, but tensions existed among different organized women's groups around issues of ethnicity, religion, class, and the meaning of feminism (Arat, 2008; Diner & Toktaş, 2010). Despite the ideological fragmentation, women's organizations proliferated and created a range of mobilizing structures to challenge patriarchal structures in society and politics. With the rise of the Islamist AKP to power in 2002, Turkey entered another phase in its political development. In its first term (2002–2007), the AKP, in line with Turkey's prospect of being a European Union (EU) member, successfully initiated democratic reforms to strengthen political rights and civil liberties (Aydin & Keyman, 2004; Öniş, 2013). In this period, civil society—including organized women—was highly active in pushing for the consolidation of democracy in Turkey. After this remarkable democratic progress, the AKP decelerated the democratization process in its second term (2007–2011). The AKP leadership began to emphasize an economically strong Turkey with a rather minimalist understanding of democratic rights and institutions (Öniş, 2013, p. 114). Thanks to the 2010 constitutional referendum that led to a restructuring of the judiciary and increased civilian oversight of the military, the AKP could further consolidate its own power at the expense of the legislative and the judiciary power (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). In its third term (2011–2015), especially after the 2013 summer protests (known also as Gezi protests) directed against authoritarian rule of the AKP and the coup attempt in July 2016, the government increased political pressure on business, the opposition, and civil society and limited the leeway for independent media. The latest political developments clearly point to a democratic reversal. These developments include: mass arrests of opposition members and journal-

² I do not name the selected women's CSOs due to the limited space; see further (Aksoy, 2017).

³ It is claimed that in authoritarian regimes, where the political arena is substantially constrained, the identification of women as "apolitical" and their activities as "not being political enough" allow women to organize their activities in civil society (Waylen, 2007, p. 56).

ists, purges in public institutions, constraints on freedom of assembly and association, palpable deficiencies in the rule of law, and the disregard of the diverse segments of civil society, except for the government supported Islamist NGOs (Freedom House, 2017). With the constitutional referendum in April 2017 and the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the presidency in June 2018, which transformed the country from a parliamentary into a presidential system, Turkey evolved from electoral democracy to “competitive authoritarian regime” (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Against this political background, organized women search for strategies to deal with the increasingly authoritarian and ultra-conservative Islamist politics of the AKP.

4. Gendered Strategies in Democratization and Democratic Reversal in Turkey

During the first two terms of the AKP (2002–2007 and 2007–2011), positive changes were witnessed in women’s rights and gender equality policies (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Aksoy, 2017; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2016). The AKP introduced new laws, regulations, and mechanisms to prevent violence and discrimination against women and to strengthen women’s rights to attain gender equality: The Labor Law reform (2003); the Penal Code reform (2004); the reform of Article 14 of the Municipality Law (2005) forcing municipalities with more than 50.000 inhabitants to establish women’s shelters. With the introduction of a clause (Art. 10) in the Turkish Constitution (2004), the state became obligated to take all necessary measures to achieve gender equality. In 2007 and 2012, *Kadının Statüsü Genel Müdürlüğü* (KSGM) [The General Directorate on the Status of Women], the state body responsible for women’s affairs, launched action plans for combating violence against women.

These gender-sensitive laws and policies were introduced not only due to the EU accession processes but also thanks to the involvement and domestic pressure of women’s CSOs in policymaking processes (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2015). Women’s CSOs participated in most phases of policymaking: in agenda setting, in decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and even in policy evaluation. Clearly, during the first two terms of the AKP, women’s CSOs were successful in translating their gendered claims into concrete laws and policies strengthening women rights. However, beginning with the third term of the AKP (2011), there has been a remarkable shift in party’s approach to gender policies. The AKP began to strongly emphasize women’s designated roles as “mothers” and to promote pro-natal policies (Altunok, 2016; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2016). In such an increasing patriarchal domination of the AKP and its authoritarian grip on power, Turkey began to witness the dismantling of existing progressive gender policies and the exclusion of autonomous women’s CSOs from policymaking processes. Occasion-

ally, Erdoğan and the other AKP leaders attempt to publicly discredit feminist activists. Instead, the AKP incorporates government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), focusing on women’s issues, in policymaking processes to support its conservative public policies (Aksoy, 2015; Kandiyoti, 2015). The government sponsors these GONGOs to represent Turkey in international women’s forums. This helps the AKP to control civil society effectively. Against this background, autonomous women’s CSOs seek alternative ways to pursue their activities. How do organized women deal with the enforced conservative gender policies that push women to accept traditionally designed gender roles? What strategies do they develop to resist the AKP’s repressive politics? In the following section, I focus on the strategies of the aforementioned four groups of women’s CSOs *before and after* 2011 to highlight the shift in AKP’s gender politics that accompanied its authoritarian turn.

4.1. Feminist Women’s CSOs

Like the second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s in the West, Turkish feminists—organized in the 1980s—focused on issues such as gendered inequalities, domestic violence, sexual harassment, women’s sexuality, and women’s reproductive rights (Arat, 2008; Bora & Günel, 2007; Coşar & Onbaşı, 2008). Thanks to their institutionalization in organizations in the 1990s, feminist women were able to approach and interact with state institutions responsible for gender policies more easily. They pressured the governments for the removal of discriminatory and women-unfriendly formulations in laws (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). Moreover, using their increased cooperation with the international women’s networks such as the United Nations Women and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee, they increased their bargaining power with state institutions to improve women’s rights. However, in the 1990s, there was not much alliance and coalition-building between feminist CSOs and other organized women’s groups.

4.1.1. Engendering the Democratization before 2011

In the beginning of the 2000s, the Turkish laws relating to women rights had to be adapted to EU law. Feminist CSOs thus gained an important opportunity for advancing women’s rights. They were highly active and influential in the amendment processes of the Civil and the Penal Code (Arat, 2008; Kandiyoti, 2015; Marshall, 2009). While the new Civil Code (2002) guaranteed equality between men and women within the family unit, the Penal Code revision was a major step in criminalizing violence against women. However, policymakers and feminist CSOs ran into several controversies. In 2004, the then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a last-minute interference in the Penal Code reform process pushing for the criminalization of adultery. Femi-

nist CSOs used the following strategies to counteract this proposal: 1) mobilizing women through demonstration and a nation-wide petition, 2) reaching out for support from women's international networks and the EU institutions, and 3) attracting the Turkish media's attention. In response to the domestic and international pressures, the AKP retracted the proposal on criminalizing adultery. Reforming the Civil and Penal Code was not only a major step in strengthening women's rights, but also enhanced women's substantive representation; i.e., the expression of women's interests in policies and institutions.

In 2004, feminist CSOs lobbied key parliamentarians to have the gender equality clause enshrined in the Turkish Constitution. The article in question (Article 10) stipulates: "women and men have equal rights. The State is responsible for taking all measures to realize gender equality" (Amend 7.5.2004–5170, Clause 1). Another encounter was in 2011, when feminists pushed for the revision of the existing Law on the Protection of the Family (No 4320). The Ministry of Family and Social Policies included representatives of *Şiddete Son Platformu* [Stop Violence Platform]—consisting of 241 women's organizations—in the policymaking process. Feminist CSOs formed nationwide networks, established web-based blogs to inform the Turkish public on the new Protection Law (No 6284) and continued to lobby parliamentarians sympathetic to feminist demands. One of my interviewees, who was active in the policymaking process, stated that:

During the process of amending the Protection Law, we have been screening the draft proposal and addressing the problematic formulations such as excluding "non-married women" from the protection law. The Minister (for Family and Social Policies) Fatma Şahin and her officials were mostly responsive to our demands, but they were feeling the pressure of the conservative basis of the party (AKP).⁴

The new Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women (No 6284), which was amended on 8 March 2012, increased the sentences for violence against women and developed state-led central mechanisms to prevent violence against women and children. In addition to organizing issue-specific campaigns and lobbying activities for achieving gender equality, feminist CSOs continued their activities to raise women's awareness of their legal rights. In addition, they prepared shadow reports, which are produced by women's CSOs in the countries that signed the CEDAW agreement, to highlight discriminatory provisions in the legal framework and call for immediate actions. This is a way to create external pressure on the ruling AKP. In this period, feminist CSOs played an important role in policymaking processes pertaining to women's rights.

⁴ Personal interview, February 2012, Istanbul.

4.1.2. In the Shadow of Authoritarianism after 2011

After 2011, when the process of democratic reversal began, organized feminists pointed out the connections between the rising authoritarianism and "religio-conservative" (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017) practices of the AKP. Feminist activists and scholars alike stressed that Erdoğan's recurrent statements on women's roles as "mothers" constitute the central axis of the party's populist and authoritarian rhetoric and politics (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2016). To resist the AKP's conservative policy proposals, feminist CSOs began to form large informal women's platforms bringing together many organizations from different women's groups. *Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu* (We Will Stop Femicide Platform), for instance, can exert considerable influence on the public agenda regarding gender-based violence. This Platform helps to not only attract the public's attention, but it also pushes judges and state prosecutors to enforce laws correctly by following the court cases pertaining to violence against women. Different from the short-lived and issue-oriented national women's coalitions they built before 2011, when the AKP was responsive to the demands of women's rights advocates, feminist CSOs now prefer to build large and informal women's platforms to prevent backsliding in gender policies during the democratic reversal.

In 2013, for instance, Erdoğan commenced a public debate on abortion, although women have legally been able to have abortions since 1983. Erdoğan stressed that abortion is not an issue of women's bodily rights, but rather it is the right of the embryo to be born. Similar to women's protests in Poland, feminist CSOs immediately initiated a campaign called "Abortion is a Right" through social media. They reached an international audience and organized sit-in demonstrations in different cities to oppose the newly planned laws on birth control and abortion (Letsch, 2013). Feminist, Kurdish, and Kemalist women's groups, along with members of the Turkish Doctors Union, criticized the AKP's attempt to outlaw abortion through several press releases. The AKP thus withdrew its draft proposal due to the domestic and international reactions; however, public hospitals have been rejecting women's request for abortions with *de facto* state decrees (Yüncüler, 2014).

