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## AUSSER DER REIHE

Borbála Juhász and Andrea Pető

### „Kulturkampf“ in Hungary about reproductive rights: actors and agenda<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

*This article is part of a larger study that discusses actors and the different NGOs dealing with reproductive rights in Hungary based on statistical data about the financial background of the organisations, interviews with actors and analysis of the legal background together with discourse analysis. The paper claims that the topic of reproductive rights is so diverse that it is almost impossible to find one actor that represents a coherent position, as would be theoretically expected in relation to such different fields. Based on analysing the collaboration between the different actors it further claims that heterogeneity also proves that traditional ideas about “left” and “right” and “progressive” and “conservative” need to be rethought.*

#### Zusammenfassung

*Dieser Artikel ist Teil einer größeren Studie, in der Akteure und die verschiedenen NRO, die sich mit reproduktiven Rechten in Ungarn befassen, auf der Grundlage statistischer Daten zum finanziellen Hintergrund der Organisationen, Interviews mit Akteuren und der Analyse des rechtlichen Hintergrunds sowie einer Diskursanalyse erörtert werden. Die Artikel behauptet, dass das Thema der reproduktiven Rechte so vielfältig ist, dass es fast unmöglich ist, einen Akteur zu finden, der eine kohärente Position darstellt, wie dies theoretisch in Bezug auf solche unterschiedlichen Bereiche zu erwarten wäre. Basierend auf der Analyse der Zusammenarbeit der verschiedenen Akteure wird ferner behauptet, dass die Heterogenität auch beweist, dass traditionelle Vorstellungen von „links“ und „rechts“ sowie „progressiv“ und „konservativ“ überdacht werden müssen.*

### 1. Introduction

In the past decade, events, politics and especially gender politics of Hungary have been discussed in the international media and by academics. In this paper we argue that a new form of governance has been created in Hungary, the ‘illiberal polypore state’,

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Pető finalised this paper with the support of the Research Group „Global Contestations of Women’s and Gender Rights“ organised by Alexandra Scheele, Julia Roth and Heidemarie Winkel at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at Bielefeld University.

which has fundamentally changed the relationship of the state to its citizens (Grzebal-ska/Pető 2018). The state has now been captured by a small group which not only uses the latter’s resources and infrastructure, but also forces activists to rethink their relationship to the state, as well as limits traditional forms of activism.

The past decade has been a period of increasing Kulturkampf in Hungary, and our research has attempted to unveil the roots of this polarisation. After 2010, however, two parallel ideologies influenced developments: neoliberal neopatriarchy and fundamentalist religion (Christian, Judaist, etc.), which combine to harm women’s rights in some areas but in other cases, such as prostitution conflict. That is why it is important to map the different actors of this new regime of social reproduction and to think about the times when the Kulturkampf will be over and the trust between the actors will need to be rebuilt.

From the focal areas of reproductive rights there are some policy areas which are threatened and can be described as being stuck within the rigid dichotomy of “progressive” vs. “conservative” – such as abortion, to an extent contraception, gay and transgender rights, and Roma women’s rights. There are policy areas where there is a surprising amount of cooperation and understanding between the two sides, mostly due to the work of women activists (these areas include maternal health, undisturbed hospital and home-birth and breastfeeding rights, surrogate motherhood seen as a violation of women’s rights, the condemnation of oversexualised, sexist images of women and understanding prostitution as a form of violence against women, and sugaring seen as being harmful to women). There are other policy areas that can be located somewhere in between, such as in-vitro-fertilisation (IVF), regarding which conservative forces have protested against the Catholic church’s plan to make IVF illegal and unsupported by social security funds. The issue addressed in this article is how the different actors address the different policy areas, and how they shape their strategies for development. This sheds light on the new cleavages that have cut through traditional left and right divisions as far as reproductive rights are concerned.

This article is part of a larger study where we discuss actors in this fight based on statistical data on the financial background of the civil society organisations (herein-after CSOs), their legal status, international affiliations, projects, number of staff, and volunteers and supporters through data publicly available on their websites (it is compulsory to upload public spending reports in Hungary) and the Hungarian Court’s civil database. Reliable sex-segregated data were hard to find after the national Central Statistical Office (hereinafter referred to by its Hungarian abbreviation KSH) was taken over by the government’s ideological influence and changed its methodology to

show a positive picture of Hungary (Diószegi-Horváth 2020). Data collected by government-sponsored organisations show a very different picture, for example, of the impact of COVID-19 on families, than the few independent organisations.<sup>2</sup> We also interviewed activists for and against reproductive rights. We were only allowed to conduct interviews on the conservative side with people we already knew personally and had had professional contact with earlier. Other conservative actors turned us down because of their workload or because they had checked Andrea Pető's publication record and found references to reproductive rights in an article by Pető published by *The Conversations*, which already sheds light on the new, global dimension of fights involving reproductive rights.

