



Funding (in)equality?

A comparative look at the funding landscape for pro- and anti-gender initiatives and campaigns in the European Union (EU)

Introduction & Background

Over the past few decades, across the European Union (EU), we have witnessed increasingly visible and coordinated anti-feminist, anti-equality mobilisation largely focusing against the rights of women and LGBTQI* people – so-called anti-gender campaigns. This mobilisation is driven by various distinct yet interrelated actors. These actors can be roughly divided into three categories: the old, the new, and the allies (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Denkovski et al. 2021) – all three can be found in Europe.

Perhaps the most crucial strategic tool at the disposal of the anti-gender movement is funding. On the whole, they are much better funded than human rights and equality advocates. At the same time, the defunding of key state services or civil society organisations has had a significant impact on the ability to conduct research and produce knowledge on topics of rights and equality and provide essential services to politically marginalised populations. These challenges have worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since early 2020, the situation of many politically marginalised groups, particularly women and LGBTQI*, has further deteriorated while many anti-gender actors have used the pandemic to reinforce their narratives and restrict the opportunities of civil society to challenge them.

This policy brief builds on research done by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, as well as by organisations such as the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF), Open Democracy, AWID, and Prospera. It also draws on a roundtable discussion organised by CFFP and Open Democracy for EU policymakers and civil society in June 2021 in follow up to the publication of our study *Power over Rights* in March 2021. It aims to provide a concise overview of the funding opportunities available to actors mobilising for and against equality in the EU (while drawing on data from other contexts), highlight the risks inherent for rights, freedoms, and democracy in the context of rising authoritarianism and shrinking civil society space, and identify the gaps at the knowledge and policy levels. It also provides recommendations to policymakers and civil society in the EU on addressing this issue better.

Funding against equality: anti-gender funding sources

For a long time, actors campaigning against the rights of women and LGBTQI* people, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) were either dismissed or analysed in isolation within their national contexts and spheres of activity. In particular, the interconnectedness and financing of these anti-gender campaigns had not been adequately researched and understood. Recently, however, research focusing on their background, connections, and financial flows has significantly increased and shed light on the actors behind these campaigns.

In 2021, EPF found that European anti-gender actors have received USD 707.2 million between 2009 and 2018, with a fourfold increase in terms of annual financing (from USD 22.2 million in 2009 to USD 96 million in 2018) (Datta 2021, 12). The report has detected three main geographic points of origin of these actors' financing: the United States (11.5% of total funding), the Russian Federation (26.6%), and the EU, where the largest proportion (66.9%) of total funding comes from (Datta 2021, 7).

The US Christian Right movement is known for its major impact on US policy and legislation dating as far back as 1940, its support of conservative and right-wing politicians, and its ties to extremist and fascist groups in the US (Sanders and Dudley 2021). While many conservative foundations fund the US Christian Right movement, there are at least seven that have a significant influence in Europe: the DeVos family foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, the Chiaroscuro Foundation, the National Christian Foundation, the Donors Trust, the Prince Foundation, and the Templeton Foundation. In total, USD 81.3 million has come into the EU from ten NGOs and think tanks in the US within the last ten years to establish a large legal infrastructure within the EU, successfully influence and lobby legislatures against the right to abortion, SRHR, LGBTQI* rights, and CSE at both the EU and the Member States level. Notably, this funding has nearly doubled in the last decade from USD 4.7 million to USD 7.6 million annually (Datta 2021, 15).

