

EUROPEAN POPULISM AND ANTI-GENDER NARRATIVES

LINKS BETWEEN THE EU AND NORTH MACEDONIA

*Gender equality research team**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy study investigates the interplay between populism¹ and anti-gender narratives in North Macedonia, contextualised within broader European dynamics. As democratic institutions in Europe face growing pressures from illiberal populist movements, gender equality has emerged as a critical battleground. Anti-gender campaigns, often underpinned by notions of “traditional values”, nationalism and disinformation, are increasingly shaping legislative and policy outcomes. Trends observed in North Macedonia are highly interlinked with developments in EU countries. Furthermore, the situation on gender mainstreaming in North Macedonia is immensely important for the EU because non-discrimination based on sex and equal opportunities for all genders are core obligations under the EU acquis and measurable conditions in the enlargement process. This policy study contributes to understanding these trends and offers concrete recommendations for European, national and civil society actors.

Key findings

☒ North Macedonia as a case study on antidemocratic gender backlash

In the past several years, the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia transformed from isolated online activism into a structured ideological bloc that successfully reshaped public discourse and influenced policy making. Interlinked dimensions of moral panic, institutional infiltration and political legitimisation characterised its development.

By appealing to “our tradition against imposed western values”,² religion³ and family values, the movement effectively weaponised social anxieties during a period of political instability and economic hardship. Through persistent disinformation, coordinated mobilisation, and

alliances with political and religious elites, it achieved tangible outcomes – from obstructing progressive laws, such as the Gender Equality Law, to reversing educational reforms by erasing anti-discrimination clauses and gender-sensitive terminology from legislation and local policies.

☒ European context and comparative insights

The case of North Macedonia exemplifies how anti-gender mobilisation is not a localised phenomenon, but rather part of a broader pan-European trend. The narratives deployed, framing gender equality as “foreign imposition” or elite manipulation,⁴ mirror discourses seen across the EU, for example, in Italy, Poland, Germany and France. Understanding the Macedonian experience thus contributes to broader European debates, offering critical insights for both internal EU cohesion and enlargement policy. Backsliding on gender equality is not only a domestic democratic concern, but also a challenge to EU values and its evolving legislative agenda, particularly in the context of the Gender Equality Strategy post-2025 and conditionality frameworks tied to accession and rule-of-law mechanisms.

☒ The role of “gender ideology” as a mobilising frame

Coined in the early 2000s by conservative movements, “gender ideology” has evolved into a powerful rhetorical device. It misrepresents gender equality efforts as ideological impositions and fuels moral panic. Resistance to a so-called gender ideology includes contestation and aiming to limit sexual and reproductive rights, including access to contraception and abortion, in vitro and assisted fertility treatments, and sexuality education.⁵ The concept travels easily across

borders and political contexts, functioning as a unifying banner for diverse anti-rights actors across Europe. Its use in North Macedonia mirrors European trends and underscores the need for a coordinated response.

☒ **European relevance and strategic alignment**

The findings are particularly timely, as the EU begins shaping its **post-2025 Gender Equality Strategy**. North Macedonia's experience, but also EU member state case studies, such as Croatia, Hungary and Poland, illustrate the vulnerability of democratic transition contexts to anti-gender populism and coordinated backlash against gender equality. These case studies demonstrate different modalities of rollback – from restrictions on reproductive rights and attacks on gender studies in Poland and Hungary to referendum-based mobilisation in Croatia and the mainstreaming of anti-gender rhetoric by far-right political actors in Italy and Germany (see Section 4). The policy study therefore reinforces the importance of anchoring gender equality within the EU's broader rule of law, democratic resilience and fundamental rights frameworks.

☒ **For international partners and donors:** sustain long-term funding for gender equality initiatives and promote alignment with the EU's post-2025 agenda.

☒ **For the government and parliament of North Macedonia:** reinforce legal protections for gender equality, ensure inclusive education policies and protect civic space. Support and hold EU institutions accountable, not just incorporating gender as a rhetoric, and increase the monitoring of anti-gender backlash in the country in line with EU institutions.

☒ **For civil society:** strengthen regional feminist alliances, especially also against the attempts to institutionalise and delegitimise civil society organisations. Civil society actors should expand strategic litigation, develop proactive counter-narratives to populist discourses and strengthen grassroots engagement beyond urban centres. Given their central role in defending democratic values, human rights and evidence-based policy making, feminist and progressive organisations require sustained institutional protection, long-term funding, and stronger regional and European solidarity mechanisms.

Policy recommendations

To respond to these intersecting challenges, the study proposes a set of policy measures, structured by key stakeholders:

☒ **For EU institutions:** embed gender equality more explicitly in the enlargement process, increase the monitoring of anti-gender backlash in member states and candidates alike, and support intersectional feminist actors on the ground. This interlinkage is also reported in the gender analysis of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans 2025 by Kvinna Kvinna,⁶ who points out the negative impact on achieving the Reform Agenda's concrete goals due to anti-gender groups. To secure the desired outcomes, a comprehensive approach by the EU is required in line with the EU accession process.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH RATIONALE

Context and emergence of anti-gender mobilisation in the EU

Over the past decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a transnational, dynamic anti-gender movement operating on a European level.⁷ What had always existed as resistance to gender equality policies has turned into highly organised campaigns with narrative frames, institutional strategies and networked mobilisation across countries.

Gender ideology has been the central term in this movement, utilised as a rhetorical instrument for opposing feminist, LGBTQIA+ and progressive reforms. Anti-gender mobilisations interpret gender equality as an external or elite imposition upon traditional values and often pair with broader populist movements.⁸

These actors operate across national boundaries, including coordinating campaigns, funding and messages. Their influence extends from religious organisations to far-right political parties, think tanks, informal groups and social media influencers.

In North Macedonia, such mobilisations have become increasingly visible, targeting progressive reforms in education, inclusion and antidiscrimination. These trends mirror similar patterns across Europe, yet they also exploit specific domestic vulnerabilities, such as fragile institutions, corruption, low trust in institutions and political polarisation.

Populist framings and anti-gender mobilisation

In the Macedonian context, populist framings such as “the people versus elites”, “foreign imposition” and “defence of national identity” have become key rhetorical tools used by anti-gender actors.⁹ These narratives present gender equality reforms

as externally imposed Western agendas, eroding “authentic” cultural traditions and threatening national identity. This framing allows populist actors, that is, politicians that are supporting anti-gender actors, to portray themselves as defenders of “the people” against out-of-touch political elites or foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As in other parts of Europe, this alignment between populism and anti-gender discourse is not accidental but rather strategic; it enables political actors to gain legitimacy by opposing reforms labelled as elitist or alien to national values.

Scope of the study

This policy study addresses anti-gender mobilisation in North Macedonia, with case studies on Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland, and how such actors impact legislative, political and discursive proceedings. It adopts a multi-level approach, linking domestic processes to broader European trends.

Key objectives include:

- mapping key anti-gender actors, narratives and their operational networks;
- identifying the key legislative changes due to the influence of anti-gender actors (education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), anti-discrimination);
- drawing comparative insights with European contexts to identify similarities and divergences; and
- offering evidence-based recommendations for progressive political, civil and institutional actors.

Why this research matters

Anti-gender mobilisation is not only a rights challenge, but also a political and institutional one. In North Macedonia, gender debates are becoming more polarised in public discourse. Feminist groups and LGBTQIA+ rights activists are subject to stigmatisation, disinformation and legislative backlash.¹⁰

In addition, the overlap of populist and anti-gender strategies discredits democratic discussion. Such movements often employ moral panic to become influential, coercing repressive policies under the guise of protecting “traditional values” or “the family”. Unless challenged by critical discussion and alternative strategies, progressive gains can be overturned.¹¹

This policy study supports national and EU-level stakeholders with evidence, analysis and strategic narratives to heighten awareness and counter anti-gender mobilisation. It aims to further academic debate while empowering policymakers and civil society to develop forward-looking, inclusive strategies.

1. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a descriptive, qualitative approach to investigate the interplay between populism and anti-gender narratives in North Macedonia, situating these dynamics within broader European trends. The research is motivated by the need to understand how anti-gender mobilisation – rooted in populist, nationalist and religious discourses – translates into tangible legislative and policy outcomes, and how these processes mirror or diverge from developments elsewhere in Europe.

The primary research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

- Who are the key actors and networks driving anti-gender mobilisation in North Macedonia?
- What conceptual frames and narratives underpin their actions?
- How have these actors influenced legislative and policy changes, particularly in education, anti-discrimination and gender equality?
- In what ways do these processes reflect or depart from similar movements in other European contexts?

In assessing the political landscape in North Macedonia, the research relies on scholarship-established concepts for anti-gender actors promoting or favouring restrictive policies and legislation targeting women, LGBTQIA+ individuals and similar.¹² Background information regarding conditions in North Macedonia are referenced from contemporary published sources.

The research examines how populist actors mobilise opposition to gender equality by framing “gender” as a contested and ideologically driven concept. Particular attention is paid to narratives

rejecting gender as a social and cultural construct and opposing the inclusion of gender-related terminology in policy frameworks, gender studies, gender-inclusive language and concepts such as gender identity. The analysis also considers the use of adversarial rhetorical frames, such as references to “gender ideology” or “radical feminism”, which are commonly deployed within populist discourse to delegitimise gender equality policies and mobilise political support.

Primary data is collected via questionnaires submitted to selected respondents, clustered into groups. Respondents are selected according to their roles in gender-related policy-making political parties, members of parliament (MPs) acting in permanent parliamentary committees dealing with legislation that directly affects gender policies, and active civil society organisations (CSOs). Respondents provided opinions, positions, claims and testimonies, and knowledge of practices from their field(s) of expertise. This analysis was paired with desk research on the EU context.

1.1 Analytical framework

The policy study’s analytical framework is grounded in several key concepts:

- Populism: defined here as a political logic that contrasts “the people” and “the elites”, often mobilising around issues of national identity, tradition and sovereignty.¹³
- Anti-gender mobilisation: encompasses individuals, organisations and networks that intentionally deploy political, religious or cultural narratives to restrict or roll back gender-related rights, often framing these as threats to national identity or family values.