One of the latest attacks of the conservative AKP politicians was the law proposal that has been labelled the "rape law" (November 2016). The law proposal meant to grant amnesty to persons charged with child sexual assault, if they marry their victims, and the act was committed "without force, threat, trick or any other restriction of consent" (Cupolo, 2016). This proposal caused a public outcry and triggered nationwide protests and the Twitter campaign (*#tecevüz-rape*) of women's platforms, in which feminist CSOs were highly visible. The AKP officials rejected the criticism and claimed that this

law aimed at helping couples who fell afoul of the law “because they had underage, but consensual sex and wanted to marry” (Tremblay, 2016). The parliamentary opposition criticized the bill and rejected it in the second round of voting. Thus, the AKP government was forced to withdraw the bill.

Put together, to resist the AKP’s increasing hostility towards feminist demands, organized feminists, like their counterparts around the world (e.g. women’s marches), prefer to go onto the streets to protest and make their claims visible. Similar to feminists in Latin America (Chile, Argentina and Brazil under military authoritarian regimes), they employ a two-level-strategy. First, on the national level, they conduct their advocacy efforts through large women’s coalitions that are not short-term and issue-specific as it was in the 1990s and the 2000s. Second, on the international level, the feminist CSOs continuously inform international women’s networks on backsliding in gender policies to create external pressure on the AKP. They extensively use social media to mobilize women for defending women’s rights, like the virally spread #MeToo campaign.⁵ Feminist groups shifted their *pro-active* strategy to influence gender issues into a *defensive* one. As one feminist activist claimed in our interview:

We [feminists] used to reach the parliamentary commissions and parliamentarians easily and could influence decision-making processes in advancing women’s rights. But nowadays, Erdoğan and the AKP politicians ignore our demands, marginalize and humiliate us in their public speeches. Erdoğan repeats his religious and sexist views on women and demands from his people [ministers] legal changes accordingly. In this atmosphere, our struggle only focuses on preventing the regressive changes, rather than advancing them.⁶

4.2. Islamist Women’s CSOs

Islamist women’s activism emerged with the aim of expanding the secular public space for women with headscarves. Islamist women activists argued that the headscarf ban, which prohibited wearing headscarf in public institutions, is a violation of basic rights of women, as it hinders women’s participation in the educational, professional, and political life (Ozcetin, 2009, p. 113). To voice their demands for participation and inclusion in the public sphere, without being pushed back by Islamist men, Islamist women formed their own CSOs (Aksoy, 2015, p. 154). They contested not only the Turkish state’s understanding of secularism, which strictly controlled religion, but also the patriarchal hierarchies within the

Islamist movement (Arat, 2008; Diner & Toktaş, 2010; Ozcetin, 2009). Their main concern was fighting against the secularist state that discriminated against religious women. Due to the ideological polarization in Turkey, the Islamist women CSOs could not cooperate with other women’s groups on gender issues until the 2000s.

4.2.1. Engendering the Democratization before 2011

With the rise of the AKP to power in 2002 and the positive atmosphere of the EU accession process, Islamist women’s CSOs began to cooperate with some feminist and Kurdish women’s CSOs to improve women’s rights.⁷ The first instance of cooperation occurred when organized Islamist women participated in the reform process of the Penal Code.⁸ Islamist women’s CSOs were especially influential in lobbying AKP politicians by conveying religious women’s views, who were perceived as the party’s own clientele. In 2011, during the reform process of the Protection Law (No 6284), Islamist women’s CSOs consulted bureaucrats about violence against women. In their advocacy and lobbying efforts, they employed two strategies: 1) cooperating with state bodies responsible for gender policies, and 2) networking with feminist and Kurdish women’s groups. Within the framework of the government’s first National Action Plan (2007–2010) to combat violence against women, organized Islamist women trained public officials in gender equality. As they engaged with other women’s groups in policy-making, they became active agents in the democratization process under AKP rule.

4.2.2. In the Shadow of Authoritarianism after 2011

From the summer protests of 2013 onward, some Islamist women activists acknowledged the fact that the AKP ignores their demands, although both stem from the Islamist movement. As the AKP strove to build a conservative society acting according to its interpretation of religious tradition, it began to build and finance its own women’s CSOs, mostly run by the female relatives of the AKP leadership.⁹ These GONGOS promote pro-family and anti-egalitarian rhetoric (Altunok, 2016, p. 142), and do not facilitate a gender perspective. Against this background, the coalition with other women’s CSOs became indispensable for critical Islamist women’s groups. The most prominent example of cooperation between Islamist and secular women’s groups was during the abortion debate in 2013. When organized feminists initiated a petition campaign on keeping abortion legal, a few organized Islamist women supported them. In their public statements, these Islamist women underscored women’s bodily rights, which include, inter alia, wear-

⁵ The scholarly discussion on the social media’s influence and effectiveness on social movements is a newly developing research field.

⁶ Personal talk, October 2016, Bremen.

⁷ Admittedly, the Islamist women’s CSOs I interviewed represent only one segment of organized Islamist women. Among organized Islamist women, there are many orthodox groups that might refrain from cooperating with other women’s groups.

⁸ Personal interview, November 2010, Istanbul.

⁹ The best example is the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM). Erdoğan’s daughter is in the executive committee of the association.

ing a headscarf, and argued that the state may not interfere in women's bodily rights. Since Islamist women suffered under the secularist state's intervention into their physical appearance because of their headscarves, they did not hesitate to criticize the state's interference in women's bodily rights (Aksoy, 2015, p. 165). Besides the national networking with other women's CSOs, Islamist women's CSOs also expanded their networks on the international level, especially with women's groups from Muslim countries. In light of rising Islamophobia, they discuss the living conditions of Muslim women around the world.

Lately, organized feminists complained about the silence of Islamist women's CSOs about rising authoritarian politics of the AKP.¹⁰ Turam additionally argues that Islamist women under AKP rule have not mobilized to defend their rights (2008, p. 486). Instead of confronting the AKP and its patriarchal approach to gender politics together with other women's groups, Islamist women's CSOs began to engage in "less political subjects" such as women's participation in work force. Although these issues are quite important for achieving gender equality, organized feminists claim that they need the support of Islamist women to resist backsliding in gender equality policies. Only one of the Islamist women's CSOs I interviewed still participate in organized women's struggles to defy AKP's conservative discourse and policies. The other two CSOs are co-opted by the AKP, and they have already become instrumentalized for government policies to protect and elevate family values, traditions, and morality.

4.3. Kurdish Women's CSOs

The experiences during the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and the propinquity to the Kurdish national movement through *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan's* (PKK) [Kurdistan Workers Party] ethnic propaganda resulted in increased political awareness among Kurdish women (Gökalp, 2010, p. 562). Although "Kurdishness" was the defining element of the Kurdish women's activism, organized Kurdish women raised their concerns on gender issues such as woman's sexuality, domestic violence, incest, rape, and the understanding of shame and honor both in Turkish and Kurdish society (cf. Diner & Toktaş, 2010). They claimed that Turkish feminist activism ignored the ethnicity dimension of women's subordination and failed to realize that Kurdish women suffer a double-discrimination, both an ethnic- and a gender-based discrimination (Aksoy, 2017). To voice their ethnicity and gender-based demands, Kurdish feminists formed their own women's organizations. Gökalp argues that due to the ethno-nationalist tendencies and radical politicization among Kurdish women, organized Kurdish women failed to garner recognition as democratic actors in Turkish public opinion in the 1990s (2010, pp. 566–567).

4.3.1. Engendering the Democratization before 2011

In the early 2000s, Kurdish women's CSOs could not participate in the reform processes of the Civil and Penal Code, as they were perceived as "separatists" by the nationalist, religious, and secularist members of the Turkish parliament. However, they were engaged in studying the causes of violence against women, especially "honor killings" in the Kurdish populated regions. Kurdish women's CSOs pointed out prevailing state violence in Kurds' daily life that perpetually produced and legitimized a "culture of violence". This, in turn, made domestic abuse a common practice in Kurdish homes. Thanks to their links to local municipalities under the control of the Kurdish parties, they successfully disseminated information on women's legal rights both in the Kurdish and Turkish language. With the election of Kurdish politicians into the Turkish parliament in 2007, they became active agents in policymaking processes. They developed the following strategies: 1) lobbying parliamentarians for the classification of honor killings as an "aggravated circumstance", 2) informing international women's platforms on the laws regarding honor killings, and 3) keeping the public's attention within the Kurdish region on the issue of violence against women. Their active engagement together with other organized women's groups played a substantial role in the final revision of the Protection Law (No 6284).