## 2. History of civil society in Hungary: political and professional divisions

The post WWII developments in Hungarian civil society were interrupted in 1951 when the last non-communist civil organisations were closed down in the process of communist takeover. During the 40 years of state socialism, only party-affiliated and sports or cultural associations (choirs or stamp collectors, or dog shelters, for example) could function. The first NGO was a dog shelter founded by the wife of the executed minister of Home Affairs, Julia Rajk (see Pető 2007). From the end of the 1970s, and especially towards the second part of the 1980s, new movements and professional organisations emerged (for example, the Hungarian Sociological Society in 1978, and the first gay organisation, Homeros Lambda National Organisation of Hungarian Homosexuals, in 1987), which the party could not control as the legal framework had changed. The politically most important movements were ecological ones (for example, those against a Danube dam/waterworks to be built on the Hungarian-Czech border, Bős-Nagymaros/ Gabčíkovo) and anti-poverty ones (Fund to Support the Poor; SZETA). As independent parties could not exist in a one-party state, the political dissident movement grew out of these civil movements. The issue of combining social movements and politics in a socialist state was found to be so interesting by a young law student that in 1987 he wrote his thesis on this topic, researching the Polish example. This student was Viktor Orbán, who by now is the longest serving PM of Hungary, and in 2014 initiated an attack against Hungarian NGOs (Orbán 1987).

<sup>2</sup> While the number of domestic violence cases and incidence of alcohol consumption had increased, the government report mentioned that the lockdown had increased solidarity within families.

After the political-economic transition, there was a huge boom in civil organising. In 1989, 8,796 NGOs had been registered, but ten years later the number was 48,171 (Szalainé/Nagy 2002: 559). The role of the Soros Foundation (then based in Budapest) was important from the beginning in terms of supporting Hungarian cultural life and civil society, while US influence was also important in creating the foundations for pro-democracy mobilisations – for example, journalism (the Centre for Independent Journalism, CIJ, was established in 1995). The first Hungarian feminist NGO, the NANE Association, which still works for victims of domestic violence, started in 1994, with an English feminist, Antonia Burrows, playing a pivotal role at the start by introducing volunteer methods (Feffer 2014). The first human rights NGO and legal aid bureau, the Helsinki Committee, was founded during the year of change in 1989.

Apart from the strong neo-liberalisation of every aspect of life, another important facet of Hungarian civil life became visible very soon: political divides and “NGO capture” by political parties. Rival civil organisations with the same profiles popped up in the 1990s along the conservative/liberal-left divide, even in professional organisations, and this influences the present analysis too. We find parallel structures with all advocacy groups and trade unions: two associations for journalists (MUOSZ and MUSZ), two medical doctors' chambers (the Orvosi Kamara, and the Keresztény Orvosi Kamara), two teachers' trade unions (PDSZ and PSZ), and even two district nurse associations (MAVE and MVVSZ). This means that a governing party, regardless of which one, can always divide the electorate, because for each issue there are two representative groups – one critical, one supportive. When Fidesz lost the elections in 2002, Orbán meticulously built up a whole system of mass popular civic circles registered as NGOs to renew and mobilise the conservative political side from the grassroots level (Civic Circles). This legacy of division and parallel systems for doing the very same work is one of our main findings in relation to reproductive rights.

## 3. Hungarian civil society under Fidesz

The electoral victory of FIDESZ brought new elements into the lives of NGOs. In the ruthless socialisation fight for hegemony, they have faced attempts to delegitimise and appropriate their agenda. A concentrated political attack focused on the so-called “Norway Grant holder” and “Soros funded” NGOs from 2014 that included many women and LGBTQI organisations. These attacks overlapped with the anti-gender and anti-CEU attacks (see Kováts/Pető 2017). In 2013, a series of initiatives implemented by government-friendly media and state actors against a group of NGOs

dealing with democracy and human rights labelled them “leftist fake NGOs”, “paid political actors”, and agents who “serve foreign interest” (see Helsinki 2017). The Hungarian Women’s Lobby (HWL) and three of its member organisations – including those that combat violence against women and promote LGBT and reproductive rights – were included on a list of 13 NGOs considered “problematic” by the government in 2014. The list was first retrieved by the liberal 444 portal (Plankó 2014). They faced a Government-Control-Office-based tedious and time-consuming audit as recipients of EEA/Norwegian NGO Funds (together with many other NGOs), as ordered by the prime minister himself. In 2015-2016, together with other NGOs, HWL and one of its member organizations faced a taxation authority audit. These procedures identified no breaches of legislation or other irregularities.