- **Transnational diffusion:** recognises that anti-gender narratives and strategies are not confined to national borders but are actively imported, adapted and weaponised by local actors, drawing on European and global blueprints.

1.2 Methodological approach

The research employs a mix of qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis:

Document analysis: review of legislative texts, policy documents, research, media reports and public statements published between 2018 and 2025, selected based on their relevance to gender equality, SRHR, LGBTQIA+ issues and public debates concerning so-called “gender ideology” in North Macedonia and Europe. The analysis included official legislative proposals, parliamentary debates, government and municipal policy documents, statements by political and religious actors, civil society reports, and media content that reflected or influenced anti-gender narratives and their institutional and policy impacts.

Primary data collection: questionnaires were submitted to selected respondents, clustered into groups based on their roles in gender-related policy-making political parties, MPs and active CSOs. Respondents provided opinions, testimonies and knowledge of practices from their fields of expertise. In gathering data on anti-gender mobilisation in North Macedonia, all “anti-gender actors” noted by respondents were validated by the researchers by independently looking for publicly available statements or reports that could “testify” for their publicly stated positions regarding gender policies.

In the period September-October 2025, seven CSOs working in the field of human rights, gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights were interviewed. In the same period, based on questionnaire responses, opinions, attitudes and knowledge were gathered from MPs on relevant committees. More specifically, members of the committee for education and science, health, equal opportunities, social policy, labour and finance. In total, eight MPs completed the questionnaire.

Case study comparison: the Macedonian experience is systematically compared with developments in other EU countries, drawing on published scholarship and policy reports to identify similarities, divergences and transnational linkages.

1.3 Scope and limitations

The study focuses on the period from 2017 to 2025, a timeframe marked by the transformation of anti-gender mobilisation from sporadic activism to a structured ideological bloc with significant policy influence. While the primary emphasis is on North Macedonia, the analysis is enriched by comparative insights from Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Italy and Germany.

Limitations include the opacity of financial structures behind anti-gender actors and the challenges of accessing internal deliberations within political and religious institutions. Nonetheless, the triangulation of documentary evidence, expert testimony and comparative analysis provides a robust foundation for the study’s conclusions.

1.4 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of gender politics and the risks faced by activists and marginalised groups, the research prioritises the confidentiality and safety of respondents. The study also acknowledges the emotional and psychological toll of anti-gender mobilisation on civil society actors and incorporates recommendations for institutional and psychosocial support.

1.5 Conceptual clarification: “Gender ideology” as a mobilising frame

The term *gender ideology* has emerged as a central rhetorical tool in anti-gender mobilisations across Europe and beyond. Coined not by academic or feminist scholars, but by religious conservatives and right-wing populist actors, the phrase is used to delegitimise gender equality policies by portraying them as a dangerous, imposed agenda rather than

a set of rights-based democratic commitments. While the term lacks a coherent academic definition, it functions as a powerful rhetorical device to delegitimise feminist, LGBTQIA+ and broader human rights agendas by framing them as part of a “foreign, elite-driven and morally corrupt agenda”.

Its origins can be traced to the Vatican in the mid-1990s, particularly in response to the outcomes of the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.¹⁴ These landmark global events introduced gender as an analytical category in international policy, prompting a backlash from conservative actors who framed the term as a threat to traditional family structures, national identity and Christian values. Since then, gender ideology has been strategically deployed by a transnational constellation of right-wing populist actors, religious institutions and nationalist groups to resist perceived cultural globalisation and the erosion of traditional values.

In this framing, gender ideology becomes a catch-all phrase, encompassing sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), feminist movements, and anti-discrimination legislation. It is portrayed as an externally imposed threat – typically attributed to EU institutions, “liberal elites” or foreign donors – that undermines the natural social order and corrupts youth. This binary framing – of *the people* versus *corrupt elites* – mirrors the core logic of populism and amplifies its resonance in national debates.

As Kuhar and Paternotte argue,¹⁵ the term gender ideology operates as an “empty signifier” into which various anxieties – about sexuality, sovereignty, demographic decline and moral decay – are projected. It enables broad coalitions of actors to coalesce around an ambiguous enemy, without needing to agree on concrete policy alternatives. The notion is particularly potent in post-socialist societies, where rapid socio-political transformations and EU accession processes have heightened fears of external imposition and cultural disintegration.

In North Macedonia and the Western Balkans more broadly, anti-gender actors often deploy the term to

accuse women’s rights organisations, EU institutions and international donors of exporting values that are alien to “traditional” national cultures. This tactic allows populist leaders and far-right groups to position themselves as defenders of sovereignty, family and morality, while undermining institutions and civil society actors promoting gender equality.

Crucially, the power of gender ideology lies not in its clarity, but in its *strategic vagueness*. It enables broad coalitions between religious groups, conservative political parties, anti-EU actors and segments of the public that feel alienated by socio-political transitions. Similar framing has also become increasingly visible globally, including in the rhetoric and policy approaches associated with the second administration of Donald Trump, where opposition to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and gender-related policies has been framed as a defence of “traditional values” and national interests. As such, gender ideology operates not just as a discursive tool but as a powerful mobilising frame – one that simultaneously legitimises backlash and suppresses progressive gender policies across the region.

In the Macedonian context, these framings have directly influenced institutional decisions, such as educational policy rollbacks, reduced institutional engagement with feminist CSOs and the stigmatisation of progressive actors in public discourse. Gender ideology, then, is not only a conceptual threat – it is a concrete political tool of reactionary mobilisation, framing resistance to equality reforms as a legitimate defence of the nation.

2. MAPPING ANTI- GENDER MOBILISATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND ITS INTERLINKAGE WITH THE EU

The trends and narratives observed across Europe do not operate separately from the national context in North Macedonia. Rather, they are deeply interconnected, with transnational discourses on gender ideology and the narratives of conservative populist identity politics being actively imported, adapted and weaponised by local actors.

Recent global developments further illustrate the transnational nature of anti-gender mobilisation. The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency has contributed to a renewed rollback of women's rights and gender equality at the international level. Early policy signals from his second term indicate restrictions on funding for SRHR, renewed support for conservative "family values" agendas, and the reactivation of alliances with religious and right-wing actors globally.¹⁶

In the early phase of his second term, Donald Trump issued a series of executive orders aimed at dismantling DEI frameworks across federal institutions and extending scrutiny to private sector actors, framing such initiatives as "illegal" or discriminatory. These measures – including the termination of DEI programmes, the rollback of long-standing affirmative action obligations and restrictions on the promotion of so-called gender ideology in education – illustrate how state-level policy shifts can actively reinforce global anti-gender mobilisation and accelerate the rollback of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights.¹⁷

This shift has broader geopolitical implications, as the USA has historically played a key role in shaping global gender equality norms and funding frameworks. The repositioning of the USA, therefore, reinforces anti-gender actors worldwide, providing both political legitimacy and strategic alignment for movements opposing gender equality in Europe and beyond. In this context, anti-gender mobilisation should be understood not only as a European or

regional trend, but as part of a wider global backlash against gender equality and democratic norms.

This interlinkage illustrates how transnational-level mobilisations provide discursive and strategic blueprints for national actors, influencing legislative agendas, public discourse and civic resistance. The following section explores these dynamics within North Macedonia's legislative and political context, highlighting how the European and transnational anti-gender tide both enables and reinforces backlash at the national level.

2.1 Timeframe in the development of the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia

In recent years, anti-gender mobilisation in North Macedonia has evolved from fragmented online activism into a more structured and influential ideological formation, capable of shaping public discourse and informing policy outcomes. This process has been driven by a combination of moral panic, gradual institutional penetration and increasing political legitimisation. By invoking narratives centred on tradition, religion and family values – particularly in a context of political and socio-economic uncertainty – these actors have successfully mobilised public anxieties and built alliances with political and religious actors. As a result, anti-gender mobilisation has contributed to the obstruction of progressive legislative initiatives and the rollback of reforms, including the removal of anti-discrimination provisions and gender-sensitive terminology from education-related policies.

This process reflects not only the strength of anti-gender mobilisation but also the fragility of institutional democracy. The blurring of lines between church and state, the normalisation of hate rhetoric in public and the media, and the silence

of key authorities have collectively contributed to democratic erosion. The anti-gender movement has become both a symptom and a driver of this decline, exploiting moral narratives to hinder social progress and delay alignment with European equality standards.

While resistance from civil society still remains strong, sustained pressure on human rights defenders,¹⁸ combined with the withdrawal of international support and the shrinking of civic space, signals a critical juncture for North Macedonia's democratic trajectory. Unless countered through coordinated institutional, political and societal responses, the consolidation of anti-gender propaganda risks entrenching a long-term regression in gender equality and human rights protection.

Rooted in nationalist, religious and traditionalist narratives, these movements have gradually evolved from sporadic civic opposition into a coordinated socio-political force influencing national policy and public discourse. Their development reflects the increasing use of gender-related issues as instruments of political mobilisation by the right wing and populist actors alongside the growing instrumentalisation of religion in politics and weakening the institutional responses to hate speech and disinformation.

2.1.1 End of 2017-2019: Sporadic signs of anti-gender narratives

The institutional use of anti-gender narratives in the past years in North Macedonia can be traced to the public debate on the Istanbul Convention in 2017. President Gjorge Ivanov was one of the first state representatives to articulate such a discourse, expressing concern that the Convention introduced a "non-traditional definition of gender" as a social construct independent of biological sex. While recognising the Convention's importance in preventing violence against women, Ivanov warned that adopting these definitions without open consultation with parents, educators and psychologists could lead to "imposed tolerance" rather than genuine respect for diversity. During

this period, online portals, such as Kurir and Infomax, began circulating disinformation about the Convention, suggesting it would promote "gender change for children" and undermine traditional family values. These early narratives marked the initial stage of public resistance to gender equality in the country.

2.1.2 2020-2021: Digital mobilisation and moral panic

The period 2020-2021 marked a transition from isolated opposition to a more visible, coordinated movement. The Ministry of Education and Science's announcement of gender-sensitive curriculum reforms in primary education and the introduction of CSE as an elective subject for ninth-grade students provoked strong backlash. Parent groups, religious organisations and conservative civic associations began framing these reforms as attempts to "indoctrinate children" and "undermine traditional values."