4.3.2. In the Shadow of Authoritarianism after 2011

With the authoritarian turn in Turkish politics, the AKP began to closely monitor the activities of CSOs deemed to be "antagonistic" to its own political vision. The government tightened controlling measures such as budget auditing, fining, surveilling, or censoring materials of independent CSOs, especially the Kurdish CSOs. In some cases, the security forces arrested, or imprisoned, activists from Kurdish CSOs and political parties. The state control over Kurdish civil society became even stricter after the military coup attempt in July 2016. In its immediate aftermath, the AKP declared the state of emergency. The party governed the country by emergency decrees with the "force of law", until it has ended in July 2018. In November 2016, the Ministry of Interior banned 375 registered NGOs by a decree (No 677), 190 of them were Kurdish CSOs accused of having links to the PKK and its affiliates (Cetingulec, 2016). In this wave of closures, two Kurdish women's organizations I interviewed were shot down, and their assets were seized. Their activists continue to call for action via social media (Twitter, Facebook) and now work under the umbrella of other Kurdish women's CSOs. Under these authoritarian circumstances, organized Kurdish women continue to resist AKP's repression and patriarchal gender politics. Like all other women's groups, they stress the importance of building large coalitions among said groups

¹⁰ Personal communication with several feminist activists, October 2016, Bremen.

because they claim that the government can target individual actions more easily.¹¹ Forming a large coalition, for instance, helped to resist the aforementioned “rape law” proposal in 2016 and improved the capacities of organized women in pushing public institutions to enforce laws and regulations relating domestic violence. Despite the patriarchal governance of the AKP, the still operating Kurdish women’s CSO I interviewed emphasizes on its webpage the importance of the sustainable cooperation with public institutions in combating violence against women (KAMER, 2018). Although interaction with the AKP government regarding policymaking on gender equality issues seems highly unlikely, cooperation with state actors on the local level and the lower level of bureaucracy is a viable possibility.

4.4. *Kemalist Women’s CSOs*

Kemalist women—the defenders of the secularist and nationalist ideals of the Turkish state established by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk)—were the first organized women’s group in Turkey. Drawing upon the Kemalist state feminism that made women’s equality a national policy, they primarily focused on strengthening gender equality in the legal framework but did not question the underlying patriarchal mechanisms in the public and the private sphere (Arat, 2008; Turam, 2008). Thanks to the rise of feminist activism in the 1980s, the Kemalist women’s CSOs became more engaged in combating violence against women and pushing the governments for further legal reforms regarding women’s rights (Marshall, 2009). Despite their distant attitude toward organized Kurdish and Islamist women, they became a constituent part of the women’s movement. In the 1990s, organized Kemalist women were the only group that closely worked with state bodies and institutions responsible for women’s issues (Aksoy, 2017).

4.4.1. *Engendering the Democratization before 2011*

In the AKP era, Kemalist women’s CSOs, whose majority of members are legal experts on women’s issues, primarily focused on combating violence against women. To this end, they developed the following strategies: 1) launching broad-based campaigns against domestic violence with the help of the secularist media, 2) raising public awareness through educational activities in public schools, and 3) lobbying parliamentarians to improve relevant laws. They were remarkably influential in negotiating with governmental institutions responsible for gender issues. In amending the Civil and Penal Codes and other legal reforms, organized Kemalist women lobbied and put pressure on policymakers sympathetic to gender issues (Marshall, 2009). Moreover, thanks to their links in the business world, Kemalist women’s CSOs acquired financial or logistic support from wealthy businesswomen

for the empowerment of women in education and the economic sector.

For a long time, Kemalist women’s CSOs were advocates of the headscarf ban in public institutions. They saw the headscarf as a political symbol of religion that had no place in the secular public sphere in Turkey (Arat, 2008; Turam, 2008). In 2007, they were involved in mass rallies, protesting the AKP’s attempt to lift the headscarf ban and the rise of Islamist politics in society and culture (Turam, 2008, p. 482). Organized Kemalist women claimed that Islamist politics threaten the secular way of life and, thus, women’s freedoms. However, when the AKP government lifted the headscarf ban in public institutions in September 2013, there was no big reaction from Kemalist women’s CSOs.

Kemalist women’s CSOs argued that women’s human rights are enshrined in national laws, but the progress and the enforcement are insufficient. In their public statements on flaws in gender laws and policies, they reminded the AKP of Turkey’s obligation to eliminate discriminatory laws, as required by the CEDAW agreement and the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention. As mentioned above, legal experts from Kemalist women’s CSOs have assisted the state body responsible for gender issues (KSGM), in preparing the CEDAW country reports that present the legal changes aimed at reducing discrimination against women.

4.4.2. *In the Shadow of Authoritarianism after 2011*

Like all other women’s groups, Kemalist women’s CSOs point to the increasingly authoritarian and conservative approach of the AKP to gender issues. They also began to employ defensive strategies to resist backsliding in gender policies. Since the restructuring and renaming of the “Ministry of Women and Family” to “Ministry of Family and Social Policies” in December 2011, organized Kemalist women stress that the omission of the word “women” from the ministry’s name means that women are not regarded as individuals, but only as “members of family”. They have since been demanding a change in the name of the ministry. However, Erdoğan rejected this demand and stated: “We are a conservative party. For us, what is important is the family” (Belge, 2011). Organized Kemalist women have also been highly vocal on the low levels of women’s participation in politics. Together with some feminist and Kurdish women’s CSOs, they have been calling for the introduction of a minimum 30 percent gender quota system.¹² However, the AKP vehemently rejects this idea. Also, Kemalist women’s CSOs have addressed the low levels of women’s participation in work force. They demand the introduction of institutional measures such as providing public childcare and elderly care services and guaranteeing equal opportunities in hiring processes. The AKP, however, introduced a new law to extend the paid maternity leave up to six months. The new

¹¹ Personal communication, October 2016, Bremen.

¹² Personal interview, November 2010, Istanbul.

law additionally increased maternity allowance for each successive child, as a part of the AKP's pro-family policies (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 113). Instead of establishing public child-care services, the government prefers to leave child-care issue to the private sector, which leads to discrimination against women from lower classes.

To resist the AKP's conservative gender discourse and politics, Kemalist women's CSOs stress the importance of the women's platforms to include various women's groups in processes of lobbying policymakers and negotiating with state institutions. They continue to use their links within the secularist media and in women's international networks. Yet, organized Kemalist women acknowledge that the religious-conservative political discourse of the AKP leadership and hostility towards organized women's demands make the struggle for gender equality increasingly difficult.

5. Conclusions

The gender and transition literature concentrated on one variant of the democratization process, namely transition to a full democracy, but failed to acknowledge and analyze the possibility of democratic reversal and the ensuing backsliding in gender politics. While gender and politics scholars newly began to analyze anti-gender movements and investigate dismantling of gender equality regimes in the context of de-democratization in Western democracies, I suggest that we need to look at empirical cases where anti-feminist actors have always contested gender equality and where the democratic pendulum has always been swinging between democratization and democratic reversal. In this regard, Turkey is a compelling case.

After a decade of democratic progress, Turkey now experiences democratic reversal, even an authoritarian revival, under AKP rule. Against this background, the AKP employs an ultra-conservative gender discourse and introduces pro-natalist and pro-family policies to cement ideals of traditional family roles (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2016). To this end, the AKP government, like any other government in authoritarian regimes, supports and finances pro-government women's organizations—under the guise of participatory democratic governance—and sidelines autonomous women's CSOs from policymaking processes (Kandiyoti, 2015). As this article showed, despite the authoritarian drift and anti-feminist discourse of the AKP, the autonomous women's CSOs have found alternative ways to mobilize and to resist AKP's conservative gender politics. While they employed *pro-active* strategies to initiate gender policy changes in democratization process before 2011, a shift to *defensive* strategies in the shadow of authoritarianism after 2011 has clearly occurred.

Similar to oppositional women's organizing in authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe (see Waylen, 2007), diverse groups of organized women in Turkey act as part of the broader opposition and in re-

sponse to increasing repression under the AKP. Relying upon their long-years of experience in advocacy, lobbying, and monitoring, they employ three strategies to deal with the democratic reversal and backsliding in gender politics under AKP rule. First, organized women prefer to coalesce on the loosely organized large women's platforms, bringing a high number of CSOs from different groups together, to resist the AKP's gender-insensitive law proposals, as was the case in the "abortion" or "rape law" debate. The large women's platforms are more likely to capture and keep the public's attention and thereby to successfully apply pressure on policymakers to take necessary steps to stop the government introducing regressive gender policies. In contrast to pre-2011, these women's platforms are not issue-based and short-lived, rather they are utilized as a long-term strategy. These large platforms can, however, only prevail when organized women overcome the dominating ideological differentiations between themselves (Kurdish vs. Turkish; Islamist vs. Kemalist), which hampered their efficiency and influence until recently (Aksoy, 2017; Arat, 2008; Diner & Toktaş, 2010; Kandiyoti, 2016). Second, the women's CSOs reach out to international women's networks (UN Women, CEDAW Committee) not only to acquire support for their gendered demands, but also to communicate with the AKP on equal terms. Since there is little or no dialogue between the AKP government and autonomous women's CSOs, they use the international platforms as a tool for communicating with the government. Third, all women's groups heavily use social media in attracting public attention to their gendered concerns. Social media has more potential to disturb the authority and is faster than print media in spreading the word. Thanks to combining the bottom-up and external pressure, women's rights groups succeed to respond to AKP's patriarchal backlash. While feminist, Kurdish, and Kemalist women's CSOs employ these strategies to oppose the patriarchal attacks, Islamist women's CSOs, as I observed, lost their visibility in the gendered struggle against AKP's authoritarianism, which needs a further analysis.