OpenDemocracy's Tracking the Backlash project published data in 2020 showcasing that US Christian Right groups have spent USD 280 million fuelling campaigns against feminist legislation on five continents. A significant amount of this funding has been channelled to Europe and directed towards interfering with EU legislation or defending Member States, for instance in two cases to defend Italy's position against gay marriage, or at least seven cases involving Poland, to defend its conservative policies including against divorce and abortion at the

European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (Provost and Archer 2020). Several prominent European anti-gender actors have been confirmed to be receiving money from the US and other sources across the Atlantic. Hazte Oír, the Spanish branch of the conservative petition platform CitizenGo has received at least EUR 40,000 from Mexican oligarchs (Ramsey and Provost 2019), while La Manif pour Tous (a French-based citizens' initiative) and its counterparts across Europe has received USD 23 million from two unknown US sources (Ramsey and Provost 2019).¹

Two conservative oligarchs, Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev contribute the largest share of funding from the Russian Federation, having donated a cumulative USD 188.2 million in the ten-year period analysed. Through multiple funding channels such as think tanks, organisations, and foundations, the money from these wealthy individuals eventually ends up in organisations and initiatives like CitizenGo or World Congress of Families (an international group convened to promote and defend the “natural family”, with consultative status at the UN ECOSOC) and several European far-right parties. The anti-gender funding coming from the Russian Federation supports Russian geopolitical interests and objectives in Europe by supporting anti-EU, anti-liberal, and anti-human rights actors and agendas. Another trend has been to engage with far-right political parties across the continent, explicitly seeking to influence elections in Western Europe, notably the EU elections of 2014 and 2019 and national elections in France and Italy (Datta 2021, 27).

However, the financing of European anti-gender actors does not only come from sources outside of the EU: the majority (66.9%) stems from sources within the EU itself. EPF has found that large parts of this money come from roughly twenty foundations, grouped into five transnational networks and foci: anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQI*, social media mobilisation, pseudo-Catholic networks, and Christian political parties (Datta 2021, 30). The largest donors among these foundations are Catholic foundations from France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Poland. The funding from within the EU has also dramatically increased over the last few years from USD 17.5 million to USD 63.8 million annually, reaching a ten-year total of USD 437.7 million between 2009 and 2018 (Datta 2021, 30).

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) that can be counted as supporters of the anti-gender movements have also doubled from 2016 to 2020. Their presence mobilises further funding opportunities for anti-gender activities (Zacharenko 2020, 7).

However large these sums may seem, EPF characterises these funding

1 These initiatives operate throughout Europe under different names with almost identical branding, creating an image of independent citizens mobilisations, blurring the traceability of power and funding structures.

amounts as only the tip of the iceberg (Datta 2021, 12). When researchers investigated the funding mechanisms, they discovered four further channels ‘beneath the iceberg’ through which anti-gender actors can acquire large sums of money. These streams are more complex and harder to grasp than the geographical origins of funds. One financing mechanism, in the past typically used by civil society organisations, is fundraising through grassroots initiatives with petition-based mobilisation. This mechanism works particularly well for initiatives that focus on the narrative of ‘saving the natural family order’, for example. Initiatives following this narrative have been able to mobilise large groups of individuals to donate small amounts of money. In addition to private individuals donating small sums, the European anti-gender movement also has access to individual billionaires and millionaires from social and economic elites, who can, and do, donate larger sums for the cause. Some of these benefactors stem from old aristocratic families in Europe with access to generational wealth and inheritance. Another particularly concerning mechanism is the funding of anti-gender activities through state support. For example, by setting up pseudo crisis pregnancy counselling centres or indoctrinating youth through school curricula, anti-gender actors gain access to official government funding, which can be abused to spread anti-equality political messages. This mechanism is further strengthened by a growing number of anti-gender and right-wing politicians being elected to office and gaining access to significant amounts of state funding through legitimate party financing channels. The final funding channel that anti-gender actors currently have access to is the usage of religious networks, predominantly catholic and other faith-based networks, through which donations and contributions can be mobilised (Datta 2021, 44-70).

It is worth noting that these funding mechanisms mirror tactics and mechanisms that civil society has been using for many years to promote and defend equality and human rights while not raising nearly as much money as the anti-gender movement – highlighting the rapidly increasing professionalisation of anti-gender actors and their fundraising approach, and the structural problems in the feminist civil society funding landscape discussed below.