Groups such as *Od nas za nas* (United We Stand Tall), a civic association also known for promoting anti-vaccine and anti-5G narratives, Libris+ from Bitola, and the Facebook group Учебници и настава мора да има (Textbooks and Teaching Must Exist) became prominent actors during this period. These groups merged anti-gender rhetoric with conspiracy theories surrounding public health measures, digital education and so-called Western ideological "infiltration." Their campaigns, particularly those opposing digital textbooks and CSE, portrayed the latter as a covert attempt to introduce "gender ideology" into schools – claiming that, "behind closed doors and in a completely non-transparent manner, gender-sensitive education aims to teach our children that it is normal for boys to identify as girls and vice versa¹⁹". The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for their outreach: exploiting public fear and uncertainty, these actors framed health restrictions, vaccination and digital schooling as part of a broader threat to parental rights and national sovereignty. Through these narratives, they effectively combined parental anxieties, misinformation, and nationalist rhetoric,

demonstrating the growing strategic use of social media as a political mobilisation tool.

2.1.3 2022: Organisational consolidation and coalition building

By 2022, the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia had evolved into more formalised and coordinated networks. The formation of the Coalition for the Protection of Children marked a significant turning point, uniting over 30 entities – including religious organisations; formal associations; informal groups such as the Facebook communities Take Responsibility, United We Stand Tall and Parent Front; and far-right parties like Rodina, MAAK and Integra.

This coalition integrated moral conservatism with political populism, invoking the defence of “children, family and tradition” as its central rallying call. Its narrative merged anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and disinformation against CSE – portrayed as a threat by “sexualising children” – with opposition to reproductive rights and gender equality initiatives.

These actors are closely networked with similar regional movements in Croatia, Bulgaria and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), sharing communication tactics, messaging strategies and ideological materials. They have also established partnerships with international anti-gender movements operating in the US and Europe, exchanging online content, narratives and visual campaigns that mirror global conservative networks.

CSOs and human rights activists working on gender equality and women’s rights increasingly faced coordinated online harassment and smear campaigns, signalling the emergence of targeted disinformation as a core mobilisation tactic.

2.1.4 2023: Mainstreaming and political legitimisation

The year 2023 represented an unprecedented amount of anti-gender mobilisation in North Macedonia. The peak is related to the mainstreaming of anti-gender movements beyond the online sphere, including massive protest and media coverage, which allowed for a huge entrance into the public discourse. Up to that point, the attacks were primarily directed at reforms in primary education, against CSE and against the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, mainly through online and media assaults on CSOs working in these areas. However, in 2023, anti-gender movements expanded their scope, openly targeting the broader concept of gender equality itself. They launched coordinated attacks against CSOs working on gender equality and institutional and parliamentary initiators of draft laws on gender equality and civil registry.

The proposals of both laws triggered mass protest by thousands of people, led by the Macedonian Orthodox Church, supported by anti-gender actors such as Parent Front and the Coalition for the Protection of Children.²⁰ The demonstrations, held under slogans defending “family and tradition”, attracted broad political backing, including public support of the protest from members and parliamentarians of the conservative right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE. That same year, anti-gender narratives gained legitimacy at the local level when the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) mayor of Strumica²¹ publicly supported positions initiated by local religious representatives of the Orthodox Church and anti-gender organisations.

The protest and campaigns ultimately succeeded at halting both draft laws, marking a major victory for anti-gender movements. According to the European Parliamentary Forum’s report on “Next wave: How religious extremists regain power” in 2025, the same protest organised by the Macedonian Orthodox Church in 2023 was identified as part of a broader regional anti-gender movement, linked to the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches and motivated by religious extremism opposing gender equality. The Church thus emerged as a central actor, connecting local activism with transnational networks, promoting moral traditionalism.

A new and significant development in 2023 was also the involvement of certain women's activists²² related to the European and Macedonian Women's Lobby – which used anti-gender narratives and publicly opposed the draft gender equality law. These representatives echoed the rhetoric of conservative and religious groups, claiming that the law imposed “ideological values”. This convergence blurred the boundaries between feminist discourse and anti-gender activism, granting the movement additional public and political legitimacy.

During 2023, public statements by clerics, notably Bishop Jakov Stobiski, exhibited overt transphobia and misogyny without any institutional consequences. State institutions largely remained silent, reinforcing perceptions of complicity. The only exception was the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, which determined that Bishop Jakov Stobiski had committed discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the field of public information and the media, along with several other activists from the anti-gender movement.

In 2023, anti-gender narratives continued to dominate public and media discourse, while political institutions increasingly echoed their framing. Hate speech, moral panic and disinformation surrounding gender ideology had by then become part of the mainstream political and social narrative.

In 2023 and later in 2024, we also witnessed the revision of 12 local policies, where the concept of gender equality was replaced with the more neutral term “equality between men and women”, reflecting a direct influence from the anti-gender discourse.

2.1.5 2024-2025: Institutionalisation, regression and normalisation

In 2024 and 2025, anti-gender movements consolidated their influence at both national and local levels. Their messaging evolved from protest rhetoric into policy action. The “Caravan Campaign”, a nationwide tour screening *What Is a Woman?* followed by discussions, exemplified the institutional

normalisation of anti-gender propaganda, with participation from clerical and political figures.

In 2024, anti-gender narratives were increasingly instrumentalised for political mobilisation, particularly in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in May. Representatives of VMRO-DPMNE openly expressed opposition to the so-called gender ideology across the platforms of anti-gender movements. Later, by the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, several MPs and senior party officials from VMRO-DPMNE publicly attended tribunals organised by the anti-gender movement Parent Front, with some even participating as panellists.

Moreover, in 2025, we witnessed the most significant legislative regression. Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Primary Education and Law on Textbooks in Primary and Secondary Schools that removed “gender”, “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” as an antidiscrimination basis, which already aligned with the 2019 Antidiscrimination Law, and deleted the terminology gender equality and sexual and reproductive health. The third law adopted in April 2025 – Law on Secondary Education – was not aligned with the Antidiscrimination Law and does not recognise “gender”, “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” as a basis for discrimination. All three laws were passed without public consultation, in direct violation of earlier participatory processes that had aligned Macedonian education policy with EU and human rights’ standards. The CSOs that are members of the Network for Protection against Discrimination submitted initiatives for the review of the constitutionality of the Law on Primary Education and the law amending the Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education before the Constitutional Court. Moreover, in July 2025, the fourth education policy was amended, by the Ministry of Education and Science, erasing “gender” and “gender-based violence” as terminology from the *Rulebook for Protection from Violence in Primary Education*.

The regression in educational policies was also influenced by the global backlash against human

rights and gender equality, including the withdrawal of USAID support and policy shifts under the new US administration.

Simultaneously, attacks against feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists intensified. Women's and queer rights' defenders, including members of the organisation working on LGBTQIA+ rights, gender equality and reproductive rights, faced online smear campaigns, doxxing, and threats from both organised groups and church representatives.

2.2 Actors and networks of the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia

The anti-gender movement in North Macedonia comprises a broad and interconnected network of actors drawn from political, religious, media, academic and civic spheres. While diverse in structure and rhetoric, these groups share a common ideological foundation: the rejection of gender equality, feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights as "foreign" or "unnatural" concepts that threaten traditional family values and national identity.²³ Their coordination across institutional and informal domains has enabled the consolidation of a powerful counter-movement capable of shaping both policy and public discourse.

2.2.1 Political actors

Political leadership has been instrumental in legitimising anti-gender narratives within the national discourse. The right-wing party **VMRO-DPMNE** and its coalition partners were repeatedly identified by CSO activists who were interviewed as key drivers of anti-gender and populist rhetoric. Party leader **Hristijan Mickoski**²⁴ incorporated nationalist and populist rhetoric into his public speeches, framing the **preservation of the nation** through a **traditional, multi-child family model**. He also announced plans to **revise school textbooks** so that children would "learn about *mother, father, big sister and big brother*", symbolically promoting a **heteronormative and pro-natalist vision of society** rooted in traditional gender roles. MPs such as **Antonio Milošoski** and **Petar Markov**²⁵ have publicly opposed CSE and gender

equality policies and framed them as ideological impositions.

Smaller conservative and nationalist parties – including **Rodina Makedonija**, **MAAK**, **Integra**, and **Desna**²⁶ – have aligned themselves with these narratives, often working in coordination with religious and parental movements. Respondents also noted the involvement of **Petar Bogojeski**²⁷ (*Macedonian Concept* party), whose rhetoric on social media echoes anti-gender themes. Interestingly, isolated figures from the Social Democratic Party, such as **Kostadin Kostadinov**²⁸ (former mayor of Strumica), were also vocal in endorsing anti-gender protests, signalling the mainstream reach of these ideas.

2.2.2 Media actors

Traditional and online media have played a central role in amplifying anti-gender narratives, particularly during debates on the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Civil Registry. Television outlets such as **Alfa TV**, **Sitel TV** and **Kanal 5** were mentioned by the interviewed activists and MPs that have provided platforms for anti-gender actors, while online portals, including **Republika**, **Kurir**, **Plusinfo** and **Off.net.mk**, have circulated sensationalist or misleading content on so-called gender ideology. The mainstreaming of such narratives through mass media, as well as influencers has had a profound effect on public perception, fuelling mistrust toward women's and LGBTQIA+ organisations while framing equality as a moral threat.

2.2.3 Public figures and cultural influencers

Prominent public figures have also contributed to the diffusion of anti-gender ideology through academia, literature and popular culture. Academics such as **Katica Čulavkova**²⁹ and **Tanja Karakamiševa**³⁰ have repeatedly criticised gender equality frameworks, often describing them as Western constructs incompatible with Macedonian traditions. The writer **Venko Andonovski**³¹ has similarly used public forums and attended anti-gender events to promote

moralist interpretations against sexuality education and gender equality.

Respondents also highlighted **Liljana Popovska**,³² a former MP, former president of the Green Party and current member of the **European Women's Lobby Management Board**, as a public figure who has publicly adopted anti-gender framings, despite her prior association with equality initiatives. Alongside her, **Daniela Dimitrovska**³³ and the **Macedonian Women's Lobby** were mentioned as examples of public individuals who, paradoxically, supported anti-gender campaigns, often by reframing gender equality discourse into narrow, "biological sex" based interpretations. During the debates on the draft law on gender equality, both figures maintained a highly visible and vocal presence in television appearances and anti-gender movement debates, causing significant damage to the advancement and public understanding of women's rights and gender equality. Their involvement lent the movement a façade of gender legitimacy and broadened its appeal among moderate audiences.