Drawing on my findings, the article maintains that the role of women CSOs is highly important to prevent regressive gender policies and to protect women's rights in the context of democratic reversal and authoritarian regimes. Women in formal political institutions can easily be sidelined and gender equality mechanisms be challenged by anti-democratic rulers. But thanks to their flexibility, women organized in the informal arena can find much faster alternative ways to circumvent the authority. The article argues that to more successfully prevent backsliding in gender politics, women's CSOs need to pursue three strategies: 1) create strong bottom-up pressure by using street protests and social media, 2) build large, heterogeneous (intersectional) and sustainable women's platforms to press gender-based demands, and 3) interact with state actors and the formal political arena. These strategies will help organized women to develop solutions to counteract anti-feminist sentiments and pol-

itics in de-democratizing and authoritarian regimes on a global level. Sustainability and vigilance are the key terms for organized women in defying the patriarchy.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Plea for an Emic Approach Towards ‘Ugly Movements’: Lessons from the Divisions within the Italian Pro-Life Movement

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Abstract

Studies of the pro-life movement have invariably been undertaken in relation to the pro-choice movement. The stress on comparison has tended to homogenize the two sides, thus understating their internal differences. This article extends beyond an analysis bounded by a movement—countermovement dichotomy. Based on ethnographic data and on the Italian case, it considers several questions that arise from revealing the intramovement divisions at various levels. First, there are tensions relating to the relationship between orthodoxy and institutionalized politics: how far, if at all, should there be doctrinal compromises in exchange for influence over public policy? Secondly, the conflicts over modes of action. In this respect, should protests be visible in public spaces, and if so how? These two issues govern the tense relationship between the *Movimento per la Vita* and more radical groups. Thirdly, the issue that divides the *Movimento* itself; the ongoing dialogue over the attitude to be taken towards contraception, and thus sexuality. At the heart of these intramovement struggles is the definition of what a ‘real’ pro-life movement is, and how a ‘real’ pro-life movement should mobilize. This article reveals a complex and highly fragmented image of the pro-life movement that, like every social movement of a certain size, is heterogeneous in its demographic composition, objectives and strategies. To show this complexity, the article adopts an emic approach that does not limit itself to a reading of conservative movements through the eyes of progressive movements.

Keywords

abortion; anti-feminism; countermovement; emic; ethnography; intramovement conflicts; Italy; pro-life; ‘ugly movements’

Issue

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Know your enemy!
Come on!

—Rage Against the Machine

1. Introduction

This article forms part of a thematic issue which explores how and why the feminist project is under threat in Europe. There is of course no simple answer to this question as the various contributions clearly illustrate. This research will address one specific threat to the feminist project represented by organized social movements

with an anti-feminist agenda. Drawing on a specific case study of the anti-abortion movement in Italy, it is argued that more attention needs to be paid to opponents of the feminist-project, and a reappraisal of the manner in which we study them is overdue. Social movement studies have addressed anti-feminist and more broadly ‘conservative’ movements mainly as countermovements: movements opposed to social change and to the progressive movements that fight for it. It is argued here that we should go beyond this perspective and proceed to study these groups as standalone subjects, rather than only in relation to the ‘progressive’ movements and the agenda that they oppose. The idea behind this is a simple one:

we can only know what anti-feminism is if we are able to understand its worldview and read its variant strategies. Focusing only on a movement–countermovement dynamic limits a more nuanced understanding, thus restricting the capacity to respond to threats.

My fieldwork on the Italian pro-life movement raised questions over the nature of the extant literature. It was clear from the outset of the ethnography, that there was a striking level of conflict within the movement itself. On social networks, in interviews, and at events, what provoked the most heated debates were the positions of rival pro-life groups, rather than the real antagonists (the pro-choice movement). From the outset, this context guided the research to pay considerably more attention than I imagined to the internal divisions of the pro-life movement—few traces of which were present in the existing literature.

To report on these divisions, an approach was adopted that considers ‘conservative’ movements in their own right; according to the priorities that make sense in their environment. This approach avoids homogenizing a movement that is in fact divided and diverse. It also allows the understanding of how these internal divisions shape the strategies the movement employs. The literature underlines the major role played by the conflicts between movements and countermovements, especially in the case of pro-choice versus pro-life mobilizations in the US (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, 2008; Rohlinger, 2002; Staggenborg, 1991). My data on the pro-life movement in Italy also shows the major role of conflicts, but specifically highlights the intramovement differences. Forty years since the legalization of abortion, the movement is now essentially shaped more by intramovement divisions, rather than by confrontation with the pro-choice movement. By revealing the significance of intramovement conflicts, the case study will also benefit future analyses of so-called ‘ugly movements’¹, where such approaches have been seldom undertaken. Social movements scholars have tended not to study these groups because they find them ideologically unappealing, and when they have done, they observed them from the outside in, and in relation to the ‘progressive’ movements that they fight (pro-life/pro-choice, anti-gay/LGBT). In such analyses a movement can appear to be markedly unified. However, as my evidence suggests, things are considerably more complicated when looked at on the inside. The argument maintained here is that emic perspectives are best served by an ethnographic non-comparative research design that goes beyond a simple juxtaposition of movement with countermovement.

After a critical review of the literature on movement–countermovement dynamics, particularly emphasizing the pro-choice/pro-life conflict, the article will consider the literature that defends an emic and ethnographic ap-

proach toward ‘distasteful social movements’ (Esseveld & Eyerman, 1992). It will then outline the methodology employed in the case study before presenting the three main conflicts that were revealed within the Italian pro-life movement. The lessons learned from these divisions are subsequently underlined, giving a more nuanced understanding of social movements that differs significantly from the canonical ‘progressive’ movements around which social movement theories are commonly built. The article ends with a plea for an emic approach to give a more revealing explanation of ‘ugly movements’.

2. Getting Beyond an Analysis in Terms of Movement–Countermovement

In the literature on social movements the American pro-life movement has become the ideal-typical figure of a countermovement. This is because this movement reunites the two definitions that we can find in the literature.

The first definition is what Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) call mechanistic: a countermovement is one that arises and acts in response and opposition to an existing movement. According to this definition, a countermovement may be progressive or reactionary. What is important here, is to identify which movement initiates the cycle of contention (Lo, 1982; Zald & Useem, 1987). Underlying the importance of the dynamic between two movements, this definition highlights the fact that both share the same object of concern and influence each other (Fetner, 2008; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, 2008). The American pro-life movement perfectly illustrates this definition: it arose in reaction to the legalization of abortion in 1973 and, has hitherto been engaged in a movement–countermovement dynamic with the pro-choice movement.

The second definition, identified here as ideological, states that a countermovement is a movement that specifically opposes social change rather than another social movement (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Mottl, 1980; Zald, 1979). It is thus defined as necessarily reactionary. Even when the ‘conservatives’ first started to mobilize against gay marriage mobilization, they were still labeled as a countermovement, or, in order to reintroduce an historical timeline, an ‘anticipatory countermovement’ (Dorf & Tarrow, 2014). Obviously, the anti-abortion movement also fits this second definition. It has been this, the ideological definition, that has held sway in the literature.

The pro-life movement has mainly been studied in its opposition–influence relation to the pro-choice movement. The definitive book by Susan Staggenborg (1991) clearly showed how the dynamics of the movement–countermovement influenced the mobilization cycles and strategies of both camps. With regard to the

¹ Expression coined by Sidney Tarrow (1994). ‘Ugly movements’ and similar labels are indicated in quotations marks, like ‘conservatives’, because, following Polletta, who stresses ‘there is nothing intrinsically awkward about any movement, group, or tactic. Awkwardness is in the eye of the beholder’ (2006, p. 476), they seem to me more ideological than analytical.

mobilization cycle, the victories of one camp can be transformed into a mobilizing effect for the losers, as was the case for the pro-life movement following the *Roe v. Wade* judgment. As for modes of action, it is impossible to understand why pro-choice feminists started lobbying—a practice distant from their political culture—unless the successes of pro-life lobbyists in the late 1970s are considered. Relations between movement and countermovement were thus described as being similar to a ping-pong match in which each player has to react and respond to the shots of the other (Green, 1992), a war (Zald, 1979), or to ‘a sometimes loosely coupled tango of mobilization and demobilization’ (Zald & Useem, 1987, p. 247).

These research designs clearly had benefits, but not without some notable blind spots. Whilst it allowed the dynamic of the mobilization constituted by the movement–countermovement interaction to be discerned, it had the disadvantage of essentially insisting on the differences between the two rival camps; a comparison that has tended to homogenize the two parties and underestimate the significance of internal differences that structure each social movement.

The trend towards homogenization and reification is stronger for the ‘conservative’ camp than it is for the ‘progressive’ one, where internal conflicts are better known (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Bracke, 2014; Ghaziani, 2008; Hirsch & Fox Keller, 1990; McCammon, Bergner, & Arch, 2015; Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; Whittier, 1995). As Ziad Munson has noted:

There is a tendency to try to boil social movements down to a single underlying idea or belief. This is especially true of movements with which one disagrees: it is easier to dismiss an opposing viewpoint by reducing it to a sound bite or a simple (and ugly) message. Until now, the pro-life movement has been examined in this manner. (2008, p. 153)

Poulson, Caswell and Gray call for wariness in such a situation: ‘We think this “difference” between researcher and the subject of inquiry should make researchers act with particular care when they characterize the participants and nature of these movements’ (2014, p. 240). It is this problem that the article seeks to overcome.

3. Studying the ‘Unlovable Groups’² from the Inside

Studies of social movements have predominantly focused on western liberal movements rather than their ‘conservative’ opposites; consequently, ‘conservative’ movements have been largely neglected by scholars. According to Jasper:

One pattern seems to hold up over the last fifty years: former activists go to grad school and begin to write about the movements that energized them. This was

once the New Left or civil rights, it is more recently the antinuclear, animal rights, LGBTQ, and other movements. (2012, p. 3)

The deficit of scholarship covering ‘conservative’ movements is thus related to the fact that liberal-minded scholars might be less inclined to study right-wing movements (Poulson, Caswell, & Gray, 2014). This could also explain that when they do study ‘conservatives’, social movements scholars tend to do this from a distance: through newspaper data, police sources, and official documents.

