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DE-DEMOCRATISATION, GENDER+ EQUALITY AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION IN EUROPE

DIAGNOSIS

Identifying the main challenges that the rising opposition against gender+ equality is posing to gender+ equality politics and policies and democracy more broadly in Europe today.

Opposition against gender+ equality policies and movements in Europe is on the rise. Broadly defined as “any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage” (Verloo, 2018: 6), it poses serious challenges not only to gender+ equality itself but to democracy more broadly. In what follows, the *DEDEMOC network*, comprising academics, politicians and civil society actors specialised in the matter (<https://unia.es/es/i-d-i/catedras/unesco/desdemocratizacion-genero-y-las-politicas-de-exclusion-en-europa>), have identified the main challenges that such opposition presents, divided into four strongly interrelated thematic areas of special relevance:

1. *The political, institutional and legal domain;*
2. *Gender+ equality movements and coalitions;*
3. *Knowledge production;*
4. *Resources and funding.*

Democracy, neoliberalism and intersectionality, which are common to the four thematic areas, emerged as issues of central importance in relation to both the causes and effects of the current rise of opposition against gender+ equality in Europe.

1. Challenges in the Political, Institutional & Legal Domain: Democracy & the State

— Antigender movements and institutional actors are by definition exclusionary. As such, they pose a **serious threat to democracy**. They may however utilise democratic instruments and channels (such as elections) and take advantage of the current weakening of democracy in Europe, in relation to the increasing limitation of states' capacity to guarantee social equality, wellbeing and economic redistribution as a result of the rise of neoliberalism, the waning of welfare, the resulting marketisation of the state, the upsurge of corruption and the growing lack of independence of state institutions, to garner support and attack democracy from within.

— Indeed, to different degrees, antigender forces, whether radical right political parties, organised religion or ultra-conservative individuals and groups, have started to infiltrate the legislative, executive and judiciary branches of democratic states in Europe alongside other domains that are key to democracy, such as the media or civil society, as well as the EU polity itself, and to undermine them from inside. This sometimes takes place straightforwardly, by **developing a directly hostile stance against feminist and LGBTQI* actors and advocates, by limiting fundamental rights and freedoms, especially of minorities, through policy dismantling, that is, by discontinuing gender+ equality policies and/or institutions, as well as by altering procedural democratic rules aimed at guaranteeing equality, fairness and plurality, such as the rule of law or free speech.**

— Yet it also takes place subtly, through **co-opting fundamental rights discourses; reframing or eliminating gender+ equality policy implementation arrangements and budgets;** substituting the objectives of gender+ equality with the aims of protecting the traditional, heterosexual, nuclear family; reaffirming traditional conceptions of gender based on sexual difference and reinstating traditional gender and sexual roles. Of particular importance in this regard is that anti-gender movements and institutional actors **reinsert and fortify an essentialising, dichotomous understanding of gender and thus of the distinction between women and men as different.** This traditional binary concept of gender resonates with ample parts of those newly disenfranchised by neoliberalism and the waning of democracy as it seem to provide a place of certainty in the midst of growing precariousness and insecurity.

— A general fundamental challenge to democracy identified is the **reduction of public policies that place the common good at the centre of the political agenda,** through the glorification of private/particular interests, which is enabled and in turn strengthened by the rise of neoliberalism not just as an economic project, but also a political and cultural one.

— The heightened presence of religious actors within antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe, in addition, is **threatening the strict separation between the church and the state** that has been a defining feature of European liberal democracies since the nineteenth century.

2. Challenges to Gender+ Equality Movements and Coalitions:

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **co-opt the emancipatory and inclusionary language and advocacy strategies of progressive movements**, again, to subvert democracy from inside. Indeed, they frame their exclusionary and antidemocratic demands in the language of democracy, equality, freedom and human rights, instrumentalising such concepts and the values and ideas they embody for purposes that run against to their original inclusionary and emancipatory aims. In fact, they often present themselves as victimized minorities and as the defenders of *ordinary women*, in ways that are fully compatible with the mainstream conservative logic they defend.

