



RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST project: Polish Case Study Findings



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Polish Case Study Findings

Introduction

Poland is often presented in public discourses as an example of a conservative and populist political regime that makes intensive use of gender and sexuality-related topics to instigate a range of ‘moral panics’ discourses, often for political gain (Żuk and Żuk, 2020). It is also frequently discussed in the context of the anti-gender mobilisations in Central and Eastern Europe (among others: Kováts and Pöim, 2015; Żuk and Żuk, 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2021; Norocel and Paternotte, 2023).

This report not only highlights similarities and re-confirms the existing scholarship, but goes beyond the state-of-the-art by offering a consolidated set of data that illustrates how anti-gender politics are produced and circulated, using a corpus of parliamentary, media and civil society sources. It evidences synergies between actors and strategies, and builds a complex understanding of the social, economic, and political entanglements of bodies, genders, and sexualities in Poland. There is some evidence of cooperation between global anti-gender actors and Polish ones, and the strong symbolic presence of the geopolitical referents in anti-gender narratives. The report is enmeshed in the dynamics of locality and globality, as the international thread reappears across all three segments of the Polish study, in both anti-gender and liberal counterparts.

Polish Parliament Findings

The first segment of the Polish case study focused on the Polish Sejm (Lower Chamber of the Parliament), its last two Terms of Office (VIII: 2015-2019; IX: 2019-2023), and examined the parliamentary debates which prominently featured topics of genders and sexualities.

- The parliamentary data is drawn from a relatively wide spread of actors who have engaged in various thematic debates in the Sejm. While Law and Justice, the largest party in Sejm, dominate the data, politicians from across all political groups on the centre to right spectrum have exhibited attitudes and produced narratives from which a notable range of discursive anti-gender strategies emerged. This may indicate that one available strategy is to use parliamentary time - which is assigned

proportionally according to the number of votes held by political groups - to create a profusion effect and maximise the exposure of ideas through frequent repetitions by numerous actors.

- The preponderance of anti-gender interventions in parliament that are repeated engagements beyond one-off contributions are produced by a relatively small number of actors. This indicates a complementary strategy whereby a narrower number of key actors drive anti-gender political rhetoric and emerge as spokespersons for their political parties, consistently claiming that they speak for broader groups of people that they assert identify with them.
- The distribution of actors by gender shows the predominance of (cis-)men and the majority (68%) of parliamentary actors deploying discursive anti-gender strategies were (cis-)men ([Cis-]women provided 32% with no actors self-declaring other gender/sex identities). This observation is not surprising, as the political sphere in Poland is dominated by (cis-)men, thus this ratio reflects the broader composition of the socio-political scene in Poland. The Sejm is also dominated by (cis-)men: Sejm's VIII & IX gender breakdown for MPs shows an almost identical gendered distribution to that observed in this breakdown of contributing actors (2/3 to 1/3). This not only reconfirms predictable gender patterns, but also highlights that in the debates on gender and sexuality, Polish parliamentary space is not one that is welcoming to a diversity of voices, especially those belonging to social groups whose fate is being discussed. This was observed across a range of examined debates, from women's right to safe abortion and inclusive healthcare, to young adults' rights to reliable and informed (sexual) education based on scientific knowledge (rather than religious morality), to non-heterosexual peoples' right to not be discriminated or prosecuted on the basis of their sexual orientation.
- Nevertheless, anti-gender tactics and strategies are not the exclusive preserve of the most notorious political actors. They exist on a spectrum of political views and attitudes that goes beyond the typical dichotomy of "conservative vs. liberal" or "authoritarian vs. democratic". For example, political actors representing the opposition parties (Civil Coalition, Polska 2050, and Polish People's Party) and self-identifying as liberal/centre-liberal were also identified in our dataset (albeit to a significantly lesser extent).
- The scale and frequency of contributions creates a volatile and highly charged atmosphere in the Sejm, when issues of gender and sexuality are of concern. This is exemplified by e.g. personal attacks on, or accusations between MPs – tactics that were gathered under one of the most popular thematic codes: Rhetorical Tools & Behaviours. While this is not atypical for Polish Sejm and can be observed in debates on a range of topics, it may also be interpreted as another anti-gender strategy. Such a charged atmosphere helps to (over)dominate the debate and set the tone at affective registers that compel or even force more liberal actors to defend and

correct the often malicious and misinformed anti-gender claims. Therefore, less time is potentially dedicated to presenting arguments, which go beyond firefighting the inflammatory anti-gender narratives, but strive to build a more positive and welcoming space of public debate, one that reliably informs, educates, and builds respectful democratic mechanisms of viewpoint exchange.