This is true (with some exceptions discussed below) for the literature on the pro-life movement. In this instance the social and ideological distance that separates progressive scholars from the movement is reinforced by a methodological approach that tends to seize the movement from the outside through a discourse analysis of official documents, sometimes alongside interviews—especially with leaders or focus groups. In a best-case scenario, these approaches can only take intramovement divisions into account in terms of frames (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Trumpy, 2014). However, as Munson has shown, and is indeed confirmed by my own data, ‘ideas about action—what people actually do—turn out to be more consequential in the pro-life movement than the underlying basis for that action’ (2008, p. 155). Yet, to grasp what it is that ‘people actually do’ demands being with them and watching them doing it. An ethnographic approach facilitates the considering of internal differences and the means assigned to these by the actors. Such an approach has been used in several studies of the far right, and in particular in the ground-breaking research projects by Kathleen Blee (2002) on women in Hate Groups: ethnography allows note to be taken of the ‘surprising diversity’ of these groups and their members ‘a point often missed because of the tendency to emphasize their similarities’ (Blee, 2002, p. 4). More recently, Arlie Russel Hochschild, after realizing that she did not know any member of the Tea Party (like I did not know any pro-life activist before my fieldwork), decided to get out of her ‘political bubble’ and spend five years doing ethnographic research in Louisiana with Tea Party enthusiasts, which she claims is the only way to try to ‘see reality through their eyes’ (2016, p. 5).

Regarding the literature on abortion, Faye Ginsburg (1989) wrote a beautiful book following an ethnographic study about the abortion conflict in Fargo. However, in comparing pro-life and pro-choice, she did not question the assumption that the pro-life movement was marked by internal heterogeneity. Ziad Munson (2008), who used qualitative (but not ethnographic) methods, is, to my knowledge, the only social movement scholar who adopted a specifically internalist perspective (Goodwin, 2006) toward the American pro-life movement by giving intramovement divisions, seen through the eyes of the

² The expression “unlovable groups” is from Nigel Fielding, a scholar of the British National Front (1981, p. 7).

people, a central importance. His work will be discussed extensively throughout the article.

In the Italian case, the only author working on the pro-life-movement is an anthropologist using ethnographic methods, who was interested in women's subjectivity in the abortion conflict (Mattalucci, 2012). This anthropological perspective has the clear advantage of taking the actors point of view into account but does not concern itself with issues related to theories of social movements. The remaining literature mostly deals with the centrality of the Church's role in morality politics and its influence in legal governance. With a few exceptions that have studied ecclesial movements (Faggioli, 2008; Marzano, 2012), the role of catholic inspired movements is seldom considered—the pro-life movement is thus severely understudied and merits detailed consideration.

Following the theoretical lead of Munson on the importance of internal divisions, and the methodological lead of ethnographic studies toward 'distasteful movements', an emic approach is defended here. It is argued that such an approach is best served by ethnographic study methods and a non-comparative research design to analyze 'repugnant others' (Harding, 1991) for themselves and from the inside. In other words, an approach that pays 'meticulous attention...to discourses and, more broadly, to the representations of actors' in order to 'take account of the indigenous point of view' (De Sardan, 1998, p. 159) is necessary, when the indigenous point of view is so profoundly different from that of the researcher, a strong risk of caricaturing and misinterpreting the people in the study is likely to be present.

4. Data and Methodology

The evidence presented here is based upon ethnographic research on the Italian pro-life movement. During the first stage of the fieldwork (February–July 2013) I was able to verify the feasibility of the research, define the boundaries of the pro-life movement, and identify the internal conflicts between the different organizations. This first stage of full time fieldwork was about gaining access and mapping the pro-life arena. During the second stage (2014–2015 academic year, half-time fieldwork), I concentrated on the main pro-life movement, the *Movimento per la Vita* (MpV) (the only one having a nationally-based constituency and chapters) and even more on its pregnancy crisis centers (*Centri di Aiuto alla Vita*, CAV). I was able to gain access to two of these centers, where I observed how pro-life activists deal with pregnant women. I was also able to observe local, regional and national meetings of the *Movimento per la Vita*, discovering how it works from the inside. During the third stage (2015–2016 academic year), the fieldwork continued at a less intense pace. I attended national meetings and conferences, including the MpV Papal Audience, but did not take part in the everyday life of the movement. In addition to participant observation,

which provided my primary data, I also conducted thirty in-depth life-story interviews with male and female pro-life activists in different organizations and at different levels of responsibility.

I had already worked ethnographically on a movement with which I profoundly disagree (Avanza, 2008), and as a feminist scholar I expected that it would be hard for me to spend time within the movement. To be sure, there were occasions especially while carrying out participant observation within the most radical groups that were difficult. For instance, praying in front of a hospital where abortions are performed was emotionally challenging. But several elements made the field less hard than I anticipated. One of them was the internal diversity of the movement, which meant I could find some people that were easier to spend time with than others—an experience that prompted me to take the internal diversity of the movement more seriously.

People knew that the movement was being subjected to research; notetaking was visibly carried out and interviews were recorded openly and with consent. I kept my personal opinions to myself; however, since I was taking part in conferences, marches, prayers and volunteering in pregnancy crisis centers, most activists assumed that I was sympathetic (even if I never said so) which made the fieldwork easier and served to deepen my access. This moral ambiguity is somehow inherent to the study of groups with which the ethnographer has an 'awkward relationship' (Snow, 2006).

This is an inductive research. I did not anticipate that the focus would direct itself to the intramovement conflicts, because I had no idea they existed. Obviously, I had done some reading before the fieldwork, but the reality that I discovered was, for the most part, not consistent with the literature. Indeed, the lack of research on the Italian pro-life movement contributed to the fact that I had no precise hypothesis. But this was also an epistemological choice: refusing to see 'conservatives' through the eyes of 'progressive' canonical social movements also meant giving the fieldwork a chance to generate the hypothesis. Since it is a field driven research, and not a theory driven one (Lichterman, 2002), the following will reveal the major intramovement divisions as they emerged from the field to connect each of them to the literature.

5. Division No. 1: To Bear Witness or to Do Politics? About the Role Played by Religion in Activism

The first and most important division that structures the Italian pro-life movement is that between pragmatism and idealism. It raises the fundamental question of how far, if at all, one is prepared to compromise on the principle that drives their involvement (being against all abortions), with the prospect of achieving qualified public policy results (e.g., stopping some abortions)? Or, does compromising any principles amount to compromising oneself and betraying pro-life activism? This division has structured the movement ever since its inception.

In Italy, Catholics communities had endured legalization of abortion via the parliamentary route in 1978 (law number 194). However, faced with the referendum proposed by the Radical Party in a bid to repeal the most restrictive articles of the 194 law, they decided to react. They also organized a repeal referendum, but their goal was to make the law more restrictive (Calloni, 2001; Sciré, 2008). This was the origin of the first split within the movement. On one side, the budding MpV with its close ties to the Church supported a solution referred to as ‘minimal’, in which abortion would be allowed, but only where the mother’s life was in danger. On the other, those communities close to the Church’s anti-conciliar factions advocated the solution referred to as ‘maximal’: a total ban on abortion. Because the Constitutional Court upheld the ‘maximal’ solution as unconstitutional, only the MpV proposal was put to the vote in 1981. However, only 32% of voters were in favor of it. Some proponents of the ‘maximal’ solution refused to support the MpV proposal in the name of the moral impossibility of voting for anything other than complete repeal.

Conflict between pragmatists and purists was played out within the MpV once again in 2004. This time it revolved around Law Number 40, concerned with medically assisted procreation and stem cell research. Pro-life activists, in accordance with the Church position (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016; Scalon, 2005), opposed in vitro fertilization claiming it necessarily means embryos would be destroyed. Both the MpV and the Italian Church did however decide to mobilize to get a law as close to their principles as possible (Frisina, Garelli, Pace, & Scalon, 2015). Their lobbying achieved its goal. Article 2 of the law specified that one must respect all the subjects involved, including *il concepito* (the one that has been conceived), thus recognizing the embryo as a subject (Hanafin, 2007; Marchesi, 2013). The MpV also claimed other aspects of the law as positive results of its political action: the ban on producing more than three embryos; the obligation to implant all embryos produced at once; the ban on freezing embryos; and the bans on heterologous fertilization and on pre-implantation diagnosis³. But for MpV’s more conservative members this was an intolerable compromise of principles. Once the law was approved, in February 2004, this minority left the MpV to establish the *Comitato Verità e Vita*. Mario Palmaro (1968–2014), a former vice-president of the MpV, and a charismatic figure of the movement, led this conservative minority that gave birth to the *Comitato*. When interviewed (June 2013) he explained to me that a pro-life movement couldn’t be in the ‘grey zone’ or defend a ‘line of compromise’ like he thought the MpV was doing. On the contrary it needed to stick with what he called a ‘pro-life orthodoxy’. A pro-life movement, according to him, needs to be ‘in the battle order’ and be able to ‘say what we need to say heeding

no one’. The 2004 split initiated by Palmaro brought an end to the MpV’s quasi-monopoly of the pro-life cause, which has since been defied by a growing number of radical groups that accuse it of compromising principles (see Appendix).

This split between pragmatism and absolutism is not limited to this case study. It is the main, and often the only, trait of division underlined by the literature on anti-abortion movements. Building on Munson’s findings, this case study explains this division and bring new elements to the discussion.

The American movement, divided ever since the 1970s over the inclusion of the exception clause (when the mother’s life is threatened), found itself facing a similar dilemma between political effectiveness and the primacy of principles in attempting to reverse *Roe v. Wade* (Rohlinger, 2015). It was around this issue that a minority left the interfaith and pragmatic *National Right to Life Committee* (NRLC), founding the rival organization, the *American Life League* (ALL) in 1979. ALL explicitly defined itself as Catholic, leading Rohlinger and Quadagno (2009) to consider this conflict to be faith-based in origin. Without denying the significance of competition mechanisms between closely related faiths, the Italian case shows that the fault line between pragmatists and purists reaches well beyond faith-based differences. Here, we are not up against differing beliefs, because everyone at MpV is catholic and agrees that life begins at fertilization and that IVF techniques are ‘anti-life’. This was reiterated by Palmaro during our interview (June 2013): ‘the issue is not the ideas defended by the MpV’. For him the problem is related to ‘the language’, ‘the style’ and the ‘flavor’ of the movement. Consequently, there is a profound difference in definition of what a pro-life movement should be. Ought it be a matter of knowing what the horizon of aspiration is for such a movement: terrestrial or celestial? Is it all about launching into political battle to get results, albeit imperfect ones? Or, is it a matter of keeping ‘a clear conscience towards God and towards men’ as the Church catechism teaches?⁴ I argue that the response depends less on faith-based belonging (Catholic/Evangelical) and more on the role that is given to religion in activism.

