



RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST project: Transnational Findings



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Introduction

The RESIST project studied anti-gender mobilisations across 5 case studies: the European Parliament, UK, Poland, Switzerland and Hungary. Data was collected from parliamentary records, media outlets and by tracking key controversies predominantly in the period of 2017-2022.

RESIST started by approaching anti-gender politics as playing a key role in contemporary Europe and beyond. It is underpinned by a recognition that the category of anti-gender politics is contingent and complex, and risks suggesting a unity of understanding and purpose between actors, ideologies and desires that does not exist in practice. Consequently, the research has developed a robust empirical base to examine anti-gender politics producing data that demonstrates how gender is mobilised in political and media discourse and practices.

Overall, the research found an animated anti-gender political landscape characterised by ideological agitation and political opportunism, pronounced fixations and a fluid focus on often interchangeable targets and issues. There are clear continuities in the targeting of equality, and gender and sexual diversity, however these intersect with and are transformed by an emerging repertoire of discourses and practices. Our findings demonstrate that tracking the uses and understandings of anti-gender requires paying attention to the processes of transnational circulation, unconventional political alliance, strategies of controversy-generation and competition for media attention that create contemporary anti-gender politics.

This overview of key findings firstly outlines what emerges across case studies and media/political discourses as anti-gender politics and their focus. Developing these insights, it outlines who is mobilising and then examines how these anti-gender politics are gaining and sustaining momentum in political and media spheres.

What emerges as anti-gender politics in our study and what is their focus?

Analysing anti-gender mobilisations, their contradictions and contestations demonstrates how the idea of gender is appropriated and framed as a source of risk to children, the family, the nation and the given social order. In anti-gender politics, the idea of gender is often constructed as an external ideological threat, which is reproduced by foreign and domestic agents. Through anti-gender discourses, gender has become a powerful cipher that condenses a range of inegalitarian politics opposing abortion and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, transgender rights, Gender Studies in universities, and sex education in schools. At the same time, anti-gender politics continually seeks to advance through an

appeal to projections of the common good, such as the defence of democracy, and sovereignty, and through claims of justice denied to 'silenced majorities', and by the neglect of politically loaded forms of rights (such as 'men's rights' and 'sex-based rights').

The following findings were uncovered across all case studies:

- **The idea of gender, feminism and LGBTIQ+ is presented as a threat to the privileged position of the heteronormative nuclear family, sex-based roles and identities, and, in multiple ways, the given order of the nation.** When people diverge from heteronormativity, they are open to being attacked as practising an array of sexual/gender 'deviances.' That is, gender diversity is not granted legitimacy as a different way of thinking and being within even a minimally pluralist arrangement, or even accepted as an antagonistic but legitimate point of difference. Instead, the very idea of gender is regarded as instigating a zero-sum game of gains and losses, where there can only be one 'winner'. For anti-gender actors across contexts and arenas, 'gender' is framed as an ideology foisted onto unwilling populations, and this framing of gender diversity and non-heterosexuality as an imposition is critical to legitimating the force and hostility of anti-gender politics. In contrast, anti-gender politics seeks the defence of rights, such sex-based rights, parents' rights, the right to have a father. These rights are rhetorically asserted rather than having a basis in legislation or legal thought.
- **A pronounced dimension of the imposition of gender and non-heterosexuality onto 'society' is the supposed need to defend children against the excesses and deformations of 'gender ideology' and, under the guise of child protection, fomenting suspicion of LGBTIQ+ people .** There is an image of the child as beset from all sides by attempts to 'sexualise' or convert them through ideological indoctrination, as part of what is often projected as a coherent and powerful ideological gender project. There is the cultivation of sex and gender panic to imply an intrinsic danger to children from aspects of the sex education curricula, and LGBTIQ+ people interactions with children. This includes implying or directly conflating paedophilia and child abuse with LGBTIQ+ existence and public visibility. This is a renewed fixation and is important in: (1) the accelerated production of a moral panic specifically about transgender identities; and (2) increased attempts to delegitimise civil society activism as a threat in schools and education, public spaces and institutions, and social and political organisation. Acting in defence of children makes it legitimate to assault the visibility and viability of LGBTIQ+ lives, and political activism and civil organisation that seeks to act for sexual and gender equalities, including trans inclusions.
- **Anti-gender politics is constituted as a defence of democracy against 'gender ideology' that threatens the nation and societies.** Anti-gender politics seeks to advance through creating divisions between presumptively homogeneous