Examples for the statements above can be found in Annex 1 "Personalities and anti-gender rhetoric".

2.2.4 Religious institutions and faith-based organisations

Religious institutions – above all the **Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA)** – have served as both moral and organisational anchors of the anti-gender movement. Respondents described the MOC-OA as operating almost like a political actor, with **Archbishop Stefan**³⁴ and **Bishop Jakov Stobiski**³⁵ at the forefront of campaigns against gender ideology. Stobiski, in particular, emerged as a symbolic figure, known for his inflammatory public statements, televised sermons, and direct attacks on feminist and LGBTQIA+ rights. Similarly, **Metropolitan Petar**³⁶ emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of women's rights, publicly denouncing **gender equality** as an "opposing ideology" that threatened traditional moral values and social order.

The **Eleusa Foundation from Strumica**, closely associated with the Church, has organised numerous forums and lectures aimed at discrediting gender equality and CSE. Respondents noted that its leadership has ties to influential families and public personalities, further extending its reach through social and cultural networks. Other faith communities,³⁷ including the **Islamic Religious Community**, the **Evangelical-Methodist Community** and the **Jewish Community** have occasionally echoed similar positions, contributing to a broader inter-religious consensus against gender equality initiatives, and supported public protest against the Law on Gender Equality organised by the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

2.2.5 Informal movements, associations and civic coalitions

Informal networks and associations have been critical in mobilising public participation and translating anti-gender rhetoric into grassroots action. Movements such as the **Coalition for the Protection of Children, Take Responsibility (Преземи Одговорност)**, **Parent Front (Родителски фронт)** and **Od nas za nas (United we Stand Tall)** were repeatedly identified as the most active coordinated anti-gender platforms opposing gender equality reforms and promoting anti-gender narratives. Framed as parental or moral initiatives, these groups have coordinated protests, petitions and online campaigns against CSE, gender recognition and reproductive rights. Respondents emphasised that many of these groups function as "quasi-NGOs", lacking transparency but maintaining a strong media presence and political connections. Their coordinated actions and connection with broader regional and global anti-gender actors have made them key enablers of the anti-gender movement's public legitimacy.

Beyond institutional and civic structures, respondents identified a number of influential individuals who act as connectors between various elements of the anti-gender network. **Argireta Ateva**,³⁸ widely described as the strategic organiser behind the *Coalition for the Protection of Children* and *Take Responsibility*, was singled out for her central coordinating role.

Gordana Godjo,³⁹ spokesperson for Od nas za nas, remains one of the movement's most visible faces, frequently appearing in media interviews and social campaigns, speaking out against sexuality education and vaccines.

Other figures, such as **Marieta Dukić**⁴⁰ (*Parent Front*), **Zlatko Bučkovski**⁴¹ and **Sašo Pangovski**,⁴² were mentioned for their role in sustaining public engagement, organising local initiatives and online activism. Ad hoc parental groups formed around schools, along with quasi-civic initiatives aligned with religious networks, continue to act as amplifiers of disinformation and moral panic at the community level.

Respondents noted the establishment of the movement **Moms for Macedonia in 2025** – through support from a US-based anti-gender organisation, **Moms for America** – that promotes “traditional family values” and openly opposes **women's reproductive rights**, including access to **safe and legal abortion**. This partnership further strengthened the **transnational dimension** of anti-gender networks operating in North Macedonia.

These hybrid actors blur the lines between formal and informal activism, connecting church authorities, political representatives and the general public. Their ability to navigate different sectors of society has allowed the anti-gender movement to embed itself deeply within North Macedonia's social and political fabric.

2.3 Dominant messages and narratives

The anti-gender actors in North Macedonia build their discourse around a central invented concept – the so-called gender ideology. Under this label, they group all initiatives related to gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, CSE and gender-sensitive curricula, portraying them as a dangerous foreign agenda. Their messages revolve around the protection of children and families (“No to CSE,” “Protect our children”); the defence of traditional, religious and national values; and the reassertion of “biological sex” as the only acceptable identity category. The

LGBTQIA+ community, particularly transgender people, is presented as a primary threat allegedly trying to “change our children” through education and culture.⁴³

While the content of these narratives has remained consistent, their tone and tactics have evolved. In recent years, they have shifted from overt hate speech to seemingly “concerned” or “rational” arguments – presenting themselves as defenders of human rights and parental freedoms rather than ideological aggressors. They increasingly employ legal and pseudo-scientific language to lend legitimacy to their claims. There is also a visible rise in anti-feminist rhetoric that romanticises traditional female roles, linking women's “natural place” in the home with patriotism and national survival. Transgender individuals are now more explicitly singled out, separating them from the broader LGB community to weaken solidarity and soften public resistance. Overall, the narrative strategy has grown more coordinated and sophisticated, combining emotional appeal with institutional pressure.

2.3.1 Communication tools and methods most frequently used by anti-gender actors and organisations

The anti-gender movement in North Macedonia relies heavily on digital mobilisation. Facebook is the main platform for spreading disinformation, coordinating groups of “concerned parents” and organising actions. Closed Viber groups are also used for internal coordination, mass reporting of online content and the spread of mobilisation messages. Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are used to distribute short videos and sensationalist visuals that glorify family values and portray gender equality as a threat.

Few traditional media, particularly television talk shows and online portals, are used to legitimise these narratives. Offline, they organise public events, film screenings and lectures in state cultural institutions and religious venues. In recent years, they have increasingly entered the political and legal arena – through open support by MPs, mayors and

other high-ranking politicians, submitting petitions and counter-petitions and lobbying for the removal of references to “gender” from laws. In short, their communication strategy combines social media for reach, local events to mobilise and institutional channels for policy influence.

2.3.2 International or regional connection and funding

Most organisations report that financial structures behind these actors are opaque, but their messaging and campaign materials clearly mirror international conservative movements. The **Coalition for the Protection of Children**,⁴⁴ one of the key non-formal anti-gender actors (consisting of more than 30 non-formal groups, associations, religious organisations and conservative political parties) has visible connections, published on its website, to global anti-gender organisations such as **Family Watch International** and **GENID (Gender Identity Challenge Scandinavia)**. It also participates in a **regional network of anti-gender groups** such as Society and Values (Bulgaria), *U ime obitelji* and *Slobodni zajedno* (Croatia), and *Roditelji za prava djece* (Serbia).

Furthermore, the American movement **Moms for America** has inspired the Macedonian group **Moms for Macedonia**, supported by the organisation **I Am a Woman**. These transnational connections reveal a coordinated structure of influence and resource exchange. Moms for America held meetings in parliament,⁴⁵ with the Ministry of Education, as well as a meeting attended by the prime minister.⁴⁶ Moms for America has long-standing experience in promoting policies that restrict women’s rights and contribute to strengthening anti-gender movements.

According to the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) study *Next Wave (2025)*,⁴⁷ there is a clear connection between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in spreading anti-gender narratives and propaganda across the region. The report highlights that, between 2019 and 2023, €1.18 billion was channelled to support anti-gender organisations across Europe. In North Macedonia,

however, anti-gender organisations continue to operate without financial transparency, offering little to no public disclosure regarding their sources of funding. Despite this opacity, there is clear evidence of the linkage of Macedonian anti-gender groups and transnational anti-gender networks disclosed in the *Next Wave* report, reflecting shared ideological, organisational and financial patterns with broader European and global movements.

2.3.3 Impact on anti-gender discourses to CSOs working on gender equality

CSOs report multiple negative effects. The most immediate is **heightened stigmatisation and public attacks** on groups working for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. Activists are portrayed as “foreign agents” or “moral corrupters”, facing smear campaigns and online harassment. Institutional collaboration has also weakened: ministries, municipalities and schools are increasingly hesitant to partner with feminist or LGBTQIA+ organisations due to the fear of backlash from anti-gender actors.

Legislative progress has slowed – the Law on Gender Equality and reforms related to legal gender recognition and sexuality education have been delayed or diluted under pressure. Financially, organisations face challenges in obtaining public funds and some international donors have even requested “softer” language in project proposals. Several activists report direct threats, online attacks and false police reports aimed at intimidation. The overall effect is a shrinking civic space, emotional exhaustion among staff, and a diversion of resources from programmatic work to self-protection and crisis.⁴⁸ Anti-gender narratives have also eroded public trust in the civil sector, making outreach and community engagement significantly harder.

2.3.4 Strategies to counter anti-gender narratives

Organisations use both defensive and proactive strategies. In response to the growing influence of anti-gender mobilisations, feminist organisations, civic initiatives and progressive political actors

in North Macedonia have developed a range of counter-strategies aimed at defending democratic values and safeguarding human rights. Increasingly, these responses move beyond reactive advocacy toward more strategic forms of democratic resilience-building. Rather than addressing individual disinformation campaigns in isolation, many actors now recognise anti-gender mobilisation as a structured political phenomenon connected to populist narratives, transnational networks and broader European trends. Many respondents stress the importance of coalition work and networking – acting collectively rather than as isolated CSOs.⁴⁹

Beyond legal advocacy, organisations working on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights have invested in proactive communication strategies to address moral panic surrounding CSE and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. These efforts include disseminating empirical research, youth-led testimonies and accessible educational materials designed to challenge disinformation. Training programmes for educators, parents and young people have emerged as particularly important tools for strengthening community resilience and promoting critical media literacy. Similar approaches have been documented across Europe, where progressive coalitions increasingly combine legal expertise, storytelling and coalition-building to counter populist framing and reclaim public discourse.

Data-driven communication and locally grounded research are increasingly used to dismantle falsehoods. Some activists also rely on art, culture and storytelling to reach new audiences outside the traditional activist circle.

At the political level, progressive MPs and public officials have also contributed to counter-narratives by publicly defending legislative reforms and participating in debates aimed at clarifying misinformation surrounding gender equality policies. Although often operating within a polarised environment, these actors have attempted to shift public discussion toward democratic principles, rule-of-law commitments and evidence-based policy making. Their engagement illustrates that resistance to anti-gender mobilisation is not limited

to civil society but increasingly involves institutional actors seeking to maintain democratic pluralism within legislative arenas.