- There is an extensive interoperability that characterises the anti-gender approaches in Poland. Both sampling and thematic coding of the gathered parliamentary debates (and also to a notable extent, in the Media, and Controversy Mapping segments) quickly showed a high permeability of topics and keywords, whereby one selected keyword yielded debates on diverse topics, and whereby the debates on one given topic were arrived at through different keywords. For instance, 'sexualisation' brought forth debates about trans people's rights to bodily-autonomy and self-determination; feminist critiques of gendered social roles in education; LGBTIQ+ activism; sexual education; parents' movements & rights; women's rights.
- The extensive plasticity of the anti-gender strategy is a notable finding linked with the above one, whereby maintaining high flexibility of what, how, when, and in response to what is being said remains as unconstrained as possible, therefore allowing a manoeuvring field for anti-gender actors to espouse anti-gender narratives where and when needed.

Polish Media Findings

This segment of the Polish case offers a quantitatively-oriented content analysis from the four popular media outlets: *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, and supplemented with *Super Express* and *Do Rzeczy*. The first two titles are country-wide broadsheets, the third is a tabloid, and the last one a far-right magazine. Examination focused on the descriptions of uses, and the identification of popular anti-gender actors.

- *Do Rzeczy* (DR) has positioned itself as an explicitly politicised 'campaigning media' through active anti-gender discourse and content production. The prevalence of *Do Rzeczy* also in the next segment (Controversy Mapping) allows a certain level of confidence to state that *Do Rzeczy* is one of main anti-gender actors, a keen platform voicing and creating outspokenly anti-gender media narratives. Additionally, it is also an active contributor of other, non-discursive tactics, which is discussed below in the next section.
- Two main Polish 'broadsheet' newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW) and *Rzeczpospolita* (RZ), have well-established, country-wide profiles as (respectively) left-liberal oriented, and more conservative and centre-right leaning. The differences in their coverage of anti-gender topics are not, however, strongly pronounced despite different profiles. While it is very clear that *Gazeta Wyborcza* takes much more

supportive and advocacy positions in support of various queer-feminist issues and Rzeczpospolita remains more restrained in this respect, Rzeczpospolita also offers a critique of outspoken anti-gender strategies and tactics used by key civil society and political actors. Thus, in the contexts of anti-gender mobilisations and mainstream, broadsheet titles, arises a need for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the media ecosystem, one that does not polarise as easily and densely around the dialectical 'liberal vs conservative' stances.

- The longstanding presence of 'gender ideology' debates in Poland creates the 'taken for granted' effect around some of the key phrases and words, when gender and sexuality are focal. Following the examination of different uses of 'gender ideology' (and 'LGBT ideology', both of which are oftentimes used interchangeably in Polish context by anti-gender actors) it is clear that its uses suggest socially settled, presumed familiarity that results in a lack of either definition or other demarcation with quotation marks.
- There is a concentration effect among Polish anti-gender actors, both organisational and individuals. Across Media and other segments of this study, a limited number of repeatedly engaging actors were observed, cutting across activism, politics, media, and popular culture. This shows the pervasiveness of anti-gender mobilisations that penetrate across different spheres of influence with a relatively small set of actors (and tools, as the next point suggests).
- The international dimension of Polish anti-gender strategies is clearly pronounced in this media study. Frequent mentions of the foreign politicians were observed, and who are presented as figures of authority and admiration due to their outspoken position on gender, sexuality, migration, the EU, and minorities. The list consists of countries such as Russia, Hungary, France, USA, Italy, and persons such as Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump and Giorgia Meloni). On the other hand, these also serve as objects of condemnation and warning used in the liberal anti anti-gender discourses. This finding on Polish anti-gender politics, while definitely expounding its own, national(istic) flavours, thus neatly links to broader global dynamics of anti-gender mobilisations.
- The EU stands as an important reference point to both anti-gender and pro-LGBTIQ+/feminist actors alike. Frequent mentions recall the observations made in the Parliamentary Debates segment, where the thematic code 'West and/or the EU as threats' proved to be popular discursive theme among the Polish conservative and (far)right-wing politicians (and for the liberal actors as a positive symbol of change and pro-LGBTIQ+/feminist initiatives). The embeddedness of the EU (and more broadly of the idea of 'Europe' and the idea of 'the West') in the Polish imaginary, when issues of gender and sexuality emerge in media (vide: Kulpa, 2020), shows the consistent importance of real and idealised geospatial imaginary that guides Polish anti-gender mobilisations (as well as the liberal 'anti anti-gender' counter politics).

Polish Controversy Mapping Findings

The third segment of the Polish study focused on actors and tactics implicated in the events of summer 2020 around the arrest of Margot, a non-binary activist, of the Stop Bzdurom! Collective, and other queer-feminist activists. The analysis of sources in the 'Margot Controversy' segment led to the identification of a range of anti-gender actors and strategies. The analysis demonstrates persisting levels of transphobia in Poland, and tokenistic use of trans and non-binary peoples in public discourse, who are (too) easily fetishised in public discussion as symbols for debates about Polish democracy and society. The intensive media and political coverage of the 'controversy' around Margot stands as another example of fluctuating discourse and representations - from scarcity to over-abundance of interest - of trans and non-binary people in Poland (Dębińska 2020, pp. 75-83). As Dębińska (2020) shows, too often the lives of trans and non-binary peoples are instrumentalized for diverse purposes, while at the same time their lived experiences are obscured.