The MpV defines itself as a secular movement that hopes to achieve tangible results in terms of public policy. In the MpV 2015 general assembly (Rome, 14 March), the newly elected President, Gian Luigi Gigli (a doctor and a parliamentarian) was very clear when he said that he wanted to ‘reinforce the link with the scientific, legal and political circles’ because otherwise ‘our testimony won’t translate into action’ (field notes). In contrast, the radicals are more interested in bearing witness than doing politics. Palmaro maintained that the movement needs to ‘keep a strong degree of dissonance’

³ Almost all these bans have been progressively dismantled through court orders in the following years, including those of the European Court of Human Rights (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016). In the eyes of the radicals, this dismantling of the 40 law amounts to additional proof of the futility of the compromise strategy adopted by the MpV.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a8.htm

to preserve its 'capacity to provide a testimony' (interview June 2013). Logically, the radicals address Catholics and the Church more than they do parliament and non-believers (especially since the arrival of Pope Francis, considered too moderate). Where they have a political network, this tends to come from groups of the catholic far right, like *Forza Nuova*⁵, which are excluded from exercising power.

Therefore, the case study presented here sheds new light on the place of religion in pro-life and other 'ugly movements' considered to be religious based. Many have held out religion as the key explanatory variable in understanding the pro-life movement. Kerry Jacoby (1998) for example, sees pro-life activism as more a religious movement than a social or political one, Munson however demonstrated that 'the religious picture of the movement...is complicated by division among activists over precisely what role faith should play in activism' (2008, p. 8). The data here shows, contra Jacoby, that even within a catholic-only movement, the attitude toward religion is not a variable that defines the movement from the outside, but a divisive one that is critically discussed within. This should encourage social movement scholars working on 'ugly movements' labelled as religious to take more seriously actors' reflexivity on this subject.

6. Division No. 2: How to Fight. When Intramovement Conflicts Shape Repertoire of Tactics

According to Munson (2008), the pro-life movement in the United States is structured as a set of organizations and activists with a universally held goal of ending all abortions, but one that is fragmented into four mutually exclusive movement streams: a political stream which focuses on legislation; a direct action stream which focuses on street protest; an individual outreach stream which focuses on individual women and their pregnancies; and a public outreach stream, which emphasizes education and broad societal awareness of the abortion issue. In Italy, the direction of campaign strategies is also a divisive issue—the movement's organizational structure, however, is very different.

The MpV developed in two distinct areas linked within a federal structure. One acts as a political and cultural body which acts as both political lobbyists (a political stream) and an agent for the distribution of a 'culture for life' (a public outreach stream). The other is situated in the care sector, located within more than 300 Pregnancy Crisis Centers managed by the MpV and intended to dissuade pregnant women from aborting by offering them help (individual outreach stream). In short, the MpV gathers to its bosom three of the four ways of struggling described by Munson. The only one not found at the MpV is direct action. It is therefore not surprising that it is this way of struggling that has mainly been de-

veloped by the radical groups. Using the example of the main type of direct action in the Italian case, the March for Life, I will show how intramovement conflicts shape the repertoire of tactics. The literature stresses the importance of movement-counter-movement dynamics in setting each movement's tactical agenda. In this view 'interactions with opponents...lead to adjustments and innovations in movement strategies' (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2008, p. 211). However, what emerged from my data was the evidence that the interactions producing strategic innovation (the March) were not the ones between movement-counter-movement, but the ones between different factions within the movement.

In its early stages, the MpV was considered a reactionary, misogynist movement, led by fundamentalists. Since then, the organization has gone to great lengths to earn itself a moderate image. The MpV now claims to be a 'for' movement (for life) rather than an 'against' movement (against abortion). This means that the MpV is no longer officially in favor of penalization of abortion, making it a borderline case in the international panorama and causing it to no longer be considered pro-life by the radical groups militating for abolition of Law 194. This search for a moderated image partly explains why the MpV refuses to engage in direct action, even when non-violent. The movement's composition adds social context to the mix: lawyers, doctors, teachers and housewives, all Catholic, of the upper-middle classes and full of a certain respectability that is expressed in moderated forms of self-expression and an unwillingness to expose themselves in the public space. The MpV thus privileges discretion, whether on the ground at its Pregnancy Crisis Centers or in its lobbying action, between 'properly brought up' people in the distinguished ambience of governmental or ecclesiastical palaces. Despite modes of public action being common in many countries, it is understandable why the MpV has never promoted a March for Life in Italy.

The radical groups saw the march as an unguarded opening and seized the opportunity to take ownership of this mode of action. In 2011 they organized the first march in the small town of Desenzano, promoted by two associations. The first, *Famiglia Domani* (see Appendix), was founded in 1990 by the Marquis Luigi Coda Nunziante, who was close to the neo-fascist groups of Rome as well as to the most conservative Church factions. The other was the *Movimento Europeo per la Difesa della Vita e della Dignità Umana* (MEDV). Although an empty box was presided over by a personality who was significant in this community: the author of numerous pro-life books, Francesco Agnoli, son and nephew of two of the promoters of the 1981 'maximal' referendum and fierce critic of the MpV. The 2011 march may have gone almost unnoticed, but in 2012, when it was held in Rome for the first time, the MpV started to have a problem with it. In 2013, an organizational committee for the march was es-

⁵ *Forza Nuova* (FN) is a neo-fascist movement founded in 1997. It became a party in 2000. The first point of the FN program is the abrogation of the 194 law legalizing abortion. The party scores, which is small minority, are around 0,2/0,5%.

established. It included several radical pro-life groups, but not the MpV. The march, with its ‘for life without compromise’ slogan, was organized in open opposition to the MpV moderation. Not only the radicals took the streets, but they marched together with extreme-right groups like *Forza Nuova* (when the MpV want nothing to do with extremist groups), held bloody photos of aborted fetuses (which the MpV strictly prohibit) and showed explicit catholic symbols (which the MpV never does in public events). Valerio, the organizer of the bus that took me from Brescia to Rome for the 2013 March, explained to me during the trip that ‘the people of life’ that attend the March ‘is sick of the MpV sluggishness’ and therefore ‘decided to bypass-it’ (field notes).

Following a stormy discussion at its general assembly of 16–17 March 2013, which I attended, the MpV decided to leave each local group of its federation free to take part in the march without officially supporting or opposing it. At the 2014 general assembly, which I also attended (Rome 22–23 March), the line taken was the same. The president (Carlo Casini) reported that the ‘hard line’ the organizers of the march took was ‘suicidal’ and defended the realism of the MpV ‘of course I am against the 194 law! But we have to find a strategic line’ (field notes). The disagreement sharpened after I left the field and ended in 2018, when the MpV President (Gianluigi Gigli) formally prohibited (in a letter that was leaked to the press) the local movements and CAV to take part in the March ‘to avoid any possible confusion between our organization and these extremist and badly traditionalist groups’.⁶

The MpV’s opposition to both direct action and having a visible presence in the public arena, is explained by both strategic issues (not seeming like anti-woman religious fundamentalists), and issues around the social respectability of MpV activists, who refuse to ‘make a spectacle of themselves’. What the MpV dislikes about the march is precisely what attracts the radical groups: being visible in public space, telling the ‘whole truth’ about abortion even if it is not nice to see (e.g., photos of aborted fetuses), not having to apologize for thinking that faith should come first (the conspicuousness of religious symbols). Therefore, if the radicals decided to organize the march, it is not because they are forced to follow the pro-choice movement into the arena of street protest (as it would be understood in a movement–countermovement analysis), it is because it was an open defiance of the moderate MpV, allowing them to advance their vision of what a pro-life movement should be.

Of course, other elements must be taken into consideration, not least the international circulation of repertoire of actions (Broqua, Fillieule, & Roca, 2016). But the influence of the movement on its countermovement was not a factor, for the simple reason that the feminist movement is not active in Italy nowadays about the abortion

issue. To support this claim, I was only once confronted with feminists during the fieldwork: I was in Milano with a radical group praying in front of a hospital where abortions are carried out and there was a feminist group protesting against the action. During the interviews, feminists are central in the discourse of the older activists when they talk about the beginning of the MpV and the abrogative referendum campaign (1978–1981). Giusi, for instance (80 when I met her in April 2013), told me that she received a life threat during the campaign and that they had to hide the signatures they had collected for the referendum, because they were afraid that the feminists would destroy them. During those first years of high-intensity conflict, the movement–countermovement dynamics had clearly played a role, including when it came to define the repertoire of actions. Giusi, for instance, told me that she organized a ‘silent march’ against abortion in Bergamo (her hometown) at the beginning of the 1980s: ‘I said to the others: we won’t scream. The feminists scream. We will remain silent’. But feminists never appear in the interviews with younger activists, or even with the older ones when they talk about the present day. However, rival pro-life groups often appear in the interviews as the political other from which one needs to distance his or herself when deciding how to mobilize.

The role of internal dynamics illustrated here shows how the strategic choices of other ‘ugly movements’ can be better explained and understood. If their choices are only considered as a response to the progressive agenda there is a high likelihood of misunderstanding the dynamics of these movements; ‘ugly movements’ can develop their own agendas, even more so when the conflict extends over a long period of time.