In 2017, Act No. LXXXVI on the transparency of organisations receiving foreign funding was adopted. This requires NGOs that receive foreign funding equivalent to 7.2 million HUF (approx. 20,000 Euros) or more to register themselves with the court as organisations receiving foreign funding, and to label themselves as such in their publications and press communications. The adoption of the Act attracted criticism from numerous international actors, for example the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) in 2017. The European Court of Justice ruled it illegal based on an infringement procedure in the summer of 2020 (Court of Justice of the European Union 2020).

In 2018, the “Stop Soros” package of laws was accepted (see Venice Commission 2018). The Bill focused on organisations that support migration and introduced a licencing obligation for their operation and levied a 25 % tax on foreign funding. This was also condemned by the Venice Commission. However, due to resilience on the part of the Norwegian diplomacy as a condition for the next cycle of Norwegian grants, the Hungarian government agreed to remove these NGOs critical to the government from the “Stop Soros” list and also agreed to involve an independent NGO administering the grant (Regjeringen 2020). This proves that the illiberal polypore state does not have its own ideology and is just interested in its own maintenance.

#### 4. Landscape for reproductive rights and Family Rights NGOs

Recently, researchers have renewed their interest in researching the topic of Hungarian CSOs, working on family policy or demography. Balázs Kapitány mapped the financial backgrounds of CSOs doing lobbying activity about demographic issues and

found that this sector had been “nationalised” by the conservative government through huge state support (Kapitány 2019: 61-78). He analysed NGOs focusing on demography and family policies in a broad sense between 2011 and 2018. Using the court registry of CSOs and their annual reports, as well as the NGO reports of the Central Statistical Office, he concluded that the income of these organisations had grown by a factor of eight (from 516 million HUF in 2011 to 1 billion 530 HUF in 2018) during Fidesz’s rule. A notable increase in the number of NGOs with reproductive rights agenda supported by the government occurred in 2016/2017. Kapitány classified the CSOs into four categories, of which two are represented within the organisations we interviewed: i) hobby NGOs (small, non-professional groups of civilians), ii) NGOs (sometimes GONGOs) mainly or solely supported by the state (through donations by state firms, and state foundations like the Lottery or Hungarian Development Bank – MFB, and Hungarian National Bank – MNB foundations), iii) NGOs that obtain most (about two-thirds) of their funding from abroad (direct EU funds, Erasmus+ programs, OSI or other foreign donors), and finally, iv) traditional NGOs with a diverse income (donations, projects, state or municipality funds, merchandise, 1 % tax campaign, consulting fees, etc.). Most family policy NGOs, whether new or old, belong to the second group (e.g., the *Három királyfi*, *három királylány* movement – three princes and three princess’s movement –, and NOE, the National Association of Large Families). All feminist and LGBTQ organisations belong to the third group.

A recent study based on semi-structured interviews by Dorottya Szikra et al. (2020) investigated women NGOs and organisations working with families and on family policy. The authors used the five-item structure of Krizsán/Roggeband (2019) about NGO mobilisation (public policy influence, activities/financing, working strategies, networks/cooperation, and aims/demands) and reached similar conclusions to Kapitány. This focus on policy ignores the actors who are actually the agents of change. This article argues that these actors have access to very different resources. (see: table 1.<sup>3</sup>) The richest pro-government organisation does not have connections to international organisations (1). The third richest on the other hand only receives funding from international organisations, which also influences its agenda setting and framing. The annual budget of the most visible organisation (11) is less than EUR 1000 annually, while the richest (1) is EUR 400,000 EUR.

