PUTTING GENDER AND LGBT+ IN A POLITICAL CONTEXT

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL ACTION

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As the title of our conference explains, gender and LGBT+ rights (hereinafter: gender rights) are a cornerstone for progressive society and politics. The state of gender rights are, in fact, a litmus test one should run to explore and evaluate the human rights situation in a given country. Acquiring full equality is the latest big fight of the human rights's movement. As U.S. President Barack Obama declared in his second inaugural address:

"It is now our generation's task to carry on what those pioneers began. For our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.[1]"

A cleaving subject in many European countries

Conservative movements (the Christian Right in the U.S. and anti-gender campaigners in Europe) repeatedly argue and act against gender rights (including marriage equality). However, these anti-gender campaigns are not "simple" reactionary or conservative movements that argue against human rights. They should not be treated as such. These movements effectively **reinterpret and re-frame the analytical concept of gender and attack LGBT+ and women's issues by using this reinterpreted and re-framed, ideological concept that has nothing to do with the gender concept that progressives use**. Those who work on gender policies and gender-related research, use gender as an *analytical* concept that lets researchers and activists *understand* the functioning of society better and *explain* the role of social factors in the construction of our identities.

For these movements, however, gender means something else. First of all, according to this interpretation, gender becomes a *prescriptive concept* that common sense people should fight. Gender becomes the free choice of one's sexual orientation, an effective propagation of homosexuality, the free choice of one's sex, and much more than that: the sexualization of children, the "culture of death". In brief: gender becomes a dangerous ideology, a totalitarian evil plan that is set out to destroy our societies. For some anti-gender movements, "gender ideology" or "gender theory" also becomes a Trojan horse for surrogacy and in vitro fertilization of lesbian women. As many researchers have pointed out, *fear* is an important mobilizing factor in the successes of the movement.

The movements' campaigns are particularly successful and able to influence the political agenda in many countries, including Slovenia, Poland, France, Italy and Spain. On the other hand, one should bare in mind that the anti-gender movements attack **much more than the elusive enemy of "gender"**. These

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1   *Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama.

movements effectively connect and squeeze together many issues related to the European political system, including the role of European and international institutions, globalization, human rights universalism and liberal capitalism (the EU and international institutions are often considered as foreign powers that impose foreign values on conservative and common sense nations). After the 2008 crisis, these arguments often fall on fertile ground.

However, while anti-gender movements show unequivocal local and national features, they are transnational in nature. Images, arguments, campaign elements often travel from one country to another. Therefore, it would be a political mistake on behalf of progressives to see these movements only as radical or reactionary movements without further analysis and interpretation. Anti-gender movements should be interpreted in the wider context of contemporary modernity, European integration and globalization.

It is worth mentioning that the FEPS in Brussels and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Budapest Büro have been working together on the analysis of these movements for a few months now. The recent publication called *Gender as symbolic glue*[2] and the policy brief[3] that accompanies the book might be an interesting start for those who wish to understand these movements better.

A counter-ideology that creates the enemy with the help of the Catholic Church

Many progressive actors and researchers have noted that the Catholic Church is an important transnational connecting link between the local and national appearances of the anti-gender campaign. In many cases, the Church is even pretty much involved in the practical organization of the movement (in the French case[4], for example, a good part of the civic background of the anti-gender *Manif pour Tous* movement could very much be traced back to radical Catholic circles).

Catholic teachings often offer an ideological rationale for these movements (religion, like secular ideologies, intend to explain and encompass all aspects of human life, and in this way, they are similar).

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2   E. Kováts and M. Põim (eds.), *Gender as symbolic glue. The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe*, FEPS and FES Budapest, 2015, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf.

3   E. Kováts, M. Põim and J. Tánczos, *Beyond gender? Anti-gender mobilization and the lessons for progressives*, FEPS and FES Budapest, http://www.feps-europe.eu/assets/335b5eeb-68cd-4e9f-a565-4cbd61088bf8/feps-fes-policy-brief-finalpdf.pdf.

4   E. Kováts and E. P. Soós, *Félelem a dominő-elvtől? A gender-ellenes európai mobilizáció jelensége. Francia esettanulmány és magyar kilátások*. [In:] *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat*, 2014/2, pp. 106-124.