However, several organisations note that, despite these efforts, the civic sector still lacks the resources and strategy for the field presence and coordination that anti-gender actors have. They stress the need for direct, assertive public engagement rather than purely reactive,⁵⁰ by creating their own new narrative that would promote democratic values instead of just reacting to anti-gender attacks.

POLITICIANS WHO PUBLICLY SUPPORTED THE LAW ON GENDER EQUALITY

Five MPs – Maja Morachanin, Sanela Shkrijelj, Snezhana Kaleska-Vancheva, Marija Kostadinova and Monika Zajkova – from three political parties – SDSM, the Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – submitted the Law on Civil Registry and publicly defended it, as well as the Law on Gender Equality, responding to disinformation surrounding these laws. Through public debates and by expressing their personal and party positions, they contributed to informing the public about their content and objectives. At the same time, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Jovana Trenchevska from SDSM, openly supported the Law on Gender Equality. In a context marked by strong opposition from anti-gender actors, these MPs and the Minister stood behind the proposed policies and publicly affirmed their support for advancing gender equality, while also being targeted by anti-gender actors through negative narratives, gendered disinformation and hate speech. In particular, Maja Morachanin, Sanela Shkrijelj and Snezhana Kaleska-Vancheva, as well as Minister Trenchevska, were singled out by the respondents in these attacks in the public sphere. As for the recent regressive changes in the education law in 2025, MP Daniela Nikolova was repeatedly mentioned by respondents as the only politician in parliament who was vocal and publicly defended gender equality and anti-discrimination policies.

2.3.5 Support for CSOs and activists to effectively respond to the anti-gender movement

The responses consistently point to the need for **financial, legal, psychological and institutional support**. This includes emergency response funds for rapid counteraction, legal aid for activists facing defamation or lawsuits, psychological assistance for those targeted by online hate, and institutional recognition from the government and EU that anti-gender movements threaten fundamental rights.

Organisations also call for closer collaboration with artists, educators and local communities to rebuild public trust and expand the narrative beyond the NGO sphere. They emphasise that **research and reports alone are not enough** – they need resources for fieldwork, grassroots engagement and a sustained presence in local environments. Stronger institutional backing, inclusion in policy-making processes and protection mechanisms for human rights' defenders are essential for sustaining resilience against anti-democratic movements. The EU and other international organisations need to increase support and funding for progressive and feminist CSOs and work on direct support in shaping the active narratives. Sustained, core financial support is crucial for groups advancing gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and youth empowerment. This funding should prioritise outreach, advocacy and strategic litigation, thereby enabling these organisations to challenge anti-gender movements and institutional opposition effectively.

2.3.6 Role of EU institutions, the international community and progressive political actors

Respondents agree that EU institutions and the international community must take an **active, coordinated and value-based stance** rather than a neutral observer role. EU institutions should explicitly recognise anti-gender movements as part of democratic backsliding and integrate gender equality and LGBTQIA+ protections into accession benchmarks. The EU needs to tie democratic

reform and gender equality benchmarks more directly to progress on EU accession and external funding mechanisms. As a solution, EU institutions should work on networking, exchange and direct support for shaping the active narratives. Also, technical assistance should be provided to national institutions to strengthen gender mainstreaming in national policy strategies, especially in education, justice and public administration reforms.

Equally important is the public condemnation of hate speech, conditionality in funding and political processes, and sustained support for organisations defending human rights.

Progressive political actors within the country are urged to stop remaining silent or making tactical compromises. They should embed equality and inclusion into their political platforms and speak out clearly when these principles are attacked. Finally, cooperation among EU delegations, embassies and civil society should focus on long-term structural support – combining funding, education, media literacy and legislative pressure to counter anti-rights populism. In essence, the EU and progressive forces must act as guarantors of democratic equilibrium, protecting weaker actors and ensuring an environment where equality and human rights cannot be negotiated away.

3. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPACTS

Over the past several years, anti-gender movements in North Macedonia have exerted a significant influence on legislative processes, successfully obstructing progressive reforms and facilitating policy regression. These groups, often aligned with conservative political actors and supported by religious institutions such as the Macedonian Orthodox Church, have mobilised campaigns portraying gender equality and human rights' reforms as threats to national identity, family values and children's safety. Their narratives have been widely disseminated through media channels and amplified by well-organised advocacy networks.

This section explores how such mobilisation has affected proposed or adopted laws, policy strategies, institutional mandates and public sector discourse.

3.1 Timeline of blocked improvement to or regress of gender equality legislation

Between 2023 and 2025, under the influence of anti-gender and anti-democratic movements, improvements to **three national laws were blocked**, and a **total of 15 national and local policies related to gender equality regressed**, including three national and 12 local policies.

3.1.1 Year 2023: Prevented improvement to two legislations – blockage of the draft Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Civil Registry

In 2023, two significant pieces of progressive legislation aimed at strengthening human rights and gender equality in North Macedonia were stalled under political pressure and anti-gender mobilisation. The **draft Law on Gender Equality sought to comprehensively regulate gender equality policies, introducing obligations for public institutions to adopt gender-responsive budgeting, ensure balanced representation in decision-making and mainstream gender perspectives across all sectors. Simultaneously, the draft Law on Civil Registry aimed to improve the rights of transgender persons by providing a clearer legal procedure for changing gender markers in official records, in line with international human rights' standards and country recommendations from the European Court of Human Rights. However, both laws faced strong opposition from conservative and religious actors, as well as political resistance within parliament. Public debates were marked by polarisation and anti-gender narratives portraying these reforms as threats to traditional values and national identity. Despite their alignment with EU accession obligations, the legislative process was blocked. The draft Law on Gender Equality was ultimately withdrawn by the government, and the draft Law on Civil Registry was left unadopted in the parliament, demonstrating how organised anti-gender campaigns can effectively halt rights-based reforms.**⁵¹

3.1.2 2023 and 2024: Regression in 12 local policies

A clear sign of anti-gender narratives penetrating **local governance policies** appeared in 2023 and 2024, when 12 municipalities, including Strumica, Kumanovo, Sveti Nikole, Bosilovo, Novo Selo, Dojran, Gevgelija, Vasilevo, Ohrid and Vasilevo, amended their annual equality programmes by replacing the term “gender” with “sex”. This was not a neutral linguistic change but a conceptual rollback, narrowing the understanding of equality and weakening local capacity to address complex gender issues, such as stereotypes, gender-based violence and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities. Such changes directly undermine local government obligation to adopt gender-sensitive policies and to integrate a gender perspective across public planning and decision-making, as required by both national equality frameworks and EU accession standards. More importantly, this rollback has serious long-term consequences: it weakens institutional mechanisms for the prevention of and protection against discrimination and violence, reduces the visibility of marginalised groups in public policy, risks reversing years of progress in equality policies, and contributes to democratic backsliding and the erosion of human rights’ protections and social inclusion.

3.1.3 2025: Regression in the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Textbooks and the bylaw on violence protection in primary schools, as well as blocking of improvement to the draft Law on Secondary Education

Revision of the **Law on Primary Education** and the **Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education** and adoption of the new **Law on Secondary Education** did not align with antidiscrimination law.

In January 2025, the parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Primary Education proposed by the Ministry of Education and Science that significantly narrowed protections in the education system. The revised law removed

“gender”, “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” from the list of explicitly protected grounds against discrimination. These changes were introduced and passed without meaningful consultation with young people, experts or CSOs, despite concerns that they contradicted the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and the country’s international human rights’ obligations.

In March 2025, ten MPs from the ruling party VMRO DPMNE proposed further amendments to the Law on Primary Education (second revisions in the same year) and to the Law on Textbooks in Primary and Secondary Education and the proposed Law on Secondary Education. This new package went beyond narrowing the definition of discrimination by also removing references to gender equality and erasing content on sexual and reproductive health from the legal framework for primary education and textbooks. At the same time, it replaced the open non-discrimination clause, which had allowed protection on any grounds recognised by national law or international treaties, with a more restrictive provision limiting protection solely to the grounds listed in the Constitution, namely, sex, race, skin colour, language, religion, national or social origin, property, or social status. The amendments were adopted in April through a shortened parliamentary procedure, reducing opportunities for public debate, expert review and stakeholder engagement.

3.2 Adoption of a new rulebook for primary schools on the procedure for reporting and protecting pupils who are victims of violence, abuse and neglect

In July 2025, the Ministry of Education and Science adopted a new **rulebook on reporting and protecting pupils who are victims of violence, abuse and neglect**. The policy replaces the 2020 rulebook, which had been aligned with European human rights’ standards. It omits key safeguards, including the recognition of gender-based violence, and reduces the visibility of vulnerable groups such as LGBTQIA+ students. These changes weaken schools’ capacity to identify and respond to structural causes of

violence, contradict anti-discrimination and human rights' obligations, and reverse previous progress toward gender-sensitive and inclusive education policies.

3.3 European relevance of the case of North Macedonia

The Macedonian experience reflects how anti-gender discourse is being localised within EU candidate countries, shaped by both regional actors and transnational influences. As in other parts of Europe, anti-gender movements in North Macedonia frame gender equality as a foreign imposition and use populist rhetoric (e.g., “protecting children from ideology” or opposing “elites and globalists”) to fuel public backlash. These dynamics mirror developments across many EU member states and must be understood within a wider European framework.

While EU institutions support progressive reforms, anti-gender actors increasingly adapt their strategies to undermine them, even using “European values” as a backlash tool. This makes the Macedonian case highly relevant for EU policy actors monitoring the erosion of democratic norms and gender equality standards at the EU's borders and within its member states.

4. EUROPEAN CONTEXT AND COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

4.1 Transnational roots of anti-gender mobilisation

Over the last decade, Europe has witnessed the rise of powerful transnational campaigns against gender equality, sexuality education, LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive freedoms. These efforts have not emerged in isolation; rather, they represent deliberate and organised initiatives involving political, religious and civil society actors that operate across national boundaries.