3 The table was designed and collected by the authors.

	a) Name	b) Branch, membership	c) Income 2019 in HUF	d) State budget donation	e) 1% of income tax as donation	f) Projects
1	3 királyfi, 3 királylány [3 Princesses, 3 Princesses Foundation] <sup>1</sup>	N	132,755,000	96,22,000	497,000	0
2	Egyedülálló Szülők Alapítványa [Single Parent Family Foundation] <sup>2</sup>	IM Coface	114,654,000	112,879,000	253,000	0
3	Amnesty International Hungary	IB Amnesty International	102,513,000	0	2,010,000	13,907,000
4	Háttér <sup>3</sup>	IM ILGA	56,392,000	0	2,478,000	21,651,000
5	Nane <sup>4</sup>	IM WAVE	32,077,000	0	4,402,000	15,990,000
6	Patent Patriarchátust Ellenzők Egyesülete [Against Patriarchy] <sup>5</sup>	N	23,267,000	0	274,000	21,480,000
7	EMMA Association <sup>6</sup>	N	19,630,000	0	253,000	16,733,000
8	Transvanilla <sup>7</sup>	IM ILGA Transgender Europe	14,850,000	0	346,000	14,800,000
9	Magyar Női Érdekvédelmi Szövetség [Hungarian Women's Lobby] <sup>8</sup>	IM European Women's Lobby	11,186,000	0	68,000	11,175,000
10	Labrisz Lesbian Association [Lesbian cultural community] <sup>9</sup>	IM ILGA	7,702,000	0	292,000	4,658,109
11	Nőkért Association [For Women] <sup>10</sup>	N	304,000	0	36,000	0
12	Családvár Alapítvány [Family Fortress Foundation] <sup>11</sup>	N	last found budget for 2011: 2,400,000	300,000	0	0

Table 1: Financial background of main women's NGOs

a) Name of legally registered organisation; b) National (N), or International Branch (IB) or International membership (IM); c) Or last known public interest organisational report; e) A national system for supporting NGOs; f) Direct EU or foreign donors, OSF, trusts, embassies etc.

- 4 Promoting the birth of desired children. The foundation based on the family-friendly, pro-demography policies of Mária Kopp (since 2009).
- 5 Manager of *Egyszülős Központ* (Single Parent Center), a community cultural centre for single mothers in Budapest financed by the state (since 2005).
- 6 Background Society Organisation.
- 7 The oldest Hungarian feminist NGO, a helpline for women victims of violence (1994).
- 8 Feminist NGO, legal aid for victims of domestic violence, expert on SRHR, works in close contact with NANE Association (since 2007).
- 9 Formerly BirthHouse Association. NGO and telephone hotline promoting home birth, natural birth and birth rights, Roma women's birth rights and offering help and advice for mothers (since 2010).
- 10 Transgender Association (2011).
- 11 An umbrella organisation of feminist women NGOs (since 2003).
- 12 Since 1996. Publishers of *Wonderland for Everyone* LGBTQ fairy tale book (2020).
- 13 A feminist NGO specialised in women's history, violence against women and intersectional feminism (since 2009).
- 14 A pro-life, birth right small Christian NGO (since 2007).

Non-critical, pro-government NGOs that reflect the world view of the government (not necessarily conservative ones, but single-cause ones, for example, family friendliness and/or demography) receive huge state support and have the means to operate professionally, thus there is no need to apply for foreign or EU funds, and they lose interest in pursuing the 1% of income tax that may be donated to CSOs in Hungary. Critical, political, policymaking feminist organisations, however, usually operate under worsening conditions, go grassroots, start dealing with social entrepreneurship (for example, opening a restaurant where Roma women do the cooking)<sup>15</sup>, lose staff, or are completely donor-driven (the donor being usually the Open Society Foundation or the Sigrid Rausig Trust). This pressure opens up the opportunity for critical NGOs to become more embedded in their context. Szikra et al. (2020) also identify a tripartite structure of topics around which these NGOs work: women as mothers, working women, and the female body as a battleground (including broad topics such as violence and birth rights). However, they may overlook what our report aims to point out: the common aspects of agenda-setting that are independent of political labelling.

Although before Kapitány (2019) and Szikra et al. (2020) the substantial funding of government-friendly NGOs and GONGOs was less well known, research showed that in Hungary the state has never funded women's groups in a meaningful way, and foreign funding has not been very consistent (Krizsan/Roggeband 2017). The EU Fundamental Rights Agency pointed out that "between 2011 and 2016 (and even before that), organisations involved in litigation and advocacy in the fields of domestic violence, women's rights and gender equality did not receive any direct government funding other than the 1% contributions from personal income tax" (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017: 30). This tendency was identified in other East-Central European and Balkan states as well, according to the CEEBBS Task Force report of the EWL (EWL 2019), while further Turkish studies (Diner 2018) also support these findings concerning the Janus-faced government attack/support on women-focused NGOs.

Another very important feature of Hungarian civil society is that women's rights and lesbian NGOs form a very small circle. In terms of the number of women who can write a policy recommendation or critically review a Bill, a budget, or a gender report, we can identify about 12-15 people (in a country with a population of 9.7 million), most of them middle-aged women who have been dedicated to their cause for 20-25 years. Activists, volunteers, and new movements naturally come and go, but

15 <http://szinesgyongyok.hu/etterem/>

the underfinanced nature of these organisations does not amount to a career or job security for young women, so the upcoming generation is generally only represented for a very brief period. NGOs also evolve and reproduce due to internal conflicts or schisms, and names might change, but the same people usually remain.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, these advocacy groups do a very professional job under dire circumstances. LGBTQI organisations, however, which also have male employees and members, are usually more consistently supported by foreign and European Commission funds and tend to work in bigger organisations. This causes considerable conflict in the small and already divided movement. Due to the forced relocation of the Central European University (CEU) to Vienna in 2019 and the pull of academia and job opportunities outside the country, many players move abroad and influence the scene through their online social media presence from abroad, but they cannot actively take part in legal organisations or in fieldwork.