7. Division No. 3: The Pro-Life Sex War⁷. Intramovement Conflicts and Status Politics

Joseph Gusfield has shown how the Temperance movement was driven by status struggles:

Precisely because drinking and nondrinking have been ways to identify the members of a subculture, drinking and abstinence became symbols of social status, identifying social levels of the society whose styles of life separated them culturally. (1963, p. 4)

By substituting the practice of drinking with the practice of premarital sex, and even considering the context of marriage as one where sexuality is not governed by the standard of ‘natural methods’ of controlling fertility, this quotation could easily be used to define the MpV. The only exception being that this status, used to define the ‘us’ of the movement, is no longer agreed upon nowadays.

⁶ <http://www.marcotosatti.com/2018/01/05/il-movimento-per-la-vita-intima-di-non-partecipare-a-una-futura-eventuale-marcia-per-la-vita-a-roma-e-non-stiamo-scherzando>

⁷ I purposely employ the formula ‘sex war’, used first to designate intra-feminist controversies at the beginning of the 80’s about pornography, prostitution and sadomasochism (Ferguson, 1984). It is a way of saying that controversies around sexual issues also occur in ‘conservative’ movements.

The MpV's official position on contraception is ambiguous. The movement claims to be secular, yet it accurately reproduces the Church position on the question as it is found in the 1968 *Humane Vitae* encyclical, and in the post-synod document on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, in 2016. These documents, despite recognizing that marital sexuality cannot be reduced to reproduction, reaffirmed that contraception remained forbidden; only natural methods of controlling fertility were deemed to be acceptable for the exercise of 'responsible parenthood'. These methods allow births to be spaced out, but, because they cannot guarantee that there will be no pregnancy, their use implies that couples remain 'open to life'. Most couples and women I met at the MpV extol the virtues of these methods, highlighting not only their effectiveness (all their pregnancies were apparently wanted), but also their benefits for the couple. At the 2014 national meeting (7–9 November in Pescara), for instance, I had a long talk with a couple in their late 30s who uses natural methods. They acknowledge that it has been difficult: it took almost three years for them to learn correctly how to go about it (because of her irregular menstrual cycle and ovarian cysts) and they had to endure 'never ending periods of chastity'. But they still think that 'it was worth it' because now they had a 'better communication' within the marriage, 'a greater intimacy' and their sexuality was not 'mediated by latex or hormones'. After many years of marriage, their 'desire is still alive' because of the waiting periods, whereas the pill, due to the hormones, 'kills female desire'.

At an organizational level, the MpV also promotes these methods and opposes contraception. The homepage of the MpV website for its young members features a list of '5 uncomfortable questions'. The first of these is 'Contraception: a non-alternative to abortion'. It states that contraception, 'because of the cavalier attitude to sex it encourages', results in an increase in unwanted pregnancies and thus in abortions.⁸

This discourse in favor of natural methods is still dominant today within the MpV, although not unanimously. According to some activists, under the leadership of a gynecologist member of MpV's executive committee, this 'sexophobic' attitude could distance the organization from a potential audience of young people, who are thought of as being opposed to abortion, but not non-procreative and premarital sexual activity. Between the pro-life pro-sex, and the more conservative wing of the movement, which accepts only natural methods, a real sex war is now being waged. The pro-sex group calls partisans of natural methods the 'banda del muco' ('mucus band') because observation of vaginal mucus is one of the techniques used in natural methods to find out whether a woman is on a fertile day. The defenders of natural methods consider that the pro-sex group has lost sight of their struggle, which is not confined to the abortion issue, but is also about which model of so-

ciety, especially with regard to sexual behaviors, is desirable. The issue is particularly sensitive when it comes to questions around the CAV (pregnancy crisis centers): for example, should the volunteers of the pregnancy crisis centers talk about contraception or just about natural methods? At the MpV 2014 National meeting (7–9 November in Pescara) there was a workshop called 'educate to life' to address this issue. Some participants, all women, some of them teachers of natural methods, argued that the movement can't talk about contraception because it means separating sex and reproduction. Others agreed in theory, but they thought that the movement needed to be realistic. The gynecologist leader of the pro-sex faction was furious 'do you think that we can avoid teen pregnancies with the Billings methods?'. A counselor in the CAV said, 'What do I have to do when a woman I convinced to keep the baby asks me what to do in order to avoid another unwanted pregnancy?'. According to a woman who is an OBG and a volunteer in a CAV 'our priority has to be to protect the unborn' (meaning even if we have to say to a woman to take the pill). But another woman volunteer, who is a retired social worker, had an opposing view. For her, contraception will bring more abortions 'the connection has been proven'. Another woman answered, rolling her eyes, 'sometimes I think you live in Alice in Wonderland'. The tension was palpable. The chair of the workshop in his conclusion tried to find a compromise. He argued that 'we don't have to give up on our values' but also that 'we have to consider the kind of society that we are living in'. Therefore 'we need to promote natural methods' but also to acknowledge that they are 'not for everybody': 'the movement can't confine itself to natural methods if we want to stay in touch with reality'. The women who spoke up in favor of the exclusivity of natural methods were not satisfied at all with this conclusion and left the room without even saying goodbye (field notes).

The conflict is thus concerned as much with what the movement must publicly justify, but also how far the definition of legitimate sexuality can be stretched for a pro-life activist. The issue is conflictual because it affects the definition of a militant 'us'. As Joshua Gamson has shown, internal debates aimed at defining the 'legitimate us' are gendered in social movements, even more so in sexual ones. In the gay movement, 'The debate over group boundaries was...closely tied to disputes over how one properly does "masculine" as a gay man' (1997, p. 182). In the case of the MpV, the issue at stake is the model of sexual respectability. Hitherto, embodied by the use of natural methods, this model of respectability is no longer unanimously agreed upon. As Lilian Mathieu stresses:

The positions or values defended by a moral crusade never form a stable or predefined given, but are very likely to evolve over time..., as well as on account of variations in internal power dynamics. (2005, p. 4)

⁸ <http://www.prolife.it/category/5-domande-scomode>

This describes what is happening at the MpV; a ‘modernizing’ minority are trying to push the boundary of what constitutes this ‘us’.

Whilst this division is central to the MpV, any mention of the sex war appears absent in the literature. The centrality of the subject in my case study is definitely linked to dominance of Catholicism within the movement. However, revealing this division is something only made possible by the methodologies used, and the analytical strategies employed. Organizations are generally reluctant to expose their divisions to the light of day, especially when they deal with sensitive subjects, like the sex-life of the activists. Consequently, the immersion into the pro-life milieu was the only way to ensure reliable access to these debates.

Highlighting the sex war in the MpV is a way of challenging the literature on status politics and life-style movements that has commonly been used to analyze countermovements (Gusfield, 1963; Moen, 1988; Page & Celland, 1978) and in particular pro-life activism (Luker, 1984; Staggenborg, 1987). In this literature, a countermovement is the expression of a threatened group who wants to defend its lifestyle (Mottl, 1980). This literature has produced important results but runs the risk of reifying the movement by depicting its members as more homogeneous than they really are. The case study presented here strongly suggests that lifestyle controversies do not occur only between a movement and its countermovement, but also within a movement.

8. Conclusion

What is a ‘real’ pro-life movement? Is it religious or secular? Should it be exemplary (even if nothing is gained) or effective (at the price of compromising on principles)? How should it conduct the fight: in the public arena, or in the palace corridors? To whom should it address itself? To married Catholics attached to their own sexual respectability, or also to young people engaging in non-marital sexual activity and who are not necessarily Catholic? These are the questions currently stirring up the Italian pro-life movement. They are important questions, ones that will reflect upon in defining their strategies in terms of its mode of influence and mode of action. For example, do they try to implement pro-life public policies or renounce them to stay ‘pure’? Should they lobby, or partake in direct action? These considerations also define the audience that they seek to reach; ought they be Catholic or not necessarily so, abstinent or not especially so?

To get to grips with them, the dominant perspective in the literature, that of considering movement-countermovement as the key explanatory variable, does not possess all the tools necessary to explain variant strategies or modes of action. It is not a matter of contesting this approach as such—just its omnipresence. As David Meyer and Susan Staggenborg themselves stress (1996), the approach they suggest is particularly well

suited when movement and countermovement engage in a continuous interaction with/against the other. This often is the case in moments of high-intensity conflict, as was the case in Italy between the legalization of abortion in 1978 and the repeal referendum suggested by the MpV in 1981—a period that saw feminists and pro-life activists in open and direct conflict. Within this context of breaking legislative news, the movement-countermovement framing may prove relevant in shedding light on the mobilization dynamic. Today, however, the pro-life movement rarely confronts the feminist movement, which is not very active on abortion issues. In a phase of structuring the mobilization over the long term, and without legislative news, it seems to me that the emic non-comparative approach used in this article is more appropriate.

Every activist I encountered during my fieldwork profoundly believed that life begins at conception and that consequently abortion is ending a life. Despite this, activists do not agree on how to end abortion and thus on what the nature of a pro-life movement should be. There are two very good reasons why feminist and social movements scholars should care about these internal struggles. First, while the literature tends to present them as monolithic, ‘conservatives’ are no less complex and diverse than ‘progressives’. Secondly, without taking intramovement conflicts seriously there is a risk that our interpretations will be erroneous and our findings spurious. In this case, it would have been easy to reduce the movement dynamics to a religious explanation if looked at from the outside, while the approach adopted here revealed the religious nature of the movement to be internally contested. It would have also been unlikely that tactical choices were shown to be (at least in part) the product of internal competition and not designed as a response to an enemy movement. Furthermore, there would have been a salient risk of considering the movement as one that mobilizes to defend a lifestyle, when observed closely, the lifestyle itself is contested within the movement. These points will prove useful beyond this case study and will give a more nuanced set of tools to scholars of those ‘ugly movements’, which tend to be reduced to either a mere religious phenomenon, a reaction to a ‘progressive’ social movement, or as a lifestyle constituency.

