

STRONGMEN AND VIOLENCE

Interlinkages of Anti-Feminism and Anti-Democratic Developments



Impressum

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1. Introduction

In his speech on 24 February 2022, Russia's President Vladimir Putin justified his war in Ukraine by fighting the West's attempt to destroy Russia's "traditional values" (Putin, 2022), among other things. In this narrative, where the West seeks to impose values that contradict "human nature", the devaluation and disenfranchisement of women and LGBTQI* persons play a central role: they serve as a justification for authoritarian policies internally and for wars of aggression externally (Bias, 2022).

The perpetual marginalisation of women and LGBTQI* persons is an essential part of authoritarian discourses, policies, and structures not only in Russia but also in other authoritarian regimes or countries experiencing democratic backsliding. The fight against the so-called "gender ideology"¹ as an empty signifier has been employed and utilised by right-wing nationalist, populist and anti-democratic governments, illiberal political parties, conservative think tanks, and other anti-gender actors in and from Russia, Poland, Kazakhstan, Hungary, Turkey, and many more countries.

For example, as Human Rights Watch rightly analyses in Hungary, "[Prime Minister] Orbán is taking a leaf out of Vladimir Putin's playbook. The Russian President has used the spectre of LGBT[QI*] rights as a wedge to consolidate a conservative support base at home, delineate regional zones of influence and forge global alliances" (Reid, 2021). Victor Orbán's various attacks on gender equality during the last years have served similar purposes (e.g

Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). Since he became prime minister in 2010, Orbán's Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) has successively and dramatically altered education, research, cultural institutions, and the economic and political system through constitutional and legal changes (Hopkins, 2020), often framed around and justified by fighting against "gender ideology" and defending Hungarians against "the influence of the West" (Lehotai, 2023). These developments will be highlighted in more detail in chapter 2.

In Poland, now ranked last among all EU states concerning the rights of and social climate for LGBTQI* individuals (ILGA Europe 2023a; 2023b), attacks on women's and LGBTQI* persons' human and reproductive rights have been rising, too, with the right-wing and populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) having imposed different discriminatory laws since they came to power in 2015 (ILGA Europe n.d.). At the end of 2019, the anti-LGBTQI* agenda has resulted in so-called "LGBT (ideology) free zones"² in around 100 municipalities (Atlas of Hate, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2023a). In parallel, many of those municipalities signed the so-called "Charter of the Rights of the Family", issued and promoted by the ultra-conservative Ordo Iuris Institute that has long been fuelling anti-gender narratives and anti-abortion campaigns (Korolczuk, 2022).³ In 2020, access to legal abortions was nearly totally banned through an illegitimate ruling of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal (European Parliament, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Just like in

¹As noted in the CFFP Study "Power over Rights. Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement" (Denkovski et al., 2021, 16), the use of the terminologies of "anti-gender movement" and "gender ideology" in this Briefing should not be understood as an acknowledgement of the existence of a "gender ideology". As will be discussed below, the anti-gender movement uses anti-gender and anti-feminist frames to advance alternative value systems and political systems, and to strengthen and/or maintain existing power dynamics.

²However, thanks to local and international pressure, and the European Commission's infringement procedure against Poland related to equality and the protection of fundamental rights, some municipalities have withdrawn anti-LGBT resolutions (European Commission, 2021; ILGA Europe, 2023a).

³The Charter claimed that "in many regions of the world, the natural notion of the family is being undermined and the social functions of family and marriage are being disregarded" (ibid.).

Hungary and other countries experiencing democratic backsliding, “subverting gender equality in Poland is crucial to the process of undercutting the current political system’s legitimacy, which opens the door to regime change. [...] [Thereby,] the anti-gender campaign [...] figures as the necessary link between the illiberal agenda and populism and allows the ultranationalist vision of state and society to become anchored in the familiar sphere of the domestic” (Grudzinska, 2021). The 2023 parliamentary elections ended the rule of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and were met with hope among feminist activists as the new Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, announced progressive legal changes (Ashley, 2023). However, it still remains to be seen if these changes are being implemented.⁴

It is important to understand the context-specific features of anti-feminism and analyse the respective groups using them at the national, regional, and international levels. However, it would be erroneous to understand actors who are advancing anti-feminist policies and narratives, which this report also refers to as “anti-gender movements”, simply as various individual, sometimes (partly) interconnected campaigns aiming at a pushback against gender mainstreaming, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women’s and LGBTQI* rights, comprehensive sexuality education or the successes by human rights proponents to realise human rights for all (Denkovski et al., 2021). Instead, we need to highlight similarities and patterns of anti-gender actors across the globe and analyse them within the context of the general decline in freedom and democracy around the world. Anti-gender movements are a highly organised (but not centralised), transnational and well-funded effort to establish an alternative political and social order, along with alternative norms inimical to and challenging the concept of universal and indivisible human rights as well

as individual freedoms. To put it bluntly, they strategically use anti-feminist discourse and policies to consolidate power at the domestic, regional, and international levels and to undermine the rule of law and other pillars of democracy (ibid.). It is no coincidence that authoritarian regimes and countries experiencing democratic backsliding are very often anti-feminist.

With 72 percent of the global population living in autocracies (V-Dem, 2023), better understanding the role of anti-feminist policies and strategies within authoritarian regimes and countries experiencing a decline in democracy is necessary both to advance the goal of more peaceful and just societies as well as to strengthen democratic structures and values at the national, supranational/EU, and the international levels.



72%

of the global population lives in autocracies (V-Dem, 2023).

This is where this report comes in. It results from a one-year-long project and builds on various conversations with a broad range of women and LGBTQI* activists who protect and advance human rights, especially women’s and LGBTQI* rights, in authoritarian regimes and countries witnessing democratic backsliding. This publication further builds on CFFP’s extensive expertise on international anti-gender movements and their manifestations in national and multilateral spaces.

⁴While it is still too early to evaluate the new government’s progress or lack thereof in the advancement of gender equality and other feminist demands, there now is a silver lining for feminist activists in Poland.

This report aims to give an overview of the role and functions of anti-feminist strategies and policies and their connection to the rise of authoritarianism and democratic decline. It will explore two central points:

1

how authoritarian regimes and countries going through de-democratisation processes use anti-feminist narratives and policies to justify the internal oppression of marginalised groups and

2

how they advance their foreign policy strategy and/or wage and justify conflicts by utilising anti-feminist narratives.

This report will also explore examples of civil society's resistance to these developments. As a result of this three-step analysis, the report will provide key recommendations to countries committed to a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) on effective ways to engage with and support

women's rights and LGBTQI* activists and scholars from illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes to advance feminist policies and preserve and strengthen democratic values and structures.

2. Why are authoritarian regimes and countries experiencing democratic backsliding often anti-feminist?

A large body of scholarly research indicates that anti-feminist policies and narratives are not just a side effect of authoritarianism or democratic backsliding but rather a central part of them. Anti-feminism is used by various - and very different - political (anti-gender)

movements and actors that want to make (gender) inequality seem natural, force people to follow conservative rules (Sanders and Dudley Jenkins, 2022a), and preserve patriarchal hierarchies and structures.

Gender as a “symbolic glue”

As scholars Kuhar and Paternotte (2018, 7) noted, anti-gender actors vary, and their ideological frameworks are often different. While the concept of “gender ideology” was first developed by the Vatican, Catholic scholars, and activists in the 1990s (Denkovski et al., 2021, 20-24ff), today’s anti-gender movements also comprise an increasing number of (right-wing populist and/or nationalist but also left) governments, populist right-wing parties and think tanks, ultra-nationalists, anti-egalitarian movements, and other religious actors that are not seldomly supported by conservative journalists and/or media outlets (ibid.), and very well-funded.⁵



INFO BOX: WHO FUNDS “ANTI-GENDER IDEOLOGY?”

In Russia, for example, oligarchs play a crucial role in expanding the anti-gender narrative beyond domestic borders and discourses moving towards becoming transnational. In its report, the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF, 2021) stated that two Russian oligarchs (connected to the Patriarchal Commission for the Family, the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood domestically and the World Congress of Families globally) spent around 188 million USD to fund the anti-gender movement regionally and globally from 2009 to 2018 (ibid.). According to data from OpenDemocracy’s Tracking the Backlash project in the United States, “US Christian Right groups have spent USD 280 million fuelling campaigns against feminist legislation on five continents” (Denkovski and Kreitlow, 2021). Much of this funding has been directed to Europe to defend EU member states’ conservative policies (amongst others in judicial cases involving Poland and Italy) (ibid.).

⁵We note that anti-gender campaigns and right-wing populists overlap and interact but cannot be completely subsumed by the other (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). Also, some anti-gender campaigns are supported by actors on the left, so the connection between the opposition to gender and right-wing populism should not be overemphasised (Denkovski et al., 2021, 19).

⁶For a more detailed analysis on the funding strategies of the anti-gender movement, see, e.g., Denkovski et al. (2021); Denkovski and Kreitlow (2021).

All these different actors share one commonality: the term gender serves as a “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska et al., 2017) and is often perceived, constructed, and portrayed as something “foreign” or “unnatural”, powerfully threatening “at least one of the three Ns” (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, 259):

1

“nature”, i.e., the traditional (cis-, heterosexual, patriarchal) family model based on the binarity of sex which is presented as part of the natural anthropological and “traditional” social order

2

“the nation”, or more broadly speaking,

3

“normality” (Denkovski et al., 2021, 34ff; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020).

Through strategic “othering” and scapegoating, anti-gender actors uphold gendered boundaries between who or what is (perceived and portrayed as) “natural” and “unnatural”.

The power of narratives: Gender as a “threat to nature” and the “traditional social order” ...

From a perspective of biological essentialism, anti-gender actors frame gender as a threat to “nature” and the “natural family”. In this logic, this threat is invested with enormous power, being able to interfere with marriage, children, and heterosexuality and take down civilization itself (Butler, 2023). In contrast to feminists (and proof in academic research), they claim that neither are gender roles socially constructed nor is inequality deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and misogynist attitudes. In their belief and consciously applied argumentative logic, which easily aligns with nationalist natalism promoting



childbearing and motherhood, people have biologically determined, unquestionable sex differences that need to be reflected in conservative, traditional, and/or religious, societal and political norms and structures (Sanders and Dudley Jenkins, 2022b). Hungary, for example in 2020, passed an anti-gender law that determines identity “by primary sex characteristics and chromosomes” (Schlagwein, 2020), denying the mere existence of intersex and trans people. Consequently, all forms of non-conformity with the “traditional social order” and thus “abnormality” in the eyes of anti-gender movements, such as same-sex relationships, including marriage, same-sex parenting, non-binary or transgender identities, etc., are to be rejected, silenced and fought against, as we will show empirically in more detail below.

... and the “nation”

To stop the spreading of “gender ideology”, “protect” their civil society and preserve the power and authority (based on patriarchal conceptions), (anti-democratic) anti-feminist actors are securitising and framing gender as a (perceived) “threat to the nation”. Countries experiencing an authoritarian backlash or democratic decline often use a legitimization strategy to protect (patriarchal) power hierarchies at the (inter-)national level, i.e., their proper position and influence, similar to the one used domestically. In the traditional family and male breadwinner model promoted by anti-gender actors, self-sacrificing women/mothers and children need to be “protected” and/or “cared for” by a strong, superior father figure/husband. In the case of states and their societies, the “normal people” need to be “protected” from external threats, i.e., from the “other(s), unnatural people” that support “gender ideology” by a strong (masculine) leader. Thus, both at the domestic (within the patriarchal family and at the national level) and international level, a strong father figure (the patriarch, the autocrat) and strongman politics are presented as justifiable and necessary. As discussed in more detail below, this can be observed in the context of the Russian war of

Moreover, authoritarian regimes and countries experiencing democratic backsliding manage to connect their narratives around gender as a “threat to nature” and a “threat to traditional social norms” to a more (geo-)political framing and lift it up to the international level. For example, many of them “are part of the Group of the Friends of the Family (the group arguing that the heteronormative-cis nuclear family model is the fundamental unit of society at the UN) through which they strive to advance their restrictive concepts of the family also at the international level” (Denkovski et al., 2021, 17) and, in parallel, frame gender as a “threat to the nation” and the “threat to the international traditional order”.



aggression against Ukraine. In her article “The International of Antifeminists”, feminist scholar Leandra Bias explains that “[w]ith its anti-feminism, Russia is staging itself as the last ‘real man’ standing. The Kremlin sees itself as the last bulwark of Western Christian civilization in its crusade against gender ideology” (Bias, 2022). As “traditional values” and the social and political order were

attacked, all means to defend them were sacred in Russia's justification logic (ibid.). "Anti-feminism thus helps to assert Russia's victim status and supports the whitewashing of its aggressive foreign policy. [...] Aggression is [...] a strategy of self-protection in Russia's culture war against the West, where Ukraine happens to be the battlefield" (ibid.).

These tactics of scapegoating and "othering" are often disguised as a postcolonial effort

against the "neocolonial" or "neo-imperial" nature of the Western liberal democratic project that is said to be linked to "gender ideology" (Bias, 2022; Evang, 2022). For example, Pope Francis mentions "gender ideology" and "ideological colonisation [by pro-gender actors]" in one breath, and some anti-gender scholars call feminism or gender concepts a new form of "totalitarianism" (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2018).

Undermining democracy in the name of fighting against "gender ideology" to protect "nature, normality, and the nation"

It is essential to understand that such "distorted representations are not only directed merely against certain causes upheld by feminism [...] [but that] they are sweeping xenophobic constructs, which have sweeping effects, namely a delegitimization of fundamental democratic premises, such as equality, inclusion, human rights, minority protection and anti-discrimination, as well as the questioning of parts of fundamental laws and constitutional mandates and, not least of all, the rejection of democratic institutions and science" (Schutzbach, 2019). In Hungary and Poland, for example, anti-feminist discourses and norms have served the centring of right-wing ideologies and populist narratives, thus increasing the latter's social acceptability and pushbacks on democracy (Sanders and Dudley Jenkins, 2022b; Schutzbach, 2019). In Hungary, his anti-feminist policies (and similar actions) helped Orbán to gain control over Hungary's independent institutions (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020; Sata, 2022), which is why the research organisation Freedom House rates the country only as "partly free" (42.86% democratic), i.e., as a transitional government/hybrid regime with autocratic tendencies (Euronews, 2023; Freedom House, 2023a; Freedom House, 2023b). The increasing social acceptability of right-wing narratives and policies is due to the fact that "the rejection of feminism or gender

- unlike xenophobia or plump nationalism - does not, offhand, appear distinctly right-wing" (Schutzbach, 2019) and enables questioning of democratic achievements "without having to resort to 'Foreigners Go Home' rallying cries" (ibid.). By choosing a narrative that does not wholly reject the concept of rights altogether - but establishes a hierarchy of rights by downgrading and rejecting marginalised groups' rights as shown above, and building on ever-present patriarchal socialisation and structures, anti-feminism (in comparison to anti-migration narratives or climate change denialism) seems to be (one of) the most beneficial justification and mobilisation mechanisms for authoritarian regimes and countries undergoing democratic decline, helping them to rally a broad and diverse mass of supporters behind them.

Their discursively and ideologically promoted biological essentialism, hierarchisation of rights and rejection of the concept of indivisible and universal human rights for all often results in tactics of legal contestation and anti-feminist law-making to consolidate power - a strategy that scholar Kim L. Schepperle has called "autocratic legalism" (Sanders and Dudley Jenkins, 2022b; Schepperle 2018). We will explore this tactic in more detail below, using the example of Russia's "foreign agent" laws (see p. 8).

Anti-feminism as modus operandi for anti-democrats

As outlined above, “strongmen” (democratically elected and not), be it Trump, Putin, Erdoğan or Xi Jinping, use strategies of (gendered) autocratic legalism, scapegoating and othering established based on and/or informed by anti-feminist narratives to challenge the legitimacy of courts, laws, institutions, and/or concepts of (human) rights and values. As Gideon Rachman explains, “[t]ypically, these [strongman] leaders are nationalists and cultural conservatives, with little tolerance for minorities, dissent or the interest of foreigners. At home, they claim to be standing up for the common man against the “globalist” elites. Overseas, they posture as the embodiment of their nations” (Rachman, 2022). So, they establish a “save the nation” narrative (ibid.) centred around cults of personality where strongmen are the

only ones able to protect “the nation” from threats through simplistic solutions: “As a result of this international movement towards personalised politics, it has become harder to maintain a clear line between the authoritarian and democratic worlds. [...] This erasure of a clear line between leadership in democratic and authoritarian systems has been a key goal of the authoritarians for decades” (ibid.). Anti-feminist narratives and policies as a modus operandi are used as a tactic here, too: Strongmen expand their personalised power and political narratives by distinguishing themselves from and “othering” liberal politicians (especially if they happen to be women such as Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern) and delegitimise (their) progressive views on family, sexuality and gender (ibid.).

As mentioned previously, while the role and functions of anti-feminism vary depending on the context, there are two key interwoven mechanisms and political concepts important to highlight: anti-feminist policies and narratives serve as a breeding ground and probably the most beneficial justification mechanism (e.g., rather than resorting to anti-migration narratives) for

1

internal oppression as part of domestic policies (gender being constructed as a threat to “nature” and “the traditional social order”, chapter 2.1.) and

2

for external oppression as part of foreign policy (gender being constructed as a threat to “the nation”, chapter 2.2).

2.1. It all starts at home or the oppression from within: how anti-feminist strategies and narratives are used to oppress critical voices, opposition and civil society as a whole

Russia: Strengthening power through anti-feminist narratives and policies

Human rights activists criminalised as “foreign agents”

Two years after the above statement, on 30th November 2023, Russia’s Supreme Court passed a bill which criminalises and declares the ‘global LGBTQI* movement’ as extremist (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). As soon as the bill was passed, the police raided 17 LGBTQI* clubs in Moscow, photographing the identification documents of those who were present. For now, this seems to be the climax of Russia’s attack on gender equality, which started as early as 2013. Since then, the policies to preserve “traditional values” have mushroomed. Already in 2022, Russia adopted a state “policy framework for preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” (Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, n.d.), defining “destructive ideology”, among others, as those dismantling the traditional family through “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”. The promotion of “non-traditional values” is criminalised, making it nearly impossible for the LGBTQI* community to live in a country with such repressive laws.



LGBT, radical feminism and child-free movements must be recognized as extremist”.

Andrei Tsyganov, Chairman of Russia’s Commission for the Protection of Children from Destructive Content at Roskomnadzor (RKN), September 2021 (TACC, 2021)

Moreover, Russia’s sustained anti-feminist policies have turned any opposition to the current regime to be considered a “threat” -not only those fighting for the rights of women or LGBTQI* individuals. Russia’s ‘gay propaganda’ started developing right after the legislation on foreign agents (Official Code of Law Russia, 2021)⁷ was adopted in 2012, a year of anti-government protests after Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections, marking the beginning of his third presidential term. According to the law, an organisation which fails to register itself as a “foreign agent” would be fined (Amnesty International, 2013). By building on the framing of gender (equality) and, in turn, human rights as something feminist and “foreign” in official discourses, the legislation on foreign agents allows the Russian state to oppress any kind of critical, oppositional and human rights work, shutting down the entire civic space. In 2022,

⁷The official name of the law is “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent” (translated from Russian by the authors).

this legislation was expanded dramatically: now, all organisations registered as “foreign agents” need to identify themselves as such “in any media or appearance” (Moscow Times, 2023), whereby in Russian, “‘foreign agent’ is synonymous with ‘spy’” (ibid.). The new law has also increased fear amongst civil society: anyone involved with a “foreign agent” organisation - i.e., according to the law, anyone “under foreign influence”⁸ - can

now also be considered a “foreign agent” themselves (Duma, 2022). According to the Moscow Times, an independent media outlet labelled a “foreign agent” itself, since 2013, more than 550 civil society organisations and individuals were included in the list of “foreign agents”. As a result, many organisations had to close down irreversibly (Moscow Times, 2023).

Restricting academic freedom and freedom of expression in the name of protecting the nation

Furthermore, Russia’s repressive legislation in the name of protecting “traditional values” violates the freedom of expression - the universal human right which entails the right to seek, receive and share information. According to a CitizenLab report which analyses Russia’s social media platform Vkontakte, the laws implemented to limit internet freedom have been, among others, utilised to “justify political censorship of Internet content, particularly content critical of Vladimir Putin or other Russian leadership, and to justify the restriction of the rights of LGBTQI communities” (Citizen Lab, 2023). This can be considered as one of the results of the 2013 “gay propaganda” law and further developments which have been happening in parallel, aiming to strengthen censorship and silencing critical voices - under the pretext of “protecting the nation from threats” and to the detriment of human rights. Consequently, Russia’s censorship of “gay propaganda” and/or content that is considered a “threat to the nation” leads to the violation of human rights - such as the freedom of expression.

Moreover, Russia and Hungary have been continuously restricting academic freedom by utilising anti-feminist narratives and policies. In 2017, politician Vitaly Milonov filed a complaint against the European University in St. Petersburg (EUSP). Referring to the gender studies programme and research on LGBTQI* topics, he accused the university of

“imposing an inappropriate research agenda – referred to as ‘fake science’ – on its students” (Tereshina, 2017). In 2012, Milonov had initiated the “anti-gay” legislation. Despite temporarily losing its licence and facing continuous attempts to revoke it, the EUSP continues teaching. However, in May 2023, the prosecution office launched a new investigation into the EUSP for “extremism”, and in November 2023, the institution was charged for taking part in the activities of an “undesirable organisation”, e.g., for having books published by the Open Society Foundation and The Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Meduza, 2023). Hungary’s Orbán government largely and openly restricted academic freedom when they banned gender studies in higher education under the pretext of gender being “nonsense” and “the content of the course [being] opposed to all of the government’s system of values about humans” (Zsubori, 2018).

By banning gender studies and threatening the existence of academic institutions where those disciplines were taught, Russia’s and Hungary’s officials undermine academic freedom and target the right of people to receive education, obtain information, and gain knowledge on critical issues. This anti-feminist approach reinforces the epistemic injustice where critical (feminist) knowledge production is silenced and censored.

⁸Foreign influence, in turn, is defined as “the provision of support by a foreign source to a person or influencing a person, including by coercion, persuasion or other means” (Duma, 2022).

Restricting women's and LGBTQI* rights in the name of "traditional values"

23,000

women in Russia were victims of intimate male partner violence in 2021.

In 2021, around 23 thousand women in Russia were victims of intimate male partner violence (Statista, n.d.). Russia remains one of the few former Soviet countries where domestic violence was decriminalised (it had been made a criminal offence before) in 2017. Now, certain forms of domestic violence (i.e., battery that does not result in injuries and lasting harm) are no longer prosecutable on the basis of criminal law (i.e., moved to the administrative code). Since then, police reports have dropped in numbers, but calls to service and help centres have increased. Scholar Alexandra V. Orlova argues that the decriminalisation of domestic violence is a concrete result of Russia's politics of masculinity (Orlova, 2018). In many instances, state officials opposed feminist critical voices who advocated for the criminalisation of domestic violence, which, according to the government, goes against "traditional values" (ibid). Also, scholar Emil Edenberg points out that "[f]ormation of resistance to domestic violence legislation was facilitated by the joint storylines of "traditional values" as a matter of national sovereignty as well as protecting children" (Edenberg, 2023). Thus, these legislative changes served as a strategy to strengthen the masculinised rhetoric highlighting the anti-gender, anti-West, anti-gay and anti-human rights narrative employed by the Russian State. At the same time, largely decriminalised intimate male partner violence strengthens the picture of a traditional family with a superior father/husband, which in turn strengthens the picture of a strong leader of the nation (as discussed on p. 6). It is not

surprising that research demonstrates a clear interlinkage between gender equality at home and a state's peacefulness abroad: "If domestic violence is normal [...] [in a certain society,] then that society is more likely [...] to be involved in militarism and war than are societies with lower levels of family violence. [...] [S]uch state violence may in turn lead to higher levels of gender violence" (Hudson et.al., 2012). This is further underlined by the fact that Russia's war in Ukraine has led to an increased level of domestic violence, as stated by the activists from Russia (Krivtsova, 2023).

Already, in 2011, Russia refused to sign the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, widely known as the Istanbul Convention, "under the pretence of it being 'alien' to Russian traditional values of gender" (Muravyeva, 2022) and a "symbol of colonial oppression and threat to Russia's sovereignty" (ibid.). Thus, in the name of "traditional values", not only activism for women's rights is oppressed, but their rights are limited as well.



Turkey: Consolidating power through anti-feminist narratives and policies

LGBTQI individuals as terrorists and women's rights as a threat to nature*

In 2021, Turkey, originally the first signatory to the Istanbul Convention, withdrew from it based on a presidential decision and without parliamentary action, which de jure violates the Constitution of Turkey. Similar to the narratives in Russia, Turkey's state officials argued that the Istanbul Convention goes against "family and social values" and "normalises homosexuality" (Aslı Aksoy, 2021). Moreover, by disregarding the constitutional provisions on the supremacy of international human rights standards over national legislation (Altan-Olcay and Oder, 2021), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan demonstrated and reinforced his authority and image as Turkey's strongman.



14 May will be a day to teach a lesson to those who support LGBT”.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, May 2023

In Turkey, Scholar Hürcan Aslı Aksoy points out that the withdrawal from the Convention helped Erdoğan to maintain power in three ways:

1

to regain voters' support,

2

to find allies and break the oppositional alliance, and

3

to strengthen his image as a "wilful leader" by "intensifying repression and suppressing democratic civil society organisations that dare to challenge his rule" (ibid).

Also, Hungary did not ratify the Istanbul Convention because it "prescribes dangerous gender ideologies" (Amnesty International, 2020).

Strengthening voters' support through "othering" of marginalised groups has long been part of Turkey's leadership strategy. The last presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, and in particular the ruling Justice and Development party's (AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) campaign, were marked by anti-LGBTQI* narratives and scapegoating of the LGBTQI* community (Michaelson and Barış Narlı, 2023). Actively threatening the opposition and progressive movements, Erdoğan stated that anyone in Turkey who "supports LGBT should learn a lesson" (Unal

Abaday, 2023a). Leading up to the last elections, AKP made use of taking an anti-gender position as a condition to enter a coalition with the two Islamist fundamentalist parties to gain more votes (Unal Abaday, 2023b). Moreover, Turkey's populist government's anti-feminist policies have targeted critical/oppositional civil society, such as LGBTQI* organisations, who are referred to as "terrorists", utilising the narrative that gender equality is a "threat to the nation" (Wakefield, 2022).



Anti-gender strategies, in many different forms, is the bread and butter of Erdoğan's reign for over a decade now. These strategies serve him in two folds: 1) to distract attention from the rising inequalities throughout the country, and redirect the anger resulting from these inequalities towards more individual level discussions (i.e., the place of women in society, the 'threat' of LGBTQI* folks, etc...); 2) as a means to consolidate his constituency, and solidify his power, behind this 'threat,' which of course is made up by him and his government. And this has worked, as it has in many parts of the world, for the public to become more conservative, less organised and mobilised, and thus more 'docile' against life becoming harder and harder for them on all fronts. It was again this confusion Erdoğan counted on, when he sacrificed the Istanbul Convention for the votes of only a few percent of the society, against the rights of more than half of the Turkish population."

Sehnaz Kiyamaz Bahceci, consultant at Women for Women's Human Rights - New Ways, feminist activist

These are only some examples of how anti-feminist narratives and policies are being used in authoritarian regimes or countries experiencing democratic backsliding to suppress independent civil society, render human rights work impossible, and restrict

academic freedom and freedom of oppression - all to strengthen or consolidate power. In this process, the rights of women and LGBTQI individuals are cut, and their lives are threatened.

2.2. When the violence transpires borders: anti-feminism as a justification for (armed) conflict and the rejection of international standards and universal (human rights) norms

Russia: Waging war in the name of protecting traditional values



The Russian war in Ukraine is a horrifying example of the cultural war turning into a real one. Some Russian politicians even explicitly connected the war with the fight against gender-neutral toilets. Bloody absurd. We see how «gender freedoms» as Putin called it, or “LGBTQ* propaganda” as Russian law calls it, are used as empty signifiers, allowing the prosecution of any type of transgression of the norms of obedient heterosexual citizens. Even though it hits now in Russia even heterosexual people — as the recent prosecution of the participants of the «naked party»⁹ showed — of course, LGBTQ* community and feminists are the first targets.”

Sasha (Alexandra) Talaver, PhD Candidate CEU,
feminist activist

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, anti-feminism does not only serve to justify oppressive domestic policies and consolidate power at the national level but also to extend global influence and achieve foreign and security policy goals. Even if these goals may vary significantly between countries, ranging from undermining human rights standards (such as the multilateral, legally binding

Istanbul Convention) to occupying other countries, as in the case of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, anti-feminism offers authoritarian regimes and anti-democratic policymakers (and other actors) a multi-use toolbox to a) vindicate their foreign and security policy and b) (thereby) increase national and global support of the latter.

⁹The “almost naked party” was organised by celebrities in Moscow and sparked attention due to “immoral behaviour”. See more in Rescheto (2024).



The Kremlin has constructed a pernicious ideology of homophobia as geopolitics, and in official Russian rhetoric the war in Ukraine is framed as the continuation of this politics by other means."

(Emil Edenborg, 2022)

As outlined in Chapter 1, Putin and other authoritarian strongmen often refer to protecting "traditional values" and present LGBTQI* rights as a "threat to the nation". In Vladimir Putin's address on 24 February 2022 (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, 2023), the day Russia invaded Ukraine e.g., he mentioned "gender freedoms" as one of the reasons for attacking Ukraine.



... [t]hey sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature."

Vladimir Putin, February 2022
(Atlantic Council, 2023)

As scholar Valerie Sperling argues, Putin perceives and frames all those who seek gender and sexuality rights as "anti-Russian" (Sperling, 2016, 13), which is why - in his ultra-nationalist and imperial logic - they need to be fought against, internally and externally (ibid.).

This is what Dr. Sabine Fischer defines as chauvinist thinking and behaviour. Analysing Russia's power and expansion politics historically and in particular in the context of the war against Ukraine and, on a larger scale, "the West", she uses the concept of chauvinism to bring together "the three [interdependent] central elements of Russian politics: aggressive nationalism, no less hostile sexism and autocracy" (Fischer, 2023, 19, translated from German by the authors).



Nationalist chauvinism and sexist chauvinism have one thing in common: they go hand in hand with authoritarian political structures and reproduce them. A nationalism that is based on biologicistic ideas of ethnic purity, exclusive cultural traditions, and a sense of superiority over other ethnic groups or nations is ultra-conservative and hierarchical in its structure. Where nationalist identification with a mostly male leader is at the centre of political thought, there is no room for the separation of powers, democratic pluralism or a diverse and participatory society. Where the degrading and aggressive exclusion of “others” [(othering, see above)] is an essential element of one’s own identity affirmation, militarism takes hold - which in turn favours hierarchical thinking and violence as a means of politics. Political authoritarianism is also already inherent in patriarchy. For where private relationships between the sexes, favoured by the patriarchal state, are based on subjugation and violence, democracy ultimately has no chance. [...] Gender dominance provides role models for the domination and marginalisation of other groups”.

(Fischer, 2023, 25, translated from German by the authors).

Chauvinist rhetoric has been employed not only by Vladimir Putin himself but also by the Russian Orthodox Church’s leader, Patriarch Kirill, who once referred to Putin’s rule as the “miracle of God” (Bryanski, 2012). It neither started in 2022 (or with the annexation of Crimea in 2014). Still, as early as the early 2000s, during the so-called colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin made misogynist and homophobic remarks opposing the revolutions by further inciting anti-West rhetoric (Sperling, 2016, 16; Edenborg, 2022). As Valerie Sperling argues, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, as well as the 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution, have fuelled Putin’s authoritarianism and strongman style, which also manifested in his masculine image to portray himself as a “tough guy” who resists the West’s pursuits to “weaken Russia” (Sperling, 2016).

As analysed in the previous sections, the

legitimation of imperial violence outside of Russia’s borders has been happening alongside the internal oppression of civil society, resulting in gross human rights violations. Thus, as the manifestation of masculinist and militarised violence is embedded in its core to preserve power and authority, it is not surprising that Putin’s regime has transpired beyond the borders of Russia.

Russia might be one of the extreme cases where anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI* narratives have been used to justify a full-scale war. However, as CFFP has demonstrated in previous research, anti-feminist narratives have become a central aspect of the foreign policies of authoritarian and democratic backsliding regimes. It allows them to foster alliances with partners that share the same ideological or political framework and advance policies in the name of protecting, e.g., the family, intending to transform our multilateral order into a protector of

patriarchal values - ultimately contributing to consolidating their (personal) power.

Considering this, monitoring anti-democratic trends intertwined with anti-feminist discourses and legislation in countries undergoing de-democratisation is important. At the same time, the interconnectedness between gender inequality domestically (e.g., high rates of domestic violence) and state violence externally (e.g., international conflicts, violation of universal human rights in other countries) needs to be considered in all analyses. The trend of contestation of legally binding instruments such as the Istanbul Convention - rightly and inclusively

conceptualising gender as a socially constructed set of norms and addressing gender-based violence - shows how anti-feminist states undermine the universality and indivisibility of human rights and gender equality norms at large, leaving limited possibilities and space for women's and LGBTQI* rights advocates to rely on international legislation and promote gender equality. It is worth paying attention to their work to understand how governments and civil society organisations dedicated to human rights for all can best support activists fighting at the forefront for the rights of marginalised people.

3. Civil society resistance: reclaiming power in the age of strongman politics

Having worked with dozens of activists and scholars from different countries like Russia, Hungary, Poland, Belarus and Kazakhstan in the context of CFFP's work over the last year(s), it is evident that across these countries and beyond, activists remain committed to challenging increasing authoritarianism

and anti-democratic developments. In many of these cases, women and the LGBTQI* are at the forefront, because they know their rights will or already have been cut when democracy is declining. They do so despite risking their lives, safety, and freedom and knowing that societal changes will take time.

Feminist Anti-War Resistance: Challenging Putin's authoritarian rule inside and outside Russian borders

After Russia invaded Ukraine, Russia's feminist civil society established the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) movement in response to the war and imperial expansionist politics of Russia (Civil Rights Defenders, 2022). Until today, they continue to resist the war and speak up against the militarism entrenched in Russia's society, ultimately challenging nothing less than Putin's authoritarian rule in and out of Russia (Khrebtan-Hörhager and Pyatovskaya, 2023). As a decentralised group, FAR consists of dozens of branches where

activists mobilise their efforts inside and outside Russia. The branches in Russia remain anonymous due to risks associated with this critical work. In December 2022, FAR was labelled a "foreign agent" after publishing an open anti-war letter from the mothers and wives of mobilised soldiers. According to a 2024 report published on FAR's official telegram channel, many of FAR's activists were arrested, tortured and had to flee Russia to avoid criminal prosecution.¹⁰

¹⁰The report is in Russian and was published in a FAR Official Telegram Channel. The whole title is: "Феминистское Антивоенное Сопrotивление 'Война начинается дома' 2024". Translated from Russian by authors. It can also be found here: [«Война начинается дома»: брошюра о ФАС \(notion.site\)](#).



FAR is focused on the intersection of patriarchal violence and the physical safety of vulnerable groups in the country and its aggressive foreign politics. As feminists, we underscored the continuum of patriarchal violence: from homes to the neighbouring country. Initially, FAR was aimed at mobilising activists for the street protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but after the stigmatisation of FAR as a foreign agent and a number of criminal cases against our activists, we had to change our tactics. However, today, we can see those protest tactics developed by FAR, gathering around monuments dedicated to WWII in a certain type of clothes (white scarfs in their case, black clothes in the FAR case), are used by the wives of the mobilised soldiers.

Sasha (Alexandra) Talaver, PhD Candidate CEU,
feminist activist at Feminist Anti-War Resistance

The existence of FAR has sparked the attention of Russia's officials, e.g., Ekaterina Mizulina, the head of Safe Internet League, who stated that "radical feminist organisations like FAR are directly involved in sabotage and terrorist attacks" in her official Telegram channel (Riamo, 2023). Safe Internet League (Itskova, 2023) is an organisation founded by one of

the Russian oligarchs (Underminers, 2017) who funds anti-gender movements. Despite these hurdles, FAR continues its work anonymously, solidarising throughout the country and outside. FAR's manifesto, which was translated into English and published in Jacobin magazine, eloquently states:





[T]he current war, as Putin’s addresses show, is also fought under the banner of the “traditional values” declared by government ideologues – values that Russia allegedly decided to promote throughout the world as a missionary, using violence against those who refuse to accept them or hold other views. Anyone who is capable of critical thinking understands well that these “traditional values” include gender inequality, exploitation of women, and state repression against those whose way of life, self-identification, and actions do not conform with narrow patriarchal norms. The justification of the occupation of a neighbouring state by the desire to promote such distorted norms and pursue a demagogic “liberation” is another reason why feminists throughout Russia must oppose this war with all their energy.

(Feminist Anti-War Resistance, 2022)

Poland: Mobilising against state homophobia

When Polish municipalities declared the so-called “LGBT-free zones”, as described above, pro-LGBTQI* organisations mobilised their efforts to resist this discriminatory practice. According to Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (Campaign Against Homophobia), a Polish LGBTQI* organisation LGBTQI*, together with feminist civil society, organised various advocacy campaigns, both online and offline, aiming at raising awareness and consequently attempting to put an end to “LGBT-free zones”. By supporting local activists, signing petitions, mobilising Members of the European Parliament, attending local municipality meetings, and campaigning online, they attracted international attention to the issue. As a result of state homophobia, Polish activists faced numerous lawsuits from local municipalities for “drawing the attention of LGBT-free zones internationally” (Zygmunt, 2023). Because of strategic campaigning by LGBTQI* activists, a legal challenge from Poland’s Human Rights Ombudsman (Reuters, 2022),

and the EU Commission’s infringement procedure against Poland for the potential violation of the “EU law regarding non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation” (European Commission, 2021) as well as the EU’s warning that municipalities declaring themselves “LGBT-free” might lose EU funding (Reuters, 2021), Polish lower courts declared nine “LGBTQ-free zone” unlawful.

The above-mentioned illustrates that well-planned and coordinated advocacy on domestic and regional levels can effectively advance the rights of women and LGBTQI* communities, thereby challenging anti-democratic trends.

Throughout our work, activists emphasised the importance of feminist transnational cooperation, which serves as a counter strategy to the transnational anti-gender alliances and networks influencing regional and global politics. Additionally, across the board, activists raised the challenge of being severely under-funded, particularly in comparison

to the anti-gender movement (see above, p.4). Thus, in sum, the hopes expressed by the activists we had the privilege to work with all centred around progressive governments politically and financially supporting feminist movements (including grassroots organisations) and creating safe platforms for alliance-building which

will facilitate context-specific exchange of experiences, peer-learning, and strategising to counteract anti-feminism on the national, regional/EU, and international level. The final section will elaborate on this, which outlines policy recommendations for governments committed to human rights for all.

4. Moving forward: Recommendations for countries committed to Human Rights for All



Fund the feminist and LGBTQI* organisations in countries such as Turkey, let them have the resources to shout out their own voice and demands. The concepts of world democracy and human rights depend on it - because we are already seeing the proliferation and 'solidarity' among the authoritarian regimes of the world. However, one of the most important things FFP countries can do to better support feminist and LGBTQI* civil society is to be consistent in their support of democracy and human rights, gender equality and freedom of assembly and expression: When there is a double standard in supporting human rights of 'some' over the human rights of 'others,' this is very strategically utilised by the authoritarian regimes to create mistrust towards these FFP countries, creating yet another 'thread' to scare their constituencies, and furthermore risking the feminist and LGBTQI* civil society organisations that receive support from these FFP countries."

Sehnaz Kiyamaz Bahceci, consultant at Women for Women's Human Rights - New Ways, feminist activist



It is essential that the states committed to a Feminist Foreign Policy keep differentiating between citizens and authoritarian states with anti-gender regimes that hit and repress their citizens. Initiatives such as political protection for survivors of gender-based and domestic violence, the LGBTQ* community, and objectors to military service are crucial. At the same time, support of civil society from such countries (I can say about Russia) also requires the promotion of a progressive agenda, women's and LGBTQ* rights among civil society actors since overcoming long-lasting anti-gender propaganda in their home country requires deliberate efforts that not all are willing to take up without motivation from the outside.

Sasha (Alexandra) Talaver, PhD Candidate CEU,
feminist activist at Feminist Anti-War Resistance

The following recommendations have been developed based on CFFP's work over the last few years and focus, in particular, on our exchange and cooperation within this

project with activists strengthening the rights of women and LGBTQI+ activists in authoritarian and democratic backsliding regimes.

They are targeted towards countries that have committed to a Feminist Foreign Policy/or are pursuing a gender equality conducive foreign policy and centre around three recurring themes:

1

politically and financially enable feminist civil society at home and abroad support the production of feminist knowledge production and,

2

raise awareness of the interlinkages of anti-feminism and democratic backsliding and authoritarianism and build internal capacities to counter these developments.

Politically and financially enable feminist civil society at home and abroad

Improve funding practices

- Implement and strengthen feminist funding practices (Lever et al., 2020; Gunther and Srivastava, n.d.). This includes:
 - ➔ Ensure that funding is predominantly provided to those most impacted by gendered oppression (instead of predominantly to governments and international organisations) and those actors that address discrimination intersectionally (such as organisations that are both concerned with women's and LGBTQI* rights).
 - ➔ Ensure funding is easily accessible to activists and movements (instead of only fully established organisations).
 - ➔ Ensure that funding includes core and institutional funding, is long-term, and is easy to administer.
 - ➔ Ensure that funding is provided for activities aimed at driving social, political, legal, and cultural changes, such as campaigns, research, and advocacy work that aims at shifting "dominant narratives about gender and sexuality, expanding public understanding of LGBTQI issues in their national contexts" (Gunther and Srivastava, n.d., p. 9).
 - ➔ Ensure that funding is provided for cross-issue work (such as women and LGBTQI* rights) and cross-regional movement building, but also for activities that enable feminist work (digital security/cybersecurity, psychological support and self-care).
- Establish a separate fund dedicated to supporting feminist and women-led organisations, managed with/by women's funds and gender-lens investors who use more flexible approaches to funding in their work (e.g., Canada's Equality Fund, Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central and North Asia (CEECCNA) Collaborative Fund, Urgent Action Fund for Feminist Activism).
- Proactively provide formal and informal consultation and advocacy spaces for feminist civil society (e.g., at (inter-)governmental meetings and multilateral fora, and through institutional guidelines including feminist civil society in delegations and negotiation teams) and compensate activists for their time and expertise (see Denkovski, 2022, 66).



- Centre do-no-harm principles when collaborating with independent civil society centring on activists' physical and psychological safety in offline and online spaces.
- Support civil society in human rights strategic litigation and use formal and informal diplomatic tools to support the latter (regionally and internationally).
- Politically and financially support women and LGBTQI* rights defenders facing criminalisation and judicial processes.
- Support activists who have to flee a certain country or region by facilitating visa processes, e.g., by delivering humanitarian visas without formal (e.g., national quota) or practical (e.g., condition to apply for a visa from the country of origin) requirements that hinder such visa processes (see Mijatović, 2022).
- Financially and legally support activists who had to flee to start activism outside their countries.
- Develop and strengthen effective national and EU strategies and legislation to counter (gendered) disinformation¹¹ and other technological opportunities, such as deep fakes, (ab)used by anti-gender actors and autocratic regimes and countries experiencing democratic backsliding to promote narratives on "gender ideology" and discredit women's and LGBTQI* policies, and multilateral frameworks to advance gender equality (such as the Istanbul Convention).
- Together with feminist civil society, the private sector, the technical community, and academia, establish a national support system for journalists, human rights defenders, policymakers, and other individuals or groups who are victims of (gendered) disinformation and (related) other forms of (gender-based) cyber harm and violence based on gender, race, or other markers of identity and/or due to their activism and human rights advocacy (Bernarding and Kobel, 2023).

¹¹For more detailed recommendations on countering (gendered) disinformation, see CFFP's study "Feminist Perspectives on the Militarisation of Cyberspace", especially p.12ff, p.20f (Bernarding and Kobel, 2023).

Supporting intersectional feminist knowledge-production

- Invest in feminist knowledge production, in particular on the interlinkages of patriarchy, militarism and violence.
- Continuously collect gender-disaggregated (quantitative) data and support qualitative studies on the situation of human rights, in particular women's and LGBTQI* rights, at home and abroad, also to counter the idea of "gender ideology" (including that gender equality has gone too far or is unnecessary), promoted by anti-gender actors (see Denkovski et al., 2021, 61f).
- Fund country-specific feminist research on anti-gender movements and the interlinkages between anti-feminism and authoritarianism, as well as democratic backsliding.
- Continuously monitor national, European Union and other multilateral institutions for key frames used by the anti-gender movement to better track the impact of anti-feminist narratives and policies on norm development, civil society and democracy at all levels and to facilitate a quick and strategic response (see Denkovski, 2022).
- Understand societal attitudes on the national and multilateral level - what concerns and misconceptions drive people to oppose gender equality and resort to anti-feminist, nationalist, and right-wing narratives? To what extent are they related to valid socio-economic concerns? This knowledge can support the development of policies and political communication that respond to the real needs of people, removing some of the appeal of populist, catch-all narratives (see Denkovski, 2022).



Continuously raise awareness of the interlinkages of anti-feminism, democratic backsliding, and authoritarianism and build internal capacities to counter these developments.

In external as well as internal communication and public speeches at all levels and in offline as well as online spaces,

- Highlight the interlinkages of anti-feminist narratives and policies, condemn the work of anti-gender actors, including strongman policymakers, as a well-funded transnational attack on human rights of marginalised groups, liberal democracy, and multilateralism.
- Together with feminist civil society and other pro-gender/pro-democratic and/or FFP governments, raise public awareness of the need to further protect and advance the rights of women and LGBTQI* and strengthen democratic societies.



Review political party financing rules at the national and EU level to ensure that political parties in opposition to human rights, democratic and other FFP principles and/or Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) are not able to receive funds (see Denkovski, 2022, 63).



Support national diplomatic and administrative staff as well as European Union staff to develop capacities to

- better identify anti-feminism and anti-gender narratives as a tactic of democratic backsliding and/or autocratic countries, and to advance counterstrategies in cooperation with (feminist) civil society,
- identify recipients of EU funding who are anti-gender actors and who may violate FFP principles and/or fundamental principles and freedoms of the EU (ibid.; Denkovski et al., 2021, 58f).



Training all staff and delegates, along the entire institutional hierarchy and horizontally across policy areas, to understand the importance of maintaining agreed language on gender equality as a vital part of democracy (ibid.).



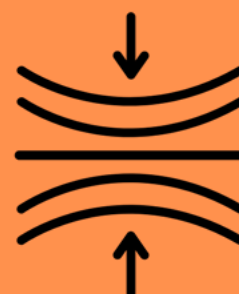
In cooperation with feminist civil society, develop toolkits or accessible language guides on agreed language on gender equality and strategies to advance gender equality (on the national and EU level) to respond to key narratives by anti-gender actors (ibid.).



Strengthen FFP commitments through missions and political foundations and publicly and accessibly communicate what FFP means through national and international awareness campaigns.



Apply diplomatic pressure on governments where anti-gender narratives are promoted and where (consequently) human rights, with special regard to women's and LGBTQI* rights, are violated.



5. Summary and Outlook

In a speech on 24 February 2022, Russia's President Vladimir Putin justified the war in Ukraine by framing it as a "defence against the West's attempt to undermine Russia's 'traditional values'". This predominant narrative, which centres on the devaluation and disenfranchisement of women and LGBTQI* individuals, is present not only in Russia but also in other authoritarian regimes and countries experiencing democratic backsliding and serves as a justification for internal authoritarian policies and external aggression. Similar strategies can be observed in Hungary, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán employs anti-gender rhetoric to consolidate power and reshape democratic institutions. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party enforces discriminatory laws against women and LGBTQI* individuals, which in the past has led to the creation of the so-called "LGBT-free zones." These anti-gender movements are part of a global trend where right-wing nationalist and populist governments strategically use anti-feminist discourse to consolidate and maintain their power, resulting in violation of universal human rights, shrinking space for civil society, limited academic freedom and freedom of expression.

This policy report emphasised the organised, transnational, and well-funded nature of anti-gender movements, aiming to establish an alternative political and social order that challenges human rights and democracy. Putin's war in Ukraine in the name of "preserving traditional values" and Orbán's anti-feminist measures in Hungary, as well as similar actions elsewhere, demonstrate how anti-feminist discourse is used to gain control over institutions, resulting in a dramatic decline in democratic values. The rise of authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe aligns with a global trend, as seen in the 2023 Democracy Report, indicating that 72% of the global population lives in autocracies. Based on a year-long project and input from various activists, the report provided an overview of strategies employed by anti-feminist states, their role in authoritarianism, and their impact on domestic and foreign policies and conflicts. It concluded with recommendations for countries committed to a Feminist Foreign Policy to engage with and support activists in illiberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

Based on the findings identified in this policy report, it is crucial to reiterate that the effective political and financial support of civil society is vital for preserving and promoting gender equality and the protection of human rights. They will always be a crucial prerequisite of democracy, the rule of law and sustainable, feminist peace.

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