Some NGOs are embedded in the European CSO network and are members of European-wide umbrella organisations: ILGA (Háttér and Transvanilla), the European Women’s Lobby (Hungarian Women’s Lobby) and Coface (*Egyszülős Központ Alapítvány*, Single Parent Center Foundation). These networks have their own agendas, language, and theoretical backgrounds, and only rarely incorporate the special Central European experience. One such exception is the above mentioned CEEBBS Task Force of the European Women’s Lobby.

### 5. Mapping the actors: ‘for’ and ‘against’ reproductive rights mobilisation scenes in Hungary

One of the findings of this article is that the topic of reproductive rights is so diverse that it is almost impossible to find one actor that represents a coherent position, as would be theoretically expected in relation to such different fields. This heterogeneity also proves that traditional ideas about “left” and “right” and “progressive” and “conservative” need to be rethought.

The year 2010 was a decisive one that was referred to in many interviews we conducted and studies we read. It was the year in which the Viktor-Orbán-led Fidesz/Christian Democratic (KDNP) coalition won the elections for the first time after eight years of socialist-liberal governing (the first Orbán government existed between 1998-

<sup>16</sup> For example: transgender NGO Transvanilla and Prizma Movement, Születésház Egyesület [Birth Center Association] –Emma Association-Másállapotot a szülészetben mozgalom [Let’s Change Obstetrics Movement]

2002). When we say 2010, we refer to a shift of power which was more than a simple democratic government change; it was the start of a total restructuring of Hungarian economic and cultural power and society. As PM Orbán plainly said in 2018, the first four years of Fidesz governing were designed to establish the political basis of their system. The second four years were intended to establish the economic and financial basis of power shifting, and the current four years are for changing cultural power relations (see Népszava 2018). In all three areas, differently marginalised citizens have paid the highest price.

We have worked with three main actors to identify the wider view: the government/state, conservative NGOs and movements, and progressive NGOs and movements. It can be argued that the NGOs which were created after 2010 belong to the first category as they are typically created (often by politicians) to support the government.<sup>17</sup> There are other NGOs that have been winners of the shift towards familialism-friendliness, but they existed earlier and have worked in accordance with their own values.

The most divisive issues are transgender rights, prostitution, abortion, LGB rights, hormonal contraception, and sexuality education (in a form which includes gender identity and sexual orientation, that is SOGI). These debates follow the international trends on a more theoretical level: i.e., the intersectional vs. structural approach, and queer vs. radical feminist approach. Some topics have not surfaced in Hungary yet, but might yet lead to public debate, for example, surrogacy and volunteer surrogacy where after the intervention of a prominent conservative public intellectual, herself mother of a child after IVF, the anti-IVF discourse was toned down to a vague government promise to reregulate the issue in the near future (Szőnyi 2017). We have summarised the issues in table 2

Self-defined orientation/issue	Fundamentalist conservative	Moderate conservative	LGBTQ	Young feminists	Older and young radical feminists	Intersectional feminists
IVF	-	+	+	+	+	+
Hormonal contraception	-	+	+	-	+	+
Abortion	-	-/+	+	+	+	+
Transgender rights	-	-	+	-	-/+	+

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, FICSÁK, a woman’s organisation: *Fiatal Családok Klubjának Egyesülete* [Association of Young Families Club] established in 2015.

Self-defined orientation/issue	Fundamentalist conservative	Moderate conservative	LGBTQ	Young feminists	Older and young radical feminists	Intersectional feminists
Reproductive rights	+	+	surrogacy +	+ with choice	+	+
Sex education in schools	-	-/+	+ with SOGI	+ with SOGI	+ without SOGI(?)	+ with SOGI
Sugar site Puncs.hu	-	-	-	-	-	-
Prostitution Nordic model	+	No clear position	-	+	+	No clear position

Table 2: Mapping of mobilisation according to issues

As we expected, beliefs play an important role, and the biggest divide appears in relation to religiousness vs. atheism. We expected that political divides (pro-Fidesz vs. the opposition, which is very heterogeneous – from neo-Nazis and liberal conservatives to liberal, leftists, and anarchists) would cut across thematic lines so sharply as to prevent meaningful dialogue, or a shared fight for common causes. As opposition voters typically loathe the Fidesz government, not even positive achievements (family friendliness, support for maternity wards and breastfeeding, etc.) are acknowledged. We did not expect to find that young radical feminists would reject any form of hormonal contraception, as ultraconservative Christian movements do, but on different grounds (harming the female body and the environment vs. sinfulness according to the Catholic Church) and support the same “natural” methods of reproductive control.