Key networks, such as Agenda Europe, CitizenGO and the World Congress of Families, have played a central role in spreading “anti-gender ideology” narratives across Europe. These actors provide campaign templates, legal strategies, funding and digital infrastructure to local movements, fostering what researchers Kuhar and Paternotte term “an epistemic community of anti-gender activism”.⁵²

“

*This isn't a backlash or a culture war.
It's a strategy. And it's well funded.*

”

The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Reclaiming Power, Neil Datta, Brussels, June 2025

The latest report “The next wave: How religious extremism is reclaiming power” from the EPF exposes an alarming rise in funding for anti-rights and anti-gender movements across Europe, amounting to \$1.18 billion between 2019 and 2023.⁵³ The report reveals how religious extremists are making a strategic effort to enter mainstream politics by forming coalitions with anti-gender equality organisations, church-run NGOs and far-right

populist parties. Authored by Neil Datta, Executive Director of EPF, the report reveals an intricate network of 275 actors driving a transnational, authoritarian transformation of Europe under the guise of “tradition” and “human dignity”.

At the same time, North Macedonia’s anti-gender mobilisation does not exist in a vacuum and is deeply embedded within this broader European context. It is directly shaped by these trends and influences. The discursive strategies employed – including framing “gender ideology” as a threat to children – alongside mobilisation tactics such as petitions, referenda and digital campaigns, as well as the formation of specific political alliances, all reflect a pattern of norm contestation that is evident across the region.

The inclusion of both Central/Eastern and Western European cases enables a broader understanding of anti-gender mobilisation as a pan-European phenomenon, rather than a regionally isolated trend. This comparative approach provides relevant insights for North Macedonia, particularly in identifying patterns of political framing, actor alliances and policy impacts that may inform or mirror developments in the national context.

4.2 Comparative case 1: Poland – institutionalisation of anti-gender politics

The Poland case is an example of the institutionalisation of anti-gender discourse across Europe. Since the early 2010s, the Law and Justice Party (PiS)⁵⁴ has advanced a staunchly conservative, Catholic-oriented narrative that casts gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights as existential threats to Polish tradition, national identity and the sanctity of the family. Significant developments include persistent efforts to withdraw from the Istanbul

Convention, the prohibition of CSE in schools and the establishment of so-called “LGBT-free zones” in various municipalities. These policies reflect a close, strategic alignment between the government, the Catholic Church and ultra-conservative CSOs. A key example is the 2020 near-total abortion ban in Poland, which illustrates how sustained anti-gender mobilisation – supported by political and religious actors – can translate into concrete legal rollback of SRHR, framed as the defence of national values against external influence.

Anti-gender mobilisation in Poland has become embedded within state institutions, with government-backed think tanks and curricula revisions reinforcing these positions. This offers a cautionary model of how populist regimes can reframe gender as a geopolitical threat – often conflating feminism with Western liberalism or “cultural Marxism”.⁵⁵ This case demonstrates how populist actors strategically deploy the notion of gender ideology to construct internal and external enemies, presenting gender equality as a threat to national survival. Poland’s discourse has had a wider regional impact, setting a precedent for similar campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe.

4.3 Comparative case 2: Hungary – illiberal democracy and gender rollback

Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party, has become a significant example of intentional regression in gender equality, often justified through appeals to national sovereignty and family values. The administration’s concept of “illiberal democracy” has manifested in sweeping institutional changes – particularly in academia, legal frameworks and the media – that have actively stifled critical gender discourse.

Noteworthy actions include the 2018 prohibition of gender studies programs at Hungarian universities, a constitutional amendment explicitly stating that “the mother is a woman, the father is a man”, and state-sponsored campaigns associating LGBTQIA+ activism with paedophilia and foreign influence. These policy moves are consistently defended using

nationalist and demographic arguments, which frame gender roles as central to the survival and identity of Hungarian civilisation.

Hungary’s anti-gender campaign is also exported regionally, including via conservative think tanks and policy exchanges.⁵⁶ Hungary actively promotes its family policy as an exportable model. It has showcased the approach in international forums, including President Novák’s 2020 visit to Washington DC, and the Budapest Demographic Summit. Hungary proactively engages in anti-gender diplomacy as a matter of national interest and sovereignty. To this end, Hungary has consistently opposed references to SRHR and gender in EU and United Nations forums.

The case exemplifies how gender politics are embedded in Hungary’s foreign and domestic policy, serving as ideological soft power. This international outreach appears effective: in April 2025, *The Hungarian Conservative* claimed that “Trump’s draft family policy framework mirrors Hungary’s approach”.⁵⁷

4.4 Comparative case 3: Croatia – the “referendum path” to anti-gender mobilisation

In Croatia, the Catholic Church – alongside prominent conservative civic organisations – has actively mobilised against gender-sensitive reforms, particularly through referenda and ongoing debates in education policy. The 2013 referendum, which amended the constitution to define marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman, stands out as a significant moment in the legitimisation and mainstreaming of anti-gender discourse.

Key developments include:

- consistent efforts to block the integration of comprehensive health and sexuality education into school curricula;

- persistent opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention; and
- the influential activities of groups such as “In the Name of the Family” (*U ime obitelji*), which have played a central role in shaping public opinion and policy.

Anti-gender discourse in Croatia has been more bottom-up, but no less impactful. Croatia’s use of referenda, petitions and grassroots mobilisation demonstrates how democratic tools can be used to advance anti-gender politics. These strategies have become influential across the region, including in North Macedonia, where similar tactics are increasingly employed

4.5 Comparative case 4: Italy – Catholic continuity and far-right synergy

Since its invention at the beginning of the 2000s, the anti-gender rhetoric has started to seep into the Italian context. Ten years later, following French protests against the same-sex marriage reform, an anti-gender protest movement was launched by the most radical groups of the anti-abortion associations and quickly achieved significant political success.

After 2013 and the success of French anti-gender demonstrations, the term gender ideology suddenly spread across the Italian political field. It became the symbol of what these conservative actors regarded as abnormal and anti-national in the contemporary Italian context. Today, under this umbrella, a vast heterogeneous front of conservative actors operates in Italy.

Research shows that we can distinguish between three sorts of actors involved in the dissemination of the anti-gender discourse in Italy: the Vatican, which invented the rhetorical device in the mid-2000s;⁵⁸ new protest groups like *La Manif pour Tous-Italia* and *Sentinelle in Piedi*, which embody the anti-gender crusade in the public eye; and a few existing anti-abortion associations, which, in connection with traditionalist groups and some far-right activists, constitute the driving force of the protest. These

groups interact with far-right political parties, such as Lega Nord and Fratelli d’Italia, as well as neo-fascist and identitarian groups, such as *Officine identitarie*, *Circolo Proudhon* and *Mille Patrie*.

Anti-gender protesters mobilise a set of rhetorical arguments in which the heterosexual family is the foundation of humanity, civilisation and national community. The notions of “family”, “nation”, “nature” and “heterosexuality” overlap, and children are presented as the innocent victims of LGBTQIA+ people’s egoistic and hedonistic drives.

In this way, the expression “gender ideology” succeeded in becoming an effective political category in Italy. Children books articulating family diversity have been withdrawn from public primary schools; several town halls have adopted resolutions against gender ideology; anti-gender phone lines have been created by public authorities to allow worried parents to denounce the presence of gender in educational programmes; slogans such as “our local administration is against gender ideology” have been broadcast on LED signposts at crossroads in some municipalities.

Right-wing actors such as Fratelli d’Italia have mainstreamed anti-gender narratives by opposing LGBTQIA+ rights, CSE and EU-level gender equality initiatives. Under Giorgia Meloni’s government, this discourse has become increasingly institutionalised. The state now positions itself as an ally of the Vatican in resisting EU-level gender equality measures, aligning national identity with a traditionalist, heteronormative vision of society.

4.6 Comparative case 5: Germany – “anti-genderism”

Within the German context, polemic articulations against “gender” began in the mid-2000s and were barely perceivable until approximately 2013. “Anti-genderism” (*Anti-Genderismus*) has become a common denominator and a “symbolic glue”⁵⁹ for heterogeneous actors within conservative, right-wing, far-right-wing and populist actors. Anti-genderism is a bridging signifier for a variety of anti-

statal, anti-EU, mainly ethno-nationalist, racist and/or xenophobic, aggressively heteronormative, and overall anti-pluralistic constellations, which form the core of contemporary neoconservative and right-wing populism in Germany.

Mobilisation against gender and sexual diversity has recently increased to reach the streets in substantial numbers. Germany has also experienced the rather sudden rise and electoral success of a new populist, right-wing, nationalist, anti-migrant and anti-EU party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), since 2014. Anti-genderism has hence become a facet of organised politics and a (eventual) topic within some regional parliaments. Following the analysis by Kováts and Pöim,⁶⁰ anti-genderism works as a net or bridge – a symbolic glue – between a variety of separate, different and yet related persons, groups and networks.⁶¹

Anti-genderism is also strongly linked, fuelled by and at the same time feeding anti-EU sentiments. Gender, as understood in gender mainstreaming, is systematically used as a code for “Brussels” and to denounce problematic things about the EU (such as a lack of democratic procedures and bureaucracy). This case highlights how gender can function as a proxy for broader anxieties about identity, sovereignty and societal change. Anti-gender discourse is not only a cultural critique but also a political strategy embedded in broader right-wing populist agendas.

4.7 Patterns and relevance for North Macedonia

The patterns emerging across these cases point to a recognisable strategy of anti-gender mobilisation. Key discursive frames – gender ideology, child protection and identity – are consistently used to legitimise resistance. The actors who are driving these efforts range from political parties seeking electoral capital to religious institutions, CSOs and transnational networks with broader agendas.

Their methods are now familiar: legislative proposals targeting gender rights; referenda used to block progressive reforms; orchestrated attacks on

school curricula; and the creation of moral panic in public discourse.

In North Macedonia, these tactics are especially apparent in the opposition to educational reforms and CSE, the spread of disinformation targeting LGBTQIA+ rights, and a coordinated backlash against gender equality initiatives. With the backlash becoming increasingly institutionalised, together with the underlying conditions – low institutional trust, a fragmented civil society landscape and influential religious authorities – this already provides fertile ground for escalation.