- There was an intensification of involvement among the state institutions (and by implication, political parties and groups), such as ministries or police forces. For instance, at a number of occasions, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, or the Office of General Prosecutor were actively engaged in spinning the anti-gender agenda into their political competences, drawing from or using the 'Margot Controversy' events as pretexts and rationale for the proposed solutions. These ranged from considerations of restricting certain freedoms (most notably of assembly) at the pretext of preventing 'social order', to infusing the national pedagogical curriculum with disinformation about gender and sexual minorities or medical state-of-arts about pregnancy termination.
- The most active and present anti-gender organisations in our dataset (Ordo Iuris, Fundacja Pro - Prawo do Życia) were the key actors in leading charges and providing evidence for the prosecution of Margot and the Stop Bzdurom! Collective. This shows that anti-gender mobilisations in Poland are actively driven by politics and politicians who seem to work 'hand in glove' with the anti-gender and heteroactivist actors of the civil society. One of the consequences of this is the polarisation and division of civil society along 'good vs. bad' lines, according to political affinity with the governing actors. Additionally, his strategy of formal and informal cooperation between the above mentioned groups of actors contributes to the development of highly discriminatory media-political ambience, and in consequence facilitates the rise of transphobic and homophobic discrimination and hate crimes (Makuchowska, 2021, pp. 32-46).
- A significant number of organisational actors in the orbit of politics, media and queer-feminist issues were mapped during the analysis of anti-gender strategies. The

pattern that emerged shows that the density is concentrated around a distinctly smaller number of organisations under each of the three groupings. Consequently, it was observed that anti-gender strategies for building actor-base resources operate similarly across different, but closely related, fields of influence (politics, media, civil society organising).

- There is evidence of resource preservation and boosting, enhanced by intra-group cooperations and exchanges. This shows the mobilised nature of anti-gender politics in Poland. Information gathered in our research about Ordo Iuris, one of the most notorious anti-gender actors on the Polish scene, well exemplifies the synergies among organisations (for example, that the same people sit on the boards of allied, but distinct organisations) that can work as a catalyst for creating a resourceful network among anti-gender actors.
- Do Rzeczy (DR) is a proactive media platform that constructs and shapes anti-gender tactics and plays a significant role in the Polish media-political-activist landscape. The outlet recycles a plethora of transphobic, homophobic, and anti-feminist discourses and activities that build the core of anti-gender tactics in Polish context. These include: various forms of discourse circulation, (thematic diversity, frequency and a range of skewed arguments); the deployment of misinformation (arising through a lack of factual checks, journalistic carelessness that allows for incorrect information to slip in and leads to misunderstanding arising among audiences); disinformation (active and purposeful deployment of the incorrect information to influence the readership); organisational involvement in 'knowledge creation' events (conferences, seminars).
- There are synergies and a saturation process happening across the political-media landscape. The scope and range of anti-gender tactics and strategies in the Controversy Mapping shows that they are similar to those identified across the Parliamentary Debates and Media segments in the Polish case. For instance, Positioning West as Threat (or its liberal reversal tactics Positioning East as Threat) corresponds to the West and the EU as Threats in Parliamentary analysis; Humour, Ridicule/Joke, and Scapegoating can also be found among the Parliamentary Rhetorical Tools & Behaviours. It is also clear that Dehumanising is a popular anti-gender tactic; it is clearly oppressive and erases a person's lived experiences, and disrespects individual self-understandings by denying bodily and identity autonomy. For instance, not recognising Margot's (and other people's) preferred gender identifications and referring to them by birth names and assigned at birth metrics, or calling LGBTIQ+ people 'an ideology', is a widely observed practice among actors who are unsupportive of LGBTIQ+ rights. These are often complemented with a tone of ridicule (also identified in the Parliamentary Debates segment) and oftentimes purposefully perplexing use of odd linguistic forms of address, exploiting a rigid system of Polish gendered grammar.

- Knowledge creation and public claims are important anti-gender tools. While in the Parliamentary data (ab)uses of knowledge in the emerging forms of ideological 'scientism' discourse were observed (use of 'scientific' arguments as supposedly irrefutable 'evidence', often calling upon 'biology', 'nature', and 'science') in the Controversy Mapping data, the focus on knowledge creation and the recognition of its importance manifests through activities such as organising conferences, and inviting and hosting (national and international) anti-gender figures of authority.

Anti-gender narratives have the strategic effect of polarising the (broadly defined) liberal side of the spectrum within and against itself. The research unveiled examples of increased support for the (broad) inclusion of trans people, while at the same time also occasional refusal or limited agreement to use preferred gender forms of address. This shows there are multiple challenges to anti-gender mobilisations that offer polyvocal perspectives among the liberal actors about the role of gender and sexuality as the markers of contemporary democratic societies.