hetero/cis-normative nations and LGBTIQ+ people. Treating the LGBTIQ+ community as separate from and different to the nation and democracy is used to withdraw, mitigate and/or debate LGBTIQ+ rights. This provides a way of marginalising LGBTIQ+ people through discourses that frequently encompass conspiratorial elements and reconstitute 'democracy' as the modality through which the nation is reproduced. There is an instrumentalisation of LGBTIQ+ families as a threat to national sovereignty and democracy. Nationalist tropes work to frame LGBTIQ+ inclusive curriculum content as foreign and external to the national project. In the European Union context, LGBTIQ+ families are used by anti-gender parliamentarians to posit a threat to the right of individual member states to make rules for themselves. This is a particularly contentious issue threatening the cohesion of the European Union in a post-Brexit Europe.

- **Gender ideology is regularly held to be a foreign import smuggled into the nation. It is seen as illegitimately reproduced through domestic activism held to undermine otherwise coherent national values. Thus, the restoration of 'sovereignty' is advanced through the assertion of necessary correctives to projects of equality and liberation, which are held to have gone too far.** This defence of sovereignty is critical to securing the legitimacy of hostility to gender and sexuality-related activism. The voluntary and associative nature of civil society is delegitimated by being framed as elite and unrepresentative, pushing motivated agendas that have no popular support, and that refuse to accept the 'already achieved' status of equality, or the given tolerance of the nation. LGBTIQ+ activism is regarded as excessive in its ideological demands, and in excess of what can reasonably be expected of society and of the nation. Thus, it is framed as a threat to democracy.
- **Anti-gender mobilisations produce a hostile hypervisibility of transgender people. The nature of this hypervisibility varies in each of the contexts studied, yet throughout, transgender people have been made the focus of hostile hypervisibility and rendered the subject of a relentless 'debate' about the legitimacy of their lives and rights, while rarely, in our data, being invited to speak about their own existence.** Sometimes this hyper-focus is a consequence of fractious debates about legislative changes in different countries, but in this data it is, to a significant extent, a product of concerted political and media efforts to position transgender identities as an urgent problem requiring public scrutiny and political intervention. This has two dimensions. The first is a clearly articulated animus to transgender identities and their presumed disruption of the gendered and sexual status quo. The second is that the moral panic about transgender rights and identities is a generative prism through which wider forms of aversion to, amongst other things queer identities, intersectional feminism, bodily autonomy, and freedom of movement can be refracted. This, in turn allows for multiple issues to be linked to each other and interchangeably mobilised in political rhetoric and media

discourse.