Using an emic approach is also a way of saying that ‘ugly movements’ are just movements. The fact that we (progressive feminist social movement scholars) find their message unappealing is not a sound scientific reason to create a category of movement that is not analytical. The same is true for the category of ‘countermovement’ when it is used, as it is most of the times, not in a mechanical but in an ideological way. If ‘distasteful’ social movements and countermovements are just movements, we should study them for themselves, not only in relation to the ‘progressive’ movements and agenda that they oppose.

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Conflict of Interests

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Appendix

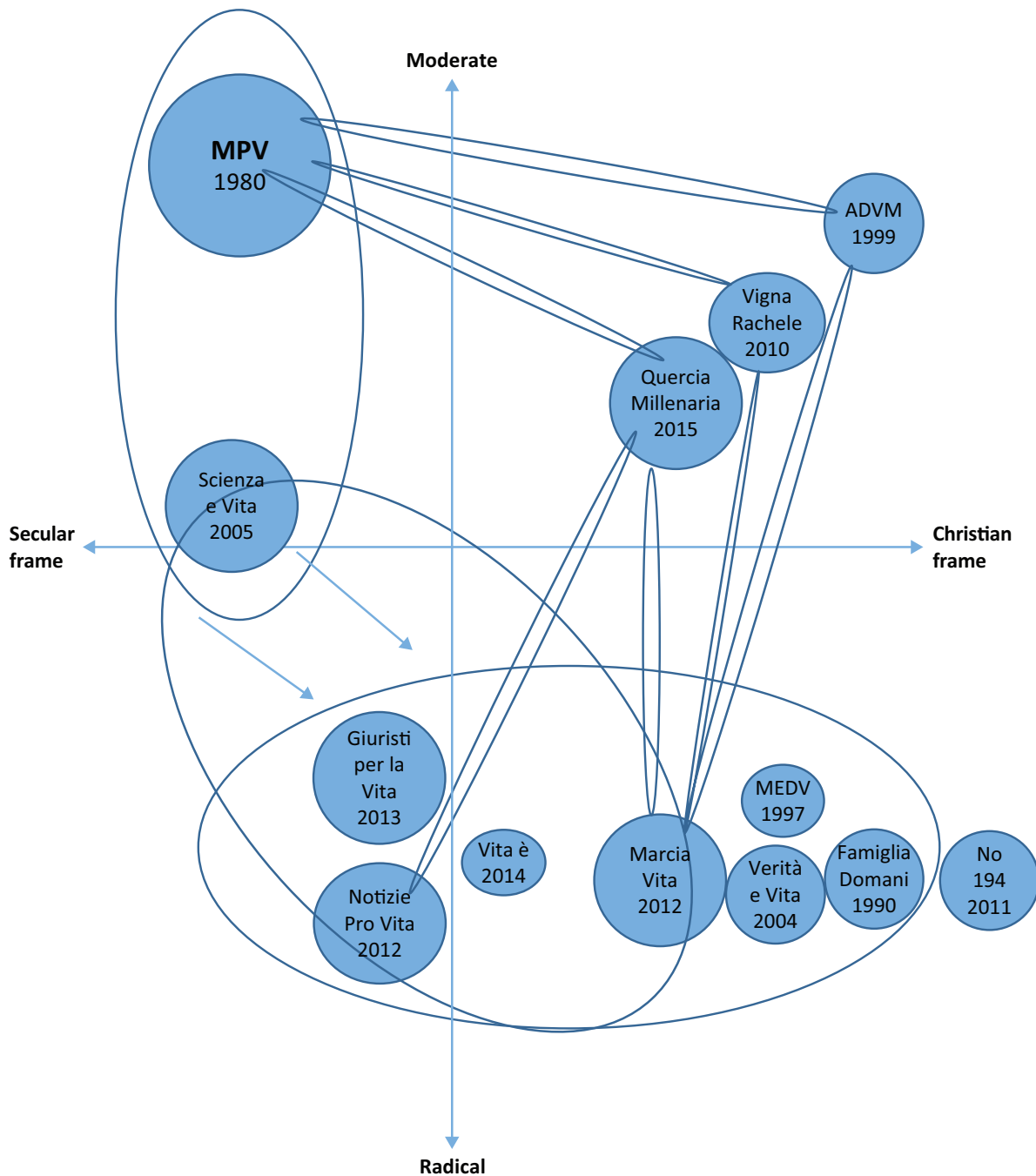


Figure 1. Mapping the pro-life arena.

The organizations (presented in chronological order and only the groups that were not detailed in the article are described here):

- *Movimento per la Vita* (MpV) [Movement for Life], 15,000 volunteers.
- *Famiglia Domani* [Family Tomorrow].
- *Movimento Europeo per la Difesa della Vita e della Dignità Umana* (MEDV) [European Movement for the Defense of Life and Human Dignity].
- *Associazione Difendere la Vita con Maria* (ADVM) [Association for the Defense of Life with Mary] is devoted to the burials of ‘abortion remains’. This is the only pro-life association under the leadership of a priest.
- *Verità e Vita* [Truth and Life].
- *Quercia Millenaria* [Millennial Oak] offers couples who do not wish to abort a ‘non-viable’ fetus the option of continuing the pregnancy to full term.

- *Scienza e Vita* [Science and Life]. Founded at the initiative of MpV, the association is essentially made up of doctors, and is intended to defend pro-life positions from a scientific, and thus secular, point of view. This group is very active; it organizes conferences and publishes a journal that is highly respected within the milieu.
- *Vigna di Rachele* [Rachel's Vine] organizes retreats for women (and sometimes couples) who have aborted or experienced a miscarriage. The goal is to 'heal' them of the 'post-abortion traumatism'.
- *No. 194*. The group name references law number 194, which in 1978 legalized abortion in Italy. The association aims to collect the 500,000 signatures necessary to initiate a referendum on a partial repeal of the law (unless the mother's life is in danger). This goal is regarded as totally unrealistic, even by the most radical groups. In addition, the association organizes prayers in front of hospitals in which abortions are carried out, a mode of action imported from the United States, and generally frowned upon in Italy. Both of its action pathways (the referendum bid and the public prayers), as well as the ostentatious behavior of its most visible members (who walk around with huge crosses bearing life-size, bloody images of 12-week fetuses) make *No. 194* the most marginalized association in the pro-life arena.
- *Marcia per la Vita* [March for Life].
- *Notizie Pro Vita* [Pro-Life News] combines a website and a printed pro-life journal. It is highly active, organizing conferences, petitions, and email bombing campaigns aimed at elected representatives. The group is very close to neo-fascist party *Forza Nuova*.
- *Giuristi per la Vita* [Lawyers for Life] models itself on equivalent American associations. The association offers the services of a task force of legal experts, who work free of charge in defense of pro-life activists who are 'persecuted'. They also draw up texts for the use of pro-life elected representatives.
- *Vita é* [Life is] is an attempt to confederate the various radical pro-life associations to rival the MpV. The association is not very active. Among its founders are the leaders of *Scienza e Vita*, *Notizie, Pro Vita*, *Giuristi per la vita* and the March for Life committee.

For reasons of legibility, only single-issue groups are included in this graphic representation of the pro-life arena. Many other organizations, particularly those linked to Catholic 'associationism' (such as the organization of Catholic doctors) or movements of the Church (such as the *Neocatechumenal Way*) are part of this arena, but abortion is not their key concern. This is also true of a small number of openly anti-abortion political actors, such as the neo-fascist party *Forza Nuova*. The pro-life organizations I consider to be single-issue groups may also work on other themes, but abortion remains their core target.

The axes:

The vertical axis structures the pro-life arena by the degree of radicalism or moderation of the various groups. Radicalism is measured at once in terms of pro-life orthodoxy (with positions going from the non-abolitionist MpV to the radical groups intolerant of every exception clause, even where the mother's survival is in question), as well as modes of action. In this way, the No 194 group, which does tolerate exception clauses, has been placed at the same level of radicalism as *Verità e Vita*, which does not, because of the way they behave in the public space.

The horizontal axis structures the pro-life arena by the degree of religiosity: more or less secularized. All pro-life groups are populated by Catholic activists, though some think that this dimension concerns the activists' private lives, others that it also defines the group's political action. In this case, prayer is an integral part of the group's mode of action. This is the case, for example, of the No 194 association or of ADVM.

Links between organizations:

The ellipses group those organizations that are close to, and collaborate with, one another. These collaborations are objectifiable through observation of speakers at the conferences organized by the various groups.

The wider the ellipses and the more they enclose the organizations, the stronger the links are. The narrower they are, the more episodic the links.

Three major poles emerge: the moderate, secular pole constituted by the MpV; the radical pole, which offers a frame that is mainly, though not exclusively, Christian; the 'charitable' action pole, comprising the associations that take care of burying 'unborn children', supporting couples whose unborn child is not viable, 'healing' women who have aborted of their 'traumatism'. These associations, which are considered proof of 'human charity' maintain relations with both of the other poles. The radical pole and the MpV do not maintain any relations, and most often engage in head-on collision. The *Scienza e Vita* association, which was born out of an MpV imitative in 2004, has since moved closer to the radical pole, but while maintaining relations with the MpV. The oblique arrows on the table indicate this slide.

Within the radical pole, individuals having responsibilities often hold multiple positions. This has the effect of multiplying the organizations, giving and impression of vitality, even though a relatively low number of individuals is concerned. The links between the groups of the radical pole are thus very close, with the notable exception of the No 194 association.

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