4.8 Key insights for North Macedonia

4.8.1 The structure of anti-gender mobilisation is replicable

Lesson: North Macedonian anti-gender campaigns are not isolated – they mirror the ones in Europe and the USA:

- **CSOs** linked to religious or nationalist agendas;
- **right-wing or populist politicians** using anti-gender framing as political capital; and
- **cross-border support**, notably from Christian-right or conservative networks in the EU and USA.

4.8.2 Professionalisation of strategic anti-gender CSOs

Lesson: anti-gender actors often adopt the **same methods as feminist or LGBTQIA+ advocates** – including professional lobbying, coalition-building and messaging. This is already visible in North Macedonia with:

- well-structured campaigns against CSE;
- professional use of social media and parental mobilisation; and

- carefully framed “child protection” narratives with moral overtones.

Implication: progressive actors must treat these groups as **strategic political players**, not fringe voices.

4.8.3 Hubs and “bridging” organisations play a critical role

Lesson: in Europe, including the European Parliament, certain CSOs function as “bridges” between civil society and formal institutions. In North Macedonia, we see emerging parallels:

- religious think tanks and family-focused NGOs act as **policy influencers**;
- coordinated appearances** in parliamentary hearings or media campaigns; and
- gaining legitimacy by framing themselves as **experts**, not activists.

Implication: map and monitor “bridging actors” who mediate between grassroots and elite spaces.

4.8.4 Discursive strategies travel across borders

Lesson: the language used in other European countries – for example, gender ideology, the LGBTQIA+ lobby, the protection of children and defence of the traditional family – is echoed in North Macedonia’s public and political discourse.

Implication: disinformation campaigns and discursive tools are **imported**, not invented. Awareness of these narratives’ European roots can help counter them with pre-emptive responses.⁶²

4.8.5 Anti-gender mobilisation is proactive, not just reactive

Lesson: anti-gender actors anticipate progressive reforms and position themselves to block or dilute them. In North Macedonia, opposition to gender equality is often **pre-emptive** – attacking draft curricula, progressive legislation or proposed strategies *before* adoption.

Implication: gender-equality and progressive actors should adopt **anticipatory communication strategies** and stakeholder engagement **before** backlash escalates.

4.9 Common patterns in anti-gender campaigns across Europe

4.9.1 Shared ideological foundations

- Gender ideology as an enemy concept:** across Europe, anti-gender campaigns construct a shared ideological enemy called *gender ideology*. This term is deliberately vague and used to mobilise fear and moral panic, suggesting that feminist, LGBTQIA+ or reproductive rights’ movements seek to dismantle family, tradition and national identity.⁶³
- Moral panic and nationalism:** campaigns often link anti-gender rhetoric with nationalist discourse, framing gender ideology as a foreign or Western imposition threatening national sovereignty, especially in post-socialist states.

4.9.2 Transnational connectivity

- Coordinated transnational effort:** despite appearing locally grounded, campaigns are part of a broader **transnational network**. Organisations like the **World Congress of Families**, **CitizenGO** and **Agenda Europe** play key roles in transferring narratives, legal strategies and campaign tactics across borders.

- **Religious and conservative funding:** these networks often receive support from **US-based Christian-right organisations, Vatican-affiliated groups** or far-right political networks, enabling the spread of common narratives and resources.

4.9.3 Strategic framing and political alliances

- **Appeal to common values:** campaigns strategically reframe opposition to gender equality by appealing to “common sense”, “natural order” or “parental rights”. This makes their message more palatable to wider audiences beyond extremist or religious circles.
- **Instrumental alliances:** anti-gender actors build opportunistic alliances with **right-wing populist parties**, religious authorities and even some mainstream political actors. These alliances amplify their policy influence.

4.9.4 Tactical innovation

- **Use of legal tools:** anti-gender movements are not just grassroots protests; they use **sophisticated legal and institutional tools**, such as citizen initiatives, referenda and lawsuits, to block or reverse progressive legislation.
- **Digital mobilisation:** high reliance on social media campaigns, viral videos and online petitions (e.g., CitizenGO) allows fast, wide dissemination of messaging and coordination of transnational efforts.
- **Anti-expert positioning:** many campaigns explicitly reject academic or expert authority, framing them as part of a corrupt elite that pushes gender ideology. Yet, ironically, they also **create their own “experts”** (e.g., anti-gender psychologists, bioethicists) to produce counter-knowledge.

4.9.5 Targeted policy areas

Anti-gender campaigns typically focus on several key policy domains:

- **Education:** strong opposition to **sexuality education, gender-sensitive curricula** and even the use of the word gender in textbooks.
- **Family law:** promotion of traditional, heterosexual family structures and opposition to same-sex marriage or adoption rights.
- **Reproductive rights:** opposition to abortion access, contraception and reproductive health services.
- **Gender equality laws:** efforts to block or repeal laws on gender quotas, anti-discrimination or gender mainstreaming in policy making.

4.9.6 Impacts and risks

- **Democratic backsliding:** anti-gender mobilisations often contribute to **authoritarian tendencies**, weakening human rights’ frameworks, marginalising civil society and reducing institutional pluralism.
- **Normalisation of hate speech:** the rise of anti-gender discourse has led to increased **public hostility** toward feminists, LGBTQIA+ individuals and minorities. Hate speech has become more mainstream in media and politics.

4.9.7 Adaptability and localisation

- **Locally tailored strategies:** while connected transnationally, campaigns **adapt their messaging** to the cultural, political and religious contexts of each country. For example:
 - in **Poland**, campaigns centre around Catholic identity and sovereignty; and

- in **Balkan countries**, gender equality is framed as an imported, “Western” threat to tradition and family.

5. COUNTER- NARRATIVES AND PROGRESSIVE RESISTANCE

In response to the growing influence of anti-gender mobilisations, it was mostly feminist and civic actors in North Macedonia who mobilised to defend democratic values and uphold human rights. We have seen their efforts to engage in advocacy and challenge regressive policy shifts through legal, discursive and grassroots strategies. Successful counter-narratives are the challenge that yet remains to be achieved.

CSOs, members of the Gender Equality Platform and the Network for Protection against Discrimination have played a critical watchdog role.⁶⁴ They have constantly warned and reacted to regressive legal reforms, such as amendments to the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Secondary Education and the introduction of a new rulebook for reporting violence in schools. These organisations have utilised a variety of advocacy tools, including public statements and detailed legal analyses. Their discourse is firmly anchored in a rights-based framework, frequently referencing international human rights' treaties such as the Istanbul Convention, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant EU non-discrimination directives.

Moreover, organisations working on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights have countered moral panic around CSE and LGBTQIA+ rights by presenting empirical data, testimonies and youth-led research. They have also trained educators, parents and young people to critically engage with disinformation and hate speech, fostering resilience within school communities.⁶⁵

5.1 Political responses and inter-parliamentary solidarity

Progressive MPs have spoken out against anti-gender amendments. Although outnumbered in legislative votes, they have used their positions to raise awareness; hold debates; and defend inclusive legislation, such as the draft Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Civil Registry, and the necessity of inclusive, non-discriminatory education policies.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this policy study highlight the increasingly sophisticated and transnational nature of anti-gender mobilisations in North Macedonia and, more broadly, across Europe. These movements – often enabled or echoed by populist political actors – instrumentalise narratives of gender ideology, foreign interference and moral panic to erode public trust in democratic institutions, civil society and international frameworks. They capitalise on structural weaknesses in national policy making, educational systems and political discourse to advance regressive agendas that disproportionately harm women, LGBTQIA+ persons and other marginalised groups.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that local feminist and civic actors continue to invest significant resistance, developing counter-narratives and interventions that reassert commitments to human rights, equality and democratic pluralism.

A comparative lens with the broader European context shows similar trends of backlash and resistance, further reinforcing the need for integrated, cross-border responses and solidarity among progressive actors.

To safeguard gender equality and democratic resilience, it is crucial to address both the discursive strategies and the institutional consequences of anti-gender mobilisation in the EU and EU accession countries. The recommendations that follow are structured to provide clear, targeted actions for multiple actors such as governments, parliaments, civil society and international partners – based on the insights derived from this analysis.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines concrete, research-informed policy recommendations designed to address anti-gender mobilisation, safeguard democratic principles and promote inclusive governance in North Macedonia and the EU. The proposals are intended for a broad spectrum of stakeholders, government authorities, parliamentarians, CSOs, media representatives and international partners.

7.1 Empowering institutional and political resilience

7.1.1 Government and executive institutions

Top priorities

- **Institutional safeguards against backsliding policy revision:** reintroduce compulsory mechanisms requiring inclusive consultations (including experts and CSOs) for any legislative amendments affecting education, gender equality or human rights.
- **Restore comprehensive education content:** reintegrate and promote evidence-based CSE and gender equality topics in primary and secondary curricula.

Further measures

- Support gender mechanisms (gender focal points) across all levels of governance.
- Promote gender-responsive budgeting and analysis in strategic planning.
- Allocate dedicated funding for gender-sensitive training of civil servants and educational staff to recognise and counter gender-based discrimination and hate narratives.

- **Initiate systems to monitor and address anti-gender disinformation:** establishing a mechanism for early warning and monitoring is crucial for identifying anti-gender campaigns, whether these occur online or offline. Such a system should involve coordinated efforts among media regulatory bodies, human rights organisations and relevant state institutions, including the Agency for Audiovisual Media Services. This collective approach could serve as a unified response to instances of moral panic and hate speech.

7.1.2 Parliament

Top priorities

- **Strengthen parliamentary oversight:** ensure that committees on human rights, equal opportunities, social policy, health and education conduct impact assessments on all draft laws related to social cohesion and anti-discrimination.
- **Avoid fast-track legal amendments in sensitive areas:** restrict the use of shortened legislative procedures for laws affecting fundamental rights, education or equality.
- **Strengthen national legislation and implementation:** develop and ensure budgets to effectively cope with hate speech; smear disinformation; online violence; and attacks towards women, marginalised groups and human rights' defenders.

Further measures

- Institutionalise cooperation with human-rights-focused civil society in the legislative process.
- Strengthen capacities and cohesion of the Club of Women MPs as a cross-party gender equality

caucus to safeguard against politicisation and backsliding.