The lack of trust is one of the main consequences of the Kulturkampf (see Pető 2020). The conservative side is very cautious about giving information to CEU based/feminist researchers. The progressive side is wary about sharing information that could harm their good relationship with their progressive allies, but there is also clear tension between transgender rights and some feminists and within the LGBT movement as well. As is typical of small and underfunded, marginalised movements that have been harassed by the government (rhetorically and legally), personal feelings of resentment and aversion divide the women’s and LGBTQ movements. Apart from well-established and internationally embedded human-rights-based NGOs, new and influential agents of change have appeared who are individual norm entrepreneurs that have created communities of followers on social media (without the burden of running an NGO or projects). As it transpired during the interviews, some progressive actors live abroad

and only take part as influencers in the Hungarian movement via the internet. Political fights increasingly happen in the digital world with all the consequences – from talking to the bubble to cyber security issues.

## 6. Mapping the anti-reproductive rights opposition

When we map so-called anti reproductive rights groups, we must distinguish which part of the reproductive rights spectrum they are attacking (Kováts/Pető 2017). Maternal health and rights are not among the issues here; all political sides of the women’s movements support or at least remain silent about these. Assisted reproduction (here: IVF) is only attacked by some Catholic bishops but is strongly supported by the demography-fixated government and conservatives in general. There is no public debate about contraception (except for smaller groups that advocate “natural contraception” methods, and which are not aligned in terms of their politics). Sexuality education is not mentioned or is attacked only if connected to SOGI and involving transgender issues or LGBQ children and young persons. The two focal topics in Hungary for the reproductive rights opposition are abortion and LGBT rights – most importantly, same-sex marriage, adoption by same sex couples, transgender rights, and any mention of LGBT issues in education. Attacks on abortion are not made by the government openly; they repeatedly say that no change in abortion regulations are planned, but LGBT rights have now become the main driving force behind the government’s rhetoric, especially transgender rights. All conservative actors from NGOs through to churches and the government stand up against rights that they identify with “gender”.

The heterogeneity of those political forces that attack reproductive rights is also a finding. Beyond the traditional, conservative forces characterised by a focus on family and demography, as favoured by the government, there is a second row of ultraconservative fundamentalist activists who draw upon American Evangelical sectarianism and have strong intellectual and financial ties. The traditional *Alfa Szövetség* (full name: *Alfa Magzat-, Újszülött-, Gyermekek- és Családvédelmi Szövetség* = the Alpha Foetus, New-born, Infant and Family Protection Alliance), established in 1996, promotes pro-life activism, especially open adoptions for “crisis-pregnant” women. They are members of the well-funded transnational organisation Human Life International, and most of their social work is carried out by female volunteers, although the president is a man. Apart from assisting with open adoption, they organise symbolic religious events such as pilgrimages to hospitals’ gynaecological wards on different days that commemorate aborted fetuses.

CitizenGo, however, utilises a different, more aggressive “American-style” approach, working with different methods. For them the religious rhetoric is an instrument and not only an aim. Sharing the very same methods and toolkits with human rights NGOs, they lobby, run a petition site, organise demonstrations, and actively mainstream public opinion in government media. The originally Spanish network appeared in Hungary in 2014 and has been very active in Hungary in relation to reproductive rights and anti-LGBT issues. Investigative journalists have attempted to identify the source of their financing (Simon 2019). The Hungarian investigative journalism portal *Átlátszó* found possible connections to Russian financing through Alexei Komov, a board member in Spain (Political Capital Blog 2021). Dr Gáspár Frivaldszky, husband of Edit Frivaldszky, who founded the Hungarian branch of CitizenGo, used to work for the Christian Democrats. Frivaldszky did intensive European lobbying for two European citizens’ initiatives, *One of us* in 2014 (a successful collection of 1,721,626 statements of support, but the European Commission declined to legislate) and *Mum-Dad and Kids* in 2015 – for the protection of marriage and family (unsuccessful). Edit Frivaldszky declined to give us an interview, although she had appeared earlier in media debates with both authors (see Szőnyi 2017b and Konopás 2019). She later passed on CitizenGo to Eszter Schittl-Zaymus, a young woman married to an American who has been involved in pro-life activism for a long time. Schittle-Zaymus also declined an interview, referring to a sentence of Andrea Pető’s that she found in an American publication. The sentence of Andrea Pető’s which made her feel sad was: “Why did an EU member state even consider forcing women to carry deformed fetuses?” (Pető -Grzebalska 2016). Edit Frivaldszky now works for her own organisation: *Emberi Méltóság Központ* (the Human Dignity Center), working on anti-gender (i.e. anti-LGBT) and pro-life causes. The vocabulary the organisation uses is the same as that used by human rights NGOs, i.e., rights, freedom, protection, and dignity. CitizenGo took part in the Council of the Status of Women’s (CSW) New York annual UN meeting in 2018, where they met the Hungarian delegation (see CitizenGo 2018). Eszter Schittl-Zaymus is a frequent guest on the government founded religious, conservative TV programme *Credo* on HírTV channel.