Data gaps regarding anti-gender funding

Notwithstanding the EPF and Open Democracy findings, there are still significant data gaps and methodological problems with the assessment of this money flow. According to EPF, the most consistently available data relates to funding from US American foundations as US financial transparency requirements

demand a concise overview of spending and donations (Datta 2021, 30). In the EU, as there are no such transparency or disclosure requirements, the data is extremely inconsistent, even compared to data from the Russian Federation, and EPF was only able to gather data on 36 European anti-gender actors. The data that has been collected so far is very likely an underestimation of the actual sums flowing into these movements. Following the financial flow of organisations active within the EU is only possible by gathering information from US documents. There are no comprehensive European sources available that examine anti-gender funding, and the available data is often fragmented (Datta 2021, 30). Even the data coming from the US show inconsistencies, as many organisations examined by Open Democracy are registered as church organisations, which do not have to follow the same financial transparency guidelines as public foundations (Provost & Archer 2020).

An additional concern that will become increasingly relevant in the future is the use of cryptocurrency for the financing of anti-gender campaigns. Currently, the movements of cryptocurrency are inadequately regulated and remain underexplored (Chimienti et al., 2019; Hayden and Squire, 2021).

Mobilising for equality and human rights? – availability of funding for progressive civil society

To gain a comprehensive overview of funding mechanisms and structures within the EU when it comes to issues such as SRHR, and the rights of women, LGBTQI* people, and other politically marginalised groups, it is essential to not only look at the financial flows of anti-gender actors but also the funding of feminist/progressive civil society. In line with the mentioned lack of transparency and accountability of financial flows, this field also lacks sufficient data and overview, particularly in Europe. Like the anti-gender actors, feminist civil society also receives funding from diverse sources. However, compared to anti-gender actors, they are not nearly as successful in generating large sums of money or ensuring financial stability. In 2013, AWID and Mama Cash found that, globally, the median annual budget of a feminist organisation rounds up to about USD 20.000 (Arutyunova and Clark 2013, 16). They also found that only about 50% of all women's rights organisations globally had access to any core funding or had secured financial stability for the following year. Since then, there is no evidence to suggest any improvement, with 48% of women's rights organisations operating on annual budgets of less than USD 30.000 (Dolker 2020). Feminist funds also feel

the desperate need for a stronger and more diversified funding landscape. Mama Cash, for example, received almost 5,500 funding applications between 2016 and 2018, from which it was only able to fund about 3 percent (Mama Cash 2018, 3).

Looking at the funding for LGBTQI* organisations, the situation is even worse. Many traditional funders only focus on ‘women and girls’ with fixed binary understandings of gender in their programming. A study by ILGA-Europe in 2018 surveyed 287 LGBTQI* organisations in Europe and Central Asia and found that about a third of these organisations did not have any access to external funding. Furthermore, organisations focused on subsections of LGBTQI* rights organising – such as the rights of transgender, intersex, or non-binary people – were even less likely to receive any external funding. Organisations advocating for the rights of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women operate on a median budget of under USD 12,000 globally (Saleh and Sood 2020, 44). Nearly half of the surveyed organisations reported not having any paid staff working for them. At the same time, it was also found that the projects that do receive funding often do not align with the identified priorities of the respective organisation, suggesting pressure to compromise on priority areas of action to ensure organisational survival. The activities most likely to remain not funded were mobilisation and campaign work against legislative threats and backsliding, emergency responses, and the provision of space for the connection and organisation of actors (Howe and Frazer 2018).