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **instrumentalise and exploit the complexity of progressive movements in order to promote their divisiveness**. In particular, they instigate the divisiveness between the women's and LGBTQI* equality projects and the class and racial inequality projects. In addition, they exploit the generational divide, pitting older and newer generations against each other. As a result, they **undermine the coalition-building capacity of such movements and their development of truly intersectional emancipatory projects**, and they affect the capacity of social movements to forge internal alliances as well as alliances with political parties, public administrations and the media. In contrast, antigender movements and institutional actors often constitute strong and well-funded advocacy coalitions that operate well at the levels of legal reform, policy debates, social discourses, and culture, with plenty of access to mainstream politics and the specialised media.

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe also **exploit the tensions that are inherent to progressive movements, in particular the desire for autonomy and their institutionalisation through the state which** enhances efficiency yet fosters elitism, creating distance between such movement and their grassroots.

— This tension is in turn intensified by the increasing **limitation of civic space and narrowing of channels for non-state actors to access the state and its decision and policy-making processes, as well as by strategies that diminish the mobilisation and political power of activists**. Antigender illiberal actors pursue this limitation of feminist and LGBTQI* activists' capacity of action through a range of instruments such as blocking access to funding, blocking access to consultation or even through violent and aggressive attacks such as smear campaigns or harassment, legal outlawing and prohibition, judicial and political persecution

or stigmatisation, as well as the sponsoring of oppositional movements and organizations, which facilitates the creation of a civic space that supports the state's illiberal objectives. Anti-gender civil society is often strengthened and used by illiberal state actors to replace existing civil society, while positions that gender+ equality activists previously held in policy processes are given to conservative, pro-family, or men's rights organisations.

3. Challenges in relation to Knowledge & its Production:

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **directly attack the institutions and programs dedicated to produce knowledge in relation to gender+ equality**, by limiting funding or directly closing them when they have the power to do so, threatening fields of scholarship and teaching that have already been severely weakened by years of neoliberal education and university politics and policies. This has negative effects for the quality of democracy, not only because it expresses a form of repression that is at odds with democracy by restricting human understanding of politics and society, but also because it hinders democratic deliberation on gender inequality, racial inequality or complex forms of intersectional inequality.

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe actively **promote disinformation in relation to gender+ equality**, often with help from the media and instrumentalising the increasingly exclusionary nature of academic knowledge production which follows the growing neoliberalisation of academia, and which in addition contributes to strongly isolate the knowledge production efforts of academia from other domains, in particular civil society.

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **instrumentalise and co-opt the knowledge produced in relation to gender+ equality by dedicated and specialised scholars**, exploiting it for purposes that run against to their original inclusionary and emancipatory aims.

— Finally, antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **produce and promote their own 'knowledge', which they present as resisting totalitarian indoctrination and as common-sensical, unproblematic and apolitical in nature, rather than as unfounded political opinions**, even when such "knowledge" is authoritarian, conservative, exclusionary, violent and, in many cases, fundamentally untrue. However, such form of "knowledge" is very difficult to combat through scientific knowledge, which follows different rules of validation and verification.

4. Resources & Funding:

— Antigender movements and institutional actors in Europe **increasingly receive a growing share of the state funding previously granted to gender+ equality actors**, both within the state and civil society, especially

when the former are in power. This adds to the emotional and economic exhaustion of overwhelmed gender+ equality actors, which often have to respond to the immediate needs of their constituencies, focusing on outreach rather than advocacy, as well as to the increasing neoliberalisation and marketisation of the state, which foregrounds economic versus social equality criteria in the allocation of public funds.

— Moreover, when in power, **antigender institutional actors can and have effectively blocked progressive actors from receiving public funding, even EU funds**, which translates into increasing institutional instability, restricted budgets for salaries and services, increasing reliance on voluntary work, burnout etc.

— **Traditional sources of public funding for gender+ equality actors are insufficient and inadequate in order to respond to antigender movements and institutional actors**, as they tend to be project-based rather than long-term and flexible. Moreover, the **imbalance in the public and private funding** that antigender actors receive and the funding that feminist and LGBTQI* actors receive is problematic for democracy and equality in Europe, because actors that actively pursue antidemocratic goals have significantly greater resources than actors that work towards the construction of more inclusive and democratic societies in Europe.

— Finally, antigender movements and institutional actors have **greater access to private, transnational funds**, which tend to be lacking in accountability and transparency.