Also initiated by international actors, the less well-known *Magyar Alapítvány a Keresztény Civilizációért* (MAKC, Hungarian Foundation for Christian Civilisation) was founded in 2015 as the Hungarian branch of the Piotr Skarga Foundation<sup>18</sup> in Cracow, Poland. As with a matryoshka doll, they were founded by the originally Bra-

zilian Tradition, Family and Property organisation (TFP, also active in the USA), with Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, a thinker and writer, as their founding father.<sup>19</sup> The Piotr Skarga Foundation (together with the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture one of the initiating groups of the new Polish abortion bill proposal<sup>20</sup>) is very lucrative due to an online religious gift merchandise business (which in 2019 raised 6.3 million Euros) and has initiated a network in the region, with branches in Estonia, Lithuania, and Hungary (*Átlátszó* 2020, Sarkadi Nagy 2021). The first Hungarian chair of this all-male, ultra-Catholic anti-abortion, and anti-LGBT organisation, Péter Szász, was associated with the minor Hungarian Neo-Nazi, Arrow Cross group (the Hungarian Arrow Cross movement that existed in 1944 – a domestic Nazi Jew-prosecuting group), Pax Hungarica Movement, but left MAKC having been accused by the Polish foundation of fraud. He is a frequent guest on Hungarian state television. The Piotr Skarga Foundation has since then kept its Hungarian members under close supervision. Its new leader, Balázs Fekete, a history teacher in a provincial town, is also a member of the obscure Pro Hungaria Sacra Christian-monarchist group, and the Hungarian Knights Templar as Sarkadi Nagy discovered in his investigation (Sarkadi Nagy 2021b). Although these obscure minor organisations that only left-wing investigative journalists know about may appear to be something out of a Monty Python sketch, actors associated with MAKC keep popping up in mainstream Fidesz-friendly institutions, such as the conservative magazine, *Mandiner* (through Áron Copf, former supervisory board member) and the new *Axióma* media initiative (through Norbert Filemon, former curator) to shape the discourse and to normalise their agenda. Perhaps the strategy of the Piotr Skarga Foundation to push East-Central Europe in a more right-wing direction is working. Transnational organisations acting locally are successfully shaping the discourse and agenda of reproductive rights.

## 7. Collaboration between activists from progressive areas

Feminist and LGBTI activists and organisations have been working well together in Hungary. As it was pointed out above, we are talking about a narrow circle of people who collaborate on projects and reports, are on the same invitation list of Western and North European embassies, who pass requests for interviews by journalist to each other, who are sitting in the make-up studio together before a television invitation to

18 Piotr Skarga was a seventeenth-century Polish preacher and Catholic philosopher.

19 The American branch: <https://www.tfp.org/> The Brazilian branch: <https://www.tfp.org.br/>

20 <https://en.ordoiruris.pl/>



the same show, who visit each other's events and demonstrations (including Pride), who wait in line together for boarding when travelling to Brussels to a European Parliament or European Commission event, and who share information. Many of them are personal friends and colleagues, or fellow alumni of the CEU Department of Gender Studies. This cooperation is also strengthened by common threats. After the Norway Grant attacks by the government *Civilizáció*, a loose coalition of CSOs, former recipients of the Funds, was organised in 2017, which includes the umbrella organisations of women's rights and LGBTI organisations.

There have been successful collaborations between *Nőkért* Association and the Hungarian Women's Lobby, and last year with the *Nem tehetesz róla, tehetesz ellene* [It is not your fault, but you can do something against it – a movement against victim blaming of rape and violence victims] movement for Onebillion Rising Budapest, the flash mob dance against violence against women initiated by Eve Ensler. The usual divides, such as the interpretation of prostitution, porn as liberating or as a form of violence against women etc. are not present in Hungary among activists. All Hungarian women's rights activists are abolitionists, anti-pornography, and understand violence against women as a form and tool of patriarchy. If there are negative feelings, they are personal resentments and sensitivities and not until most recently connected to theoretical divisions.