When it comes to funding from EU institutions, only basic research on the funding of feminist civil society has been done, with shocking results. In 2018–2019 about 60% of EU aid listed gender equality as a significant objective, with less than 10% listing it as a principal objective (Gendernet, 2021). In practice, this has often meant the financing of initiatives which vaguely reference “women and girls”, and these funds almost never reach grassroots feminist and queer organisations. EU funding is administered through several funding streams, focusing on different priorities. There is no centralised body that lists and evaluates funding recipients from the individual streams. Therefore, gaining a comprehensive overview of EU funding for feminist civil society is nearly impossible. An analysis done by Prospera in 2019 found that even though substantial funding towards gender equality is disbursed through these funding streams, the landscape remains fragmented, difficult to administer, and unequally distributed (Weisblatt and Charhon 2019, 40). Further research has shown that EU funding tends to favour organisations coming from the EU-15 (the 15 countries that were part of the EU before its expansion in 2004), even though threats to women’s and LGBTQI* rights are particularly stark in the newer member states of the EU (Mahoney and Beckstrand 2011).

The newly established European Commission Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) Programme offers a glimpse of hope for European feminist civil society organisations as it promises a budget of EUR 1.55 billion from 2021 to 2027 for civil

society organisations that work on citizen engagement, equality, and the promotion of EU rights and values (European Commission 2021). It remains to be evaluated whether and how this funding might improve the situation for feminist civil society.

Structural problems

As discussed in the previous section, the amount of institutional funding in the EU towards progressive civil society is not nearly sufficient. It lags far behind the funding available to anti-gender actors.

However, the money that does reach progressive civil society is often paired with complex bureaucratic obligations and rarely reaches grassroots movements on the ground. Asked about their experience with EU funding, many civil society organisations report they found it particularly hard to access such funding and that feminist and queer organisations were not getting nearly enough funding (Weissblatt and Charhon 2019). Instead, large parts of EU funding only reach large consortia and bigger, established (international) organisations than grassroots feminist movements (Weissblatt and Charhon 2019, 14), largely due to the co-financing requirements (FRA 2021, 42). Similarly, with many LGBTQTI* organisations being largely active on the local and national level, defending or advocating for national legislation, they find themselves often excluded from EU funding with its strong focus on international and transnational projects (ILGA Europe 2020, 14).

Many organisations view EU funding as increasingly bureaucratic, with a growing expectation of the level of administrative professionalisation of civil society, without the willingness to fund such staff positions. Fewer grants are being given out, favouring more competitive tendering and contracts. This further reduces the organisations' autonomy and their ability to quickly respond to changing contexts as the contracts increasingly include legally binding requirements to deliver contracted services. In addition, organisations and institutions tend to focus significantly more on short-term, project-based funding with meagre funding available for core/institutional support (Divjak and Forbici 2017, 30).

For smaller organisations, in particular, these dynamics create continuous financial insecurity and the pressure to always apply for funding and 'chase grants' rather than relying on stable institutional funding, which allows long-term planning, staff retention, and programmatic strategy development. Simultaneously donors overwhelmingly cover project costs but not costs associated with developing proposals, reporting, or overhead. This financial insecurity disproportionately captures capacities that could otherwise be directed towards more meaningful work and advocacy. In a 2021 survey, young social entrepreneurs and changemakers from Europe stated that only 19% of them can live off their ventures and ac-

tivities, 61% report experiencing a lack of personal financial stability, and 54% see themselves at a high risk of burnout at some point (The Possibilists 2021, 10,13).

Access to EU funding also improves an organisation's ability to influence EU policy, to participate in high-level groups and formal consultations on the EU level. As EU funding can mostly be attained by larger, more established, and often already influential organisations, this mechanism leads to further inequalities among civil society organisations and decreases the scope of influence and opportunities for smaller feminist organisations (Persson and Edholm 2018). The result of this dynamic is that major donors and their priorities determine which forms of activism and advocacy are 'acceptable', thereby limiting the capacity of civil society to enact systemic change addressing the root causes of inequality.