- **There is an increased intensity and velocity in the marginalisation and mistreatment of transgender people**, which is an established form of social violence in each of the contexts studied. This sensationalist media and political focus has only taken shape over the last years. The relative newness of this mobilisation is important to underline, as it draws attention to the extent to which this has been produced by concerted and organised tactical action. This constructs trans people as problematic and trans populations as perpetrators of gendered violence, despite extensive evidence that show the inverse is far more accurate, that trans people are a primary target of gendered violence.
- **There is an extensive importance put on the ‘problem’ of transgender identities and lives which is directly related to an intensified de-legitimation of LGBTIQ+ ‘activism’**. Trans people’s decisions about their bodies are framed as not to be believed or trusted, regarded as a product of trends or indoctrination. A key mode of undermining the legitimacy of transgender identity involves asserting that it is a product of ideological influence or manipulation through forms of activism. Not only does this erase the agency of transgender people, but it also anchors the transnationally pronounced attack on activism as a source of ideological corruption. For example, education on gender identity is accused of advancing ‘transgender ideology’ as a dimension of ‘gender ideology’, which has the aim of ‘sexualising’ children and young people. This mutual reinforcement, in turn, is important to understanding how activism becomes framed, in many contexts, as a threat to democracy. Activism, in the anti-gender framework, is a loosely attributed accusation and includes areas such as the provision of health services, educational resources, community support, human rights protection, policy initiatives, and support services.
- **Anti-gender politics can deny women’s rights and autonomy**. They seek to ensure that heteronormativity is reproduced in contextually specific ways to ensure the social and gendered reproduction of the nation. They appropriate women’s bodily autonomy as a site of political and ideological contestation and patriarchal control. Abortion was identified as a site to challenge women’s rights in the name of Christian and national values in the Polish, Hungarian, and European Parliaments. In these debates, cis-women’s bodies are framed as having too much agency in terms of choice to terminate a pregnancy or as needing paternalistic protection.
- **There is a widespread framing and justifying of oppressive ideas and actions through an appeal to liberal ideas and practices. These are mobilised through repeated declarations and campaign mobilisation, such that they are legitimised as existent categories of rights**. In both the UK and Hungary, for example, parliament and media actors justify anti-trans measures with reference to the established tolerance of the nation that is challenged by a lack of freedom of speech. Purported rights’ infringements also include ‘parental rights’ around controlling what sex

education their children receive in schools; cisgender women's 'sex-based rights' used to justify anti-trans mobilisations; and the ascribed 'rights' of children to heterosexual parents. There is also a widespread practice of anchoring anti-gender discourse through appeals to freedom of speech as anti-gender actors consistently represent themselves and their viewpoints as being silenced by opponents who cannot legitimately refute their opinions.

Who are those promoting and perpetuating anti-gender politics?

The research in this mapping project tracked key actors while avoiding being reductively actor-led in examining the reproduction of discourse and practices of anti-gender politics. RESIST's approach has emphasised the way that the media create and shape anti-gender politics is critical. Across all five case studies the focus on politicians, media and actor mapping reveals broader patterns as to who is propagating anti-gender politics:

- **Hostility to gender, feminism and LGBTIQ+ rights and identities is primarily associated with men in the conservative and radical/extreme right in Europe.** In every national parliament studied, cis-men are overwhelmingly responsible for the articulation of anti-gender discourse. Predominantly, but not exclusively, these men are members of radical right parties, and right-wing conservative parties that have increasingly converged 'rightward' with their counterparts. The exception to this cis-male dominance of anti-gender discourse is in the European Parliament, where a revitalised repertoire of anti-gender arguments is equally mobilised by male and female MEPs from both radical right party groups, Identity and Democracy (ID), and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).
- **When viewed from beyond parliaments to wider media discourse and anti-gender activism, the political 'centre' is also active in the creation of anti-gender politics and does not conform to a straightforward left/right divide.** For example: in Hungary coverage of transgender issues crossed the left/right divide, in contrast to an otherwise pronounced left/right antagonism on anti-gender politics; in Switzerland, centre-right mainstream news outlets condemn the violent methods of far-right anti-gender activists while nevertheless framing their anti-gender concerns as legitimate; in the UK, where most parliamentary discourse opposing transgender rights emanates from the right-wing Conservative Party, the wider opposition to these rights is actively maintained by activist networks that are often as left-wing on other issues, including other forms of gendered inequalities.
- **There is a consistent use of 'gender ideology' as a key and often naturalised term in right-wing media discourse.** In contrast, the contested and controversial nature of the idea is widely recognised in liberal and left journalism. This contemporary media ubiquity contrasts with prior dominant usage of the term as a motivated political discourse by anti-gender actors. It is present in opinion and editorial material, and a

point of reference in news stories, and this demonstrates the extent to which it has become partially normalised through circulation.