7.1.3 Civil society and feminist movements

Top priorities

- **Develop coordinated counter-narratives:** launch educational campaigns that reframe gender ideology by affirming constitutional values, human rights and children's wellbeing.
- **Strengthen the legal watchdog's role:** monitor legal changes and file constitutional complaints where gender regression or discriminatory provisions occur.
- **Parliamentary committees and MPs are important allies:** support parliamentary committees and MPs that are allies in screening legislation for discriminatory provisions. Support parliamentary bodies that provide gender impact assessments and human rights' compatibility checks before adopting new legal reforms, particularly those affecting youth, education and family rights.

Further measures

- Strengthening civic education and enhancing public awareness regarding gender and human rights. Comprehensive campaigns, along with working with schools, to actively promote democratic values, diversity and equality. Involving youth-led initiatives and social influencers offers alternative narratives that counteract harmful rhetoric. Furthermore, supporting parent associations, educators and students – who serve as key stakeholders – remains vital in challenging misinformation and fostering a culture of inclusivity. Support in terms of funding is also crucial.
- Continue regional cooperation to exchange best practices and protect activists under threat from anti-gender groups.

7.1.4 International actors (EU, UN agencies, donors)

Top priorities

- **Apply political conditionality:** tie democratic reform and gender equality benchmarks more directly to EU accession progress and external funding mechanisms.
- **Support legal and strategic resilience:** provide technical assistance to strengthen gender mainstreaming in national policy strategies, especially in education, justice and public administration reforms.
- **Increase support and funding for progressive and feminist CSOs:** sustained, core financial support is crucial for groups advancing gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and youth empowerment. This funding should prioritise outreach, advocacy and strategic litigation, thereby enabling these organisations to challenge anti-gender movements and institutional opposition effectively.

Further measures

- Ensure that gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights and support of local feminist and human rights organisations are prioritised in EU and international donor programs.
- Support watchdog programs to closely follow trends, disclose main actors, collect data and create strategic responses towards anti-democratic and anti-gender movements.
- Monitor anti-gender influence as anti-democracy and a governance risk and address it within the rule of law and fundamental rights frameworks in the enlargement process.
- Strengthen gender-specific benchmarks in accession chapters, including effective implementation of anti-discrimination legislation in line with EU law (not just formal alignment). For example, by establishing robust national-level

systems for monitoring and evaluating Reform Agendas,⁶⁶ including the systematic integration of gender-responsive indicators across all policy priorities within national Reform Agendas. Ensure the meaningful and inclusive participation of a broad range of CSOs, particularly women's rights and LGBTQIA+ organisations, in national monitoring and evaluation processes, with special attention being paid to reforms concerning fundamental rights.

- Investment in the prevention of and reduction in case backlogs related to gender discrimination and gender-based violence.
- Provide systematic gender-disaggregated statistics for all policy fields.
- Align with and implement the Istanbul Convention.

7.2 EU legislative relevance and policy entry points

The findings of this policy study intersect directly with the ongoing development of the EU Gender Equality Strategy post-2025, which is expected to prioritise a stronger response to anti-gender backlash, online gender-based violence and the protection of LGBTQIA+ rights across member states and neighbourhood countries.

It also supports enlargement monitoring frameworks, such as:

- the EU Rule of Law Mechanism;
- the European Commission's annual enlargement package;
- the LGBTQIA+ equality strategy; and
- the Istanbul Convention implementation tracking.

Under the new European Democracy Shield framework, keep gender equality on the agenda in discussions on shifting geopolitical contexts and evolving EU priorities, including security.

Further measures for EU institutions

- Integrate gender equality resistance monitoring into the European Rule of Law Mechanism and enlargement reports.
- Provide targeted funding for civil society and education programs countering misinformation and promoting inclusive values.
- Include anti-gender backlash as a risk factor in gender impact assessments across EU policy areas.
- Expand strategic partnerships between EU institutions and feminist networks in the Western Balkans and beyond.

ANNEX 1 PERSONALITIES AND ANTI-GENDER RHETORIC

I would advise those who make a good living from promoting CSE (Comprehensive Sexual Education) not to use the term sexual orientation, because it also implies the notion of disorientation. Let them say sexual preference instead. And finally: these different preferences are supposed to be brought closer to young people so that they can become 'tolerant' and 'healthy' individuals. This means that anyone who does not tolerate ALL existing 'differences' is considered unhealthy. But even though uneducated, both my child and I should know where the limits of tolerance lie. Paedophilia has not yet been legalised, and as for sex with animals – I am not sure.

Therefore, it seems to me that CSE is being used, on the backs of children, to resolve the issue of social acceptance (and even VIP valuation) of homosexuality.

Venko Andonovski, writer and academia representative, column "Po(a)rno Sexual Education" 2021

The fourth controversy (regarding the Draft Law on Gender Equality) involves interference with children and the organised promotion of possibilities for gender change through modern sexuality education... The fifth contradiction (of the Law) is that after decades of feminist struggle against stereotypes and sexism, of which women themselves were the victims, stereotypes and sexism are now coming back into fashion through trans people. We can see that one of the main reasons given for wanting to change one's gender is the desire to dress and behave like the opposite sex.⁶⁷

Liljana Popovska, member of the Executive Committee of the European Women's Lobby, ex-MP, forum on "The True Face of Gender", Strumica, June 2023

Our society is being threatened at lightning speed by an even more dangerous, destructive, and poisonous ideology – gender equality. This manipulative ideology is blasphemous, unnatural, and perverted. God created man and woman, and everything altered or different from God's creation is abnormal and therefore unacceptable.⁶⁸

Metropolitan Petar, Macedonian Orthodox Church (April 2023)

Since this law (the Draft Law on Gender Equality) essentially introduces a new category called gender identity, even the provisions in the law that are quite good fall under the shadow of this new concept of gender identity, which will be introduced in legislation for the first time. With the introduction of gender identity, which is based on a feeling, I could, on the basis of that feeling, perhaps feel like a woman today, and tomorrow, or at some point, feel like a man and declare myself as one. On the basis of feelings, we (as women) could lose a large part of our privileges and achievements... In our case, this law serves as a mask for introducing a new definition of gender identities. Everyone who reads it thinks the law refers to men and women, and it does, but it also includes this notion of gender identity within it, which relativises both man and woman in the text.⁶⁹

Daniela Dimitrievska, Macedonian Women's Lobby, TV Sitel, 2023

We had discussions with a larger group of those parents and adjusted [the content of the law] according to what they believe is good for their children – that is, wherever it was considered that a certain gender ideology should be promoted, such a

*term was replaced with equality between the rights of women and men...*⁷⁰

Antonio Miloshoski, MP and member of the Executive Committee of VMRO-DPMNE, media interview, July 2025

*The Draft Law on 'Gender Equality' represents the greatest evil and danger for women in their pursuit of equality. It also legalises violence against everything that signifies and represents women, carried out by trans women – that is, biological men – and by the transgender ideology, all under the guise of a so-called 'fight' against violence toward women.*⁷¹

Vicar Bishop Jakov Stobiski, Strumica Diocese, Macedonian Orthodox Church

*Parents must react in schools when they see that their children are being indoctrinated – regardless of whether such content exists in textbooks or is introduced through a document from the Ministry of Education or Bureau of Education. If they notice that instead of discussing 'sex', the term 'gender' is used, or that besides male and female gender they speak about 'trans' and others – parents must react. As long as there are organisations, that is, gender ideologists who push this agenda, there will also be the Coalition for the Protection of Children and the Parents' Front, who are our partners – we will continue organising such debates and enlightening the people.*⁷²

Argireta Ateva, Coalition for Protection of Children, public forum on "How Far Has Gender Gone?", Strumica, April 2024.

The bylaws and sub-legal acts we mentioned during this debate already exist and are gradually being enforced in institutions where, according to them, urgent action is required. In 2021, the previous Minister of Labour and Social Policy adopted a document – the Concept for Primary Education – which introduced

*so-called 'gender sensitivity'. Under that heading lies everything that will be implemented as a misuse of schools, turning them into centers of indoctrination aimed at changing children's perceptions from an early age, making them more accepting of what will later be presented as options for gender transition, including hormone therapy and surgical procedures.*⁷³

Petar Markov, former municipal adviser in municipality Novo Selo, MP from VMRO-DPMNE, and initiator of the 2025 amendments to the Education Laws, forum on "The True Face of Gender", Strumica, June 2023

*Here we are, the children of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, gathered together with representatives of all churches and religious communities to say YES to life and to the sanctity of the family – a family formed by one man and one woman – to declare that we will defend our dearest ones, our children.*⁷⁴

Archbishop Stefan, Head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, public protest opposing the adoption proposed for the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Civil Registry, Skopje, 2023

ENDNOTES

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In light of security considerations, it was decided not to publicly disclose the identities of the authors; their names are held in confidence by FEPS.

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit German foundation based in Bonn and Berlin. It focuses on the core ideas and values of social democracy - freedom, justice and solidarity - and organises its work autonomously and independently. The FES Office Skopje, is its local representation in North Macedonia.



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The Progres Institute is an independent, non-profit think tank that promotes social democratic values in North Macedonia. The institute's activities are focused on research, education, and advocacy, with a focus on socioeconomic equality, gender equality, youth participation, democracy, the rule of law, and climate justice.



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At a time when democratic institutions across the EU and in its candidate countries are under siege from illiberal populist movements, gender equality has become a defining battleground. This policy study explores the dangerous interplay between the EU and North Macedonia when it comes to European populism and anti-gender narratives, placing it within the broader context of European political and social dynamics. As illiberal movements gain traction across the EU and its accession countries, gender equality has become an increasingly contested area, with anti-gender campaigns - rooted in appeals to “traditional values,” nationalism, and disinformation - shaping policy debates.

The analysis highlights how trends in North Macedonia reflect broader patterns observed in EU member states such as Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, and Germany. For the European Union, the situation in North Macedonia is particularly relevant, as gender mainstreaming and non-discrimination are key components of the EU acquis and measurable criteria in the enlargement process. Progress in these areas is a matter of alignment with EU standards and values.

By offering comparative insights and practical recommendations, this study aims to support European, national, and civil society actors in addressing these challenges. It underscores the importance of a coordinated approach to uphold gender equality as a fundamental principle of EU integration and democratic governance.

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