While the amount of EU money directed towards civil society has increased over the last few years, civil society has recognised a shift in the international donor landscape. International funders are less likely to offer European organisations the opportunity to apply for funding, as they refer to the EU as the major donor there. Similarly, in newer member states joining after 2004, EU development cooperation funding, which many civil society organisations in these states relied on due to the lack of availability of national funding, was made unavailable. Due to the mentioned constraints with EU funding within member states, smaller women's rights and feminist organisations have decreased rather than increased access to these kinds of funding. Therefore, it has become almost impossible for some organisations to secure funding. They are too small for EU funding and, as EU-based organisations, not eligible for international development funding (European Women's Lobby 2019, 8).

Even though large companies, institutions, and celebrities frequently emphasise their ideological support of feminism, LGBTQI*, and anti-racist causes, the actual financial support they direct towards these movements is deficient at best. While wealthy individuals significantly fund anti-gender actors, societal elites, and old aristocratic families supporting their cause with large amounts of money, feminist civil society, on the whole, does not have such beneficiaries. Despite a record amount of USD 3.7 billion donated in 2018 by foundations for human rights projects in 2018, this amount is only between 2 and 7% of global foundation funding – with "equality rights and freedom from discrimination" representing less than one percent of this funding (Ingulfsen et al. 2021, 4-5). Most of these foundation grants focus on only one politically marginalised group, indicating a lack of understanding of the need to support intersectional activism and movements (Ingulfsen et al. 2021, 16) Unlike the highly professionalised fundraising approach of the anti-gender campaigns, in line with the dynamics described above, progressive and grassroots civil society rarely has the institutional capacities and resources to invest in private fundraising and campaigning. One of the most visible manifesta-

tions of this hypocrisy is Pride month when many companies change their logos to include a rainbow or initiate campaigns showcasing their queer employees. However, many of these seemingly progressive companies – like Walmart, Amazon, or AT&T – simultaneously support and donate to anti-LGBTQI* politicians (Chalabi 2021).

Simultaneous with the growing presence and influence of anti-gender actors, the space for civil society has been increasingly shrinking. In 2020, only 3% of the global population lived in free societies, with meaningful rights to peacefully assemble and fight injustice – in the EU this applies to about 173 million people, a little over a third of the population (Schächtele et al. 2021, 6). Through multilateral or national laws and regulations, states impede the ability of civil society to receive funding, assemble in public, and take influence on the multilateral and local levels (Kube et al. 2021). The specific dynamic varies by context, but “common elements of restrictive laws include increased powers for governments to decide which NGOs can register, increased scrutiny of NGO and university activities and sources of funding; and in some cases, a requirement for government approval for those seeking cross-border funding” (Ariadne 2016, 4). Over one hundred laws aimed at restricting the funding and operations of civil society have been passed globally in the last decade (Roggeband & Krizsan 2020, 9). Repressive laws often carry over across borders, shrinking the space for civil society on a regional level (Ariadne 2016, 5). The European Parliament warned about the degradation of civil space across the EU, noting that either deliberately repressive laws and regulations or practices instilling a chilling effect leading to self-censorship of civil society are being implemented in some Member States (Donáth 2021, 6). This is particularly harmful to the rights of women and LGBTQI* people, who depend on an active civil society for their defence and advancement. The issue is exacerbated in states whose national power structures specifically oppose the rights of women and LGBTQI* people and actively fund government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) to advance their agendas. One example is Poland, where numerous municipalities that declared themselves LGBTQI*-free zones have committed themselves not to fund any civil society activities promoting equal rights. In response to the EU cutting funding to these municipalities due to this decision, the Polish government committed to stepping in and filling the gap (Hector et al. 2020). The result is that anti-gender activities can be fully funded from the national budget, in addition to the other funding sources discussed above. In contrast, equal rights initiatives in such contexts can neither receive domestic nor EU funding for their work.