- **Media activity creates a consistent platform for anti-gender actors, where their talking points are represented and circulated in public culture. This positions the targets of these politics as subject to continuous debate and controversy contributing to hypervisibility of those targeted.** The systemic requirement for attention-grabbing and sensational content in highly competitive and fast-moving media environments gives a significant advantage to anti-gender politics. This is because it benefits from and intensifies political antagonism between the people it purports to speak for, and the 'divisive' ideologies and 'unrepresentative' groups it targets. Therefore, there is a strong connection between anti-gender 'news' for media actors in competitive news environments, and political actors seeking to stoke controversies that allow them to command public space and attention, and appeal to particular constituencies. The contested status of gender-related issues in the societies in question means that gender-related controversies have commodity value. This can be seen, in several of the media contexts, in the importance of foreign controversies and controversial figures to news coverage that in turn facilitates anti-gender focused comment and opinion.
- **The interest of key media and political players in anti-gender content has been beneficial to a range of highly mobilised campaign and activist groups. There are clear interactional dynamics between political party agendas, the media coverage of anti-gender debates and anti-gender activists.** Networks of established and new campaign groups, think tanks, political activists and social media-enabled entrepreneurs can be identified through the sources used in news stories. This alignment is presented as 'good activism' in part because of its close formal and informal relationships with governing parties and supportive media. 'Good activism' is the preserve of 'concerned' citizens, parents and spokespersons who are often presented as reluctantly political, despite frequently being well-organised groups that campaign regardless of the issues they say they are responding to.

How is anti-gender politics retaining its momentum? How are the visions of the problem, risks and threats sustained?

- **What '*gender ideology*' is or means is adaptable and it changes by context and over time. These mutations are key to advancing anti-gender politics, and interchanging issues that can be dismissed or diminished through their association with the term.** In some contexts 'gender ideology' is used with relative consistency, for example, in the UK data it is almost always associated with anti-trans discourse. In others, the use of 'gender ideology' conflates, and rapidly changes focus between, different issues. For example in Poland and Hungary, this conflation can involve shifting attacks

between reproductive rights, sexual orientation and gender identities, and LGBTIQ+ visibility and advocacy, gender and sexuality education.

- **The ‘imposition’ of ‘gender ideology’ is portrayed as emanating from outside the nation and imported through a variety of *non-representative* agencies.** These presumptive relations of imposition bring together geopolitical rationales with frequently conspiratorial constructions. In Hungarian parliamentary and media discourse, specific formulations and more general invocations can be found. In a trope also popular in the European Parliament, the Istanbul Convention is described as a “Trojan horse” for ‘gender ideology’, a specific accusation which is part of a wider charge, that ‘the West’ threatens Hungary’s status as a “bastion of conservatism”. In one Hungarian publication, for example, ‘gender ideology’ has been compared to immigration to Hungary as an expression of “globalist world power”, thus also drawing a comparison with “great replacement theory” imaginaries. Comparable rhetoric is common in Polish media and parliamentary discourse, where Brussels/the European Union act as specific reference and as a more general imaginary, interchangeable with ‘the West’. Despite the prevalence of gender identity discourse in UK media discourse, the imposition of ‘gender ideology’ from elsewhere is absent in RESIST data, other than parallels and links drawn with supposed ‘wokeness’ in the United States.
- **Anti-gender politics presents LGBTIQ+ movements as dogmatic – and at times authoritarian – and involved in imposing gender ideology on unwilling populations.** This produces an image of powerful and doctrinal movements of, for example, ‘queer ideology’ in Hungary, and ‘LGBT ideology’ in Poland. Across contexts and regardless of the secular or religious basis of anti-gender activism, it sets up the activities, inclusion and work of those it opposes as non-scientific and as ‘activist’. There are frequently vague gestures in the data towards a ‘trans lobby’ or comparable formulations, but specific organisations are also intensively targeted.
- **Anti-gender claims that silencing of anti-gender actors is key to driving the production of those they oppose as unrepresentative, ideological and excessive ‘activism’.** This claim relies on the assertion that those who oppose them cannot win the argument democratically and so must silence anti-gender actors. Being silenced, or unable to speak what is claimed as the truth is then understood as driving a compulsion to ‘speak out’ for democracy/the nation/children. In turn, this can be used to assert that anti-gender activists are ‘reluctantly political’.