About two – three years ago the interpretation of “gender” (as a structural power relationship between the sexes or as an inner sense of identity) and the relationship to transgender rights has started to divide the activists, but most of this was subdued until 2020, as cooperation on other pressing issues (like the ratification of the Istanbul Convention) seemed more important. From 2020 onwards however, a serious transgender theory critical article was published by long-time feminist, member of the women's movement and active volunteer of victims of violence Anna Betlen, and with this the differences came to light. Pro-transgender feminist activist Rita Antoni from *Nőkért* (also interviewed by us), whose intersectional, pro-transgender feminist *Szabadnem* [gender free] blog became so popular that it appeared as a guest site on one of the oppositional news portals (444.hu), openly expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of sympathy from “certain feminists” with the transgender community.

The conflict, however, seems not to be only about tactics, but an ideological divide between postmodern queer feminism and feminism based on women's sex-based rights and the phenomenon of “trans” children and their treatment (not legal in Hungary).

It is important to mention that there have previously been coalitions between the progressive and conservative women's movements on several occasions. The topics were

prostitution and trafficking, child prostitution, sugar daddy sites sponsored by EU funding, women's quotas in parliament and on boards, maternity leave, family-friendly policies and birth rights.

Since women's NGOs (especially if they also run services) work for female clients from all backgrounds, only theory-based cooperation will never work, though cooperation is possible on issues. If a “united front” is the vision it is difficult to be united when key definitions and concepts might differ from issue to issue both in theory and in practice.

## 8. Conclusions: backlash discourse and its critique

In this article, we understand that “gender serves as symbolic glue” (Grzebalska/Kovats/Peto 2017). The concept of gender has been used to mobilise very different political forces in an attempt to unite hatred for one enemy – gender-studies scholars and practitioners. It has also become a central rhetorical tool of these efforts to define what “pure reason” means to a wider audience in order to create a new consensus about what is “normal” and “legitimate”. This kind of social mobilisation that incites hatred against “gender ideology” and political correctness not only demonises the world views of its opponents and rejects the human rights paradigm that has long been the basis of a European-North American consensus, but also provides an alternative that seems realistic and acceptable to many people by focusing on the family, nation, religious values, and freedom of speech – concepts often weaponised in contemporary culture wars.

Far-right fundamentalist gender politics, which is also based on a politics of care, and places the family in the centre, absorbs the political space formerly occupied by conservative women's politics and unites all political forces that are oppressed by the dominant “communist” political system. The rhetoric of progress and the concept of the “New Woman” is thereby appropriated by anti-modernist political forces (Pető 2010). Far-right political forces very effectively use the fight against disenchantment in their political mobilisation. Unless progressive politics comes up with an alternative, the process of re-enchantment will be taken over by far-right political forces which will construct emotional communities.

Second, the rhetoric of the victorious neoconservative politics that followed 1989 have left emancipatory leftist politics in a defensive position, as their rhetoric is itself defensive (protecting women) and negatively framed (fighting against discrimination). As the latter does not criticise neoliberal politics, it remains a prisoner of progress. Lisa Brush has called maternalism (the ideologies that exalt women's capacities to be a

mother and extend to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance and morality “feminism for hard times” (Brush 1996: 431). Perhaps the rethinking of maternalism is one way out of the deadlock at a time when electoral support for traditional progressive parties is not increasing, but social and economic problems are.

A background study from 2018 on the backlash against women’s rights and gender equality by Juhász/Pap (2018) described it in the following way: Although the backlash and related movement extends across borders, countries with a longer and uninterrupted history of democratic governance, a strong women’s movement, and living traditions of civil organising, have been able to balance the forces behind the “gender ideology” debate. Other countries with weaker democratic roots and legacies, a younger women’s movement (often not supported by the usual liberal, progressive, but anti-feminist allies), a living memory of “state feminism”, Soviet-style crèches, and the forced “social engineering” of the socialist past, have managed differently. Civil movements in these countries offered less resistance to anti-gender ideology being raised to state policy level in the form of demographic policy, the weakening of women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the dismantling of gender equality mechanisms, including gender mainstreaming.

Much of the analysis may be located in this “backlash” framework, which is shared by academia, gender experts, feminists, and LGBT+ activists. However, there is also growing left-wing criticism of the (often also left-wing) backlash discourse (Kováts/Zacharenko