One mechanism that has been heavily criticised by civil society in recent years is the implementation of counterterrorism laws and regulations. In 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, international restrictions against terrorist groups started to

grow, and the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1373. This resolution gave states the freedom and ability to introduce laws that would criminalise, disrupt, and prevent support for terrorist groups. However, in the absence of an agreed definition of ‘terrorist groups’ and ‘terrorism’, it was left up to the individual states to categorise according to their national security paradigms and interests. Very broad definitions of terrorism ensued, including non-violent protests against animal cruelty or other forms of civil disobedience and the criminalisation of human rights defenders in, for example, Kenya, Pakistan and Brazil (Hayes 2017, 10–11). Another relevant UN body in this matter is the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), entrusted with securing the integrity of the global financial system and preventing money laundering. According to FATF’s Recommendation 8, civil society organisations are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by terrorist organisations, trying to hide behind them. Many NGOs have repeatedly contested this claim as while there were several high-profile cases, this claim was not seen as a concerning and realistic threat. The adoption of Recommendation 8 has expanded the scope of the FATF beyond counterterrorism measures to include civil society transparency (Hayes 2017, 18).

In an open letter to the Permanent Missions of UN Member States to the United Nations written by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in May 2021, member states were asked to address the consequences such counterterrorism initiatives had on human rights defenders and civil society organisations. The EU Directive on the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online was listed as a particularly troubling example, as it allowed national authorities to force media companies to remove online content, which they vaguely defined as ‘terrorist’, very quickly and without judicial process (International Federation for Human Rights 2021).

These frameworks, especially the loose definition of terms, also have tremendous effects on the financing of civil society organisations. The frameworks can – by some states – be used as a vehicle for national legislation to regulate non-profits and civil society. It reduces the capacities of civil society to move money around the world easily, which becomes particularly important in regions of conflict and war, where civil society provides humanitarian assistance and key services, or in countries where national funding is hard to secure and international donors are the only potential source of funding for crucial civil society activity. Policies that demanded more transparency from civil society, such as Recommendation 8, have also impacted philanthropic institutions, foundations, and other donors, which have become less open to donating to smaller NGOs. In fear of their funding being misused, they invest in bigger organisations or even only in UN entities (Hayes 2017, 38–39). Even though civil society has been alerting the international community to this risk for years (International Federation of Human Rights 2021), the introduc-

tion of stricter counterterrorism mechanisms has ultimately further reduced the public space and opportunities for civil society organisations.

What is at stake?

As progressive civil society continuously struggles to establish sustainable financing mechanisms and is forced out of public spaces, anti-gender movements are establishing an increasingly professionalised and well-funded advocacy presence within the EU. The consequences of this shift are not only catastrophic for progressive civil society actors, but they also have detrimental effects on democracy as a whole.

Current Members of the European Parliament have stated in background talks (June 2021) that the growing presence of anti-gender actors in EU institutions is tangible in their daily work and influences their policies. An example of this growing influence are the events preceding the so-called ‘Matic report’ in July 2021. The report, officially titled Report on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women’s health, was passed in the European Parliament with 378 votes in favour and 255 against. It is the first report in the European Parliament to address the growing backlash against SRHR legislation in EU member states and highlights SRHR as an essential part of human rights. In the weeks leading up to the vote, European anti-gender actors launched massive campaigns against the report and its supporters. Organisations like Ordo Iuris or the European Centre for Law and Justice (the European branch of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ)) launched petitions against the report. They made press statements while progressive MEPs received thousands of emails on the topic. The report’s author, Predrag Fred Matic, stated: “the external pressure is immense, and we are facing hate emails, online petitions against me ... they are comparing me to Hitler, obstructing the report and they have a strong disinformation campaign” (De la Baume 2021).

Seven years before the Matic report, the so-called ‘Estrela report’ (after the Portuguese MEP Edite Estrela) was debated in the European Parliament. It had a similar direction as the ‘Matic report’, arguing predominantly for the importance of SRHR services in the EU, attracting similar opposition from anti-gender actors. Organisations like European Dignity Watch, World Youth Alliance, and FAFCE mobilised significant support for their opposition through platforms like CitizenGo, among others. A total of 80.000–100.000 emails were written to MEP Estrela and other MEPs in favour of the report. The report was sent back to the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, the language was watered down, and, in the end, the entire report was rejected. The vote was mainly lost due to abstaining

MEPs, who, fearing a backlash, did not want to take a side in the very heated discussion (Zacharenko 2020, 58.)

The professionalised presence of anti-gender actors in the EU is not only limited to EU institutions. Their presence is also growing in EU Member States. Poland is an example of an EU member state where anti-gender actors have successfully lobbied their cause and influenced legislation. Between 2011 and 2016, anti-SRHR politicians have brought forward several legislative proposals to ban abortion in the country, which were met with large protests and eventually withdrawn. In 2020, however, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruling supported a decision to ban abortions even in cases of severe or fatal foetal impairment, essentially equalling a near-total abortion ban (Hoctor et al. 2020, 55). In September 2021, a 30-year-old woman died in hospital due to sepsis at 22 weeks of pregnancy. The doctors handling her case were reluctant to end her fatal pregnancy, which would have saved her life, due to fear of breaking Poland's strict abortion law. The Polish Ministry of Health has since clarified that life-saving procedures do not fall under this legislation, but doctors' uncertainty remains (BBC 2021). In the case of the Polish ban on abortion, the direct involvement of anti-gender actors was seen through the European Centre for Law and Justice, affiliated to the ACLJ and heavily financed by dark money from the US Christian Right. Open Democracy's research has shown that the centre had intervened in at least seven court cases involving Poland to defend Poland's conservative policies on divorce and abortion (Provost & Archer 2020).

The resources and degree of professionalisation present in the anti-gender movement combined with the lack of resources and capacities among progressive rights advocates carry the significant danger of shifting policymakers' priorities. As progressive civil society struggles to finance itself and is denied access to space for meaningful consultation and advocacy, its positions run the risk of not being heard or listened to. With the increasing presence of anti-gender actors and decreasing visibility of progressive civil society, law and policymakers are likely to misjudge and underestimate the vital importance of intersectional approaches to policy development. The hesitation of donors to fund networks, hubs, and platforms for peer learning, exchange, and coordination in particular also lead to the further fragmentation of feminist civil society and a decreased ability to amplify the voices of already politically marginalised populations (women, LGBTQI* people, racialised groups, ethnic and religious minorities, among others).

We have previously argued that anti-gender actors are not mobilising against gender or the rights of women and LGBTQI* as such, but that they use these issues to reinforce or increase their power and to maintain or promote social and political hierarchies that benefit them in the face of their (perceived) decline (Denkovski et al. 2021). Such campaigns promote an exclusionary understanding of the world

where certain groups' rights take precedence over others. When analysing the interlinkages between anti-gender ideologies and politically extreme positions (left and right alike), it is crucial to consider how anti-feminism and anti-gender provide space for centring exclusionary ideologies. Schutzbach (2019) has identified how anti-gender language and the rejection of feminism and gender, which does not, on the surface, appear to be extreme positions, make more 'traditionally' exclusionary stances socially acceptable. This means that democratic premises such as equality and the universality of human rights can be quietly delegitimised without the need to use socially less palatable language such as 'Foreigners Go Home'. Beyond threatening the rights of women and LGBTQI* people, anti-gender campaigns threaten fundamental freedoms in a democratic society and, ultimately, democracy itself.

As demonstrated in CFFP's study *Power over Rights*, anti-gender campaigns do a significantly better job at aligning different actors behind a shared goal or cause. Therefore, they are more successful in acting as a united group. More networking and unity among feminist civil society actors is needed to counter their activities, which is impeded by current funding structures that encourage siloed thinking and short-term activity.

Recommendations

This policy brief has demonstrated the growing professionalisation and financing of anti-gender actors paired with the lack of sustainable, long-term funding available to equality advocates and grassroots movements pose a significant threat to human rights, democracy, and the stated values of the EU. We, therefore, propose the following policy recommendations for EU policymakers to counter the outlined developments:

- 1. Invest in internal capacity and knowledge development to adequately recognise and understand the strategies and narratives of anti-gender actors.**
 - a.* Capacitate EU staff across sectors to become aware of the anti-gender movement, how it operates, and the threat it poses to democracy, human rights, and the Union values.
 - b.* Establish cross-institutional research and data collection guidelines on anti-gender actors and their campaigns and collect more data to inform policy.
 - c.* Establish regular internal checks at the EU level screening for institutional funding to anti-gender actors.
 - d.* Specifically, invest in internal training for staff responsible for assessing European Commission funding applications to

spot anti-gender initiatives couched in human rights or feminist language.

e. Engage civil society working on tackling anti-gender campaigns in meaningful consultations to understand local and regional needs and dynamics.

f. Develop publicly accessible evaluations of the impact of funding initiatives targeted at advancing European values.

2. To effectively respond to the anti-gender movement, the funding for feminist civil society by EU institutions and EU member states needs to be increased. Proactively prioritise funding for feminist, LGBTQI*, and anti-racist civil society initiatives.

a. Set benchmarks to ensure that the proportion of EU funding going to projects with gender equality as a principal and significant objective according to the OECD DAC gender marker is increased to at least 20% and 90%, respectively.

b. Mechanisms must be established to facilitate the access of grassroots movements and small, locally active organisations advocating for equality and fundamental values to EU institutional funding.

c. An intersectional approach must be mainstreamed in funding principles and award decision guidelines, particularly in including LGBTQI* organisations and issues and anti-racist initiatives.

d. The broad alliance of anti-gender actors needs to be confronted with a broad alliance of well-funded and interconnected civil society organisations operating across sectoral silos. Therefore, EU and member state funding and policies need to encourage civil society networking and increasingly fund hubs and platforms of exchange for those actors.

e. Multiyear institutional funding mechanisms for grassroots feminist civil society must be developed to facilitate the strategic planning of equality advocacy organisations and engagement in long-term campaigning and advocacy.

3. Strengthen the regulatory framework.

a. Develop and advocate for stronger EU transparency laws on financing for non-state actors.

b. Invest in better understanding how cryptocurrencies are being used to finance anti-equality initiatives.

c. Ensure that counterterrorism measures do not negatively affect and endanger the work of progressive/feminist civil society.

d. When developing and implementing new regulatory frameworks which have the potential of affecting civil society, ensure that this is done in consultation and collaboration with civil society organisations.

4. Be politically bold and consistent.

a. Invest in opinion polling and attitudes research to better understand why people mobilise behind exclusionary, anti-gender narratives and their disillusionment with the EU and its values.

b. The EU and its institutions should strongly position themselves in defence of a safe environment for civil society advocacy and activism within its member states.

c. Ensure that decisions taken at the EU level are consistent with the stated values of the EU.

d. Advocate for a systemic understanding of the anti-gender movement and holistic institutional responses.

It is not as bleak as it seems: a way forward for civil society

While the funding landscape for civil society advocating for human rights and equality is meagre compared to that of anti-gender actors, increasing mobilisation has been taking place across sectors over the last few years to coordinate, exchange, and develop effective responses. While anti-gender attacks have been growing across the EU, activism to counter them is also rising. Multiple initiatives have been launched at the regional, European, and global level connecting activists, advocates, and researchers working on the various facets of the human rights framework under threat by the exclusionary narratives of the anti-gender movement and other anti-egalitarian currents. Such efforts need to be supported and strengthened. By learning from each other and cooperating across sectors and borders, progressive civil society can emerge stronger, more cohesive, and more resilient. By applying intersectionality and the ethics of care to our analyses, we can develop more effective programming and messaging to defend and advance rights and equality. The institutions and donors that claim to stand for the values of equality, universal human rights, and non-discrimination need to walk the walk by acting and funding accordingly.

Sources

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