Indeed, the ideological and theological basis of anti-gender movements can be traced back to papal writings (including groundbreaking texts of John Paul II, like the *Theology of the Body, Mulieris Dignitatem – On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* and the 1995 *Letter to Women*). In these writings women and men are complementary to each other and also *define* each other. Note that contemporary Catholic teaching refuses to accept the analytical separation of sex and gender.

Although Pope Francis is often considered as a progressive due to his communications style and warm, welcoming and humble personality ("*If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?*"), his gender related theology is a clear continuation of the John Paul II and Benedict XVI doctrine. Pope Francis himself has already argued against "gender ideology" several times. In his latest encyclical, *Laudato si,* he reiterated the teachings related to the complementarity of the sexes and suggested that transgender people should accept the body they were assigned at birth. Granted, the Pope is a politician who needs to navigate between his own progressives and his conservatives in the Vatican, activists and progressive politicians should be aware of the fact that the Pope is not a 100% progressive ally.

What LGBT+ movements and progressive parties should do to be in top of the game?

It is difficult (nearly impossible) to come with a game plan that is suitable for all local contexts. Progressives should always analyze and understand their local contexts and come up with solutions that are suitable for that context. However, there are a few points and suggestions that might be useful for all progressives in Europe:

1. Understand what campaigners mean under the terms "gender ideology" and "gender theory" and accept that they use the word "gender" in a different framework. Ideological and value-based debates usually use polysemantic words – if the meaning of words were unequivocal, there would be no room for debate. As we are in the realm of the ideological, "explaining" the scientific meaning of the word "gender" from a high horse is not an effective counter-strategy on behalf of progressives.[5]

2. Understand that the Catholic Church is an important actor in this fight, but keep in mind that the Church is not a monolithic actor – and should not be treated as a monolithic actor either. Progressives can and should be able to find allies within the Church. Dialogue is an important tool to break the supposed unity of the "anti-gender" movement and to build issue-based and value-based coalitions even if progressives will never agree with moderate conservatives on everything.

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5   A forthcoming paper of ours analyses progressive responses so far and formulates recommendations as to what is effective: W. Grzebalska and E. P. Soós, *Responses to the recent anti-gender mobilizations in Europe: lessons for progressives, forthcoming*, FEPS Young Academics Network.

3. Build alliances around policy issues, even while you are aware that you are doing politics.

4. Progressives should understand that all anti-gender movements operate in the realm of the ideological. Today, conservatives have a narrative about the human rights framework that they put together as "a counter-ideology". Granted, there is no "gender ideology", but what progressives represent is indeed based on values. Progressives should be proud of these values. Women's rights and LGBT+ rights are not neutral policy issues, they are value-based issues. This is not a time when you can hide behind policy provisions. Conservatives are in the business of politics. Political parties and NGOs should get in that business, too.

5. Your program and what you can achieve is never independent from the international political context. As discussed before, anti-gender movements coordinate internationally and react to international issues and institutions – while existing in a national, local environment. Progressives should do the same thing. Follow international developments and try to come up with its possible effects on your political opportunities. For example, in the worst-case scenario, the migration crisis can be the end of liberal and left-wing human rights univeralism. This could be a serious ideological threat for the left and for the liberals even within the European Union, so they should be prepared to face the challenge.

6. The local context is as important as the international context for your *marge de manoeuvre*. As political parties operate under the logic of electoral politics, they are not always in a position to be a 100% ally of feminist and LGBT+ movements. Progressive NGOs, in countries like Slovakia, should think about ways they can help self-declared progressive parties to "educate" their electorate.

7. The EU adhesion factor (the pressure to acknowledge and protect human rights in preparation to the EU adhesion) might be less effective in the Balkan countries than it was in the CEE region ten years before. The current political context is more turbulent, more insecure, thus it can be expected that less attention will be given to human rights univeralism then before, in the era of human rights optimism.

8. Progressives should be thinking strategy, not tactics. You want enduring freedom for LGBT+ people, not just tactical gains and a law voted by a government that is promptly eradicated by a next government. Progressives, therefore, should try to control the narrative, win the ideological battle and continuously match tactics and strategy.

9. Progressives should, first of all, understand that time does not play into their hands. The era of optimism and universalism is over. But history is not over. It is back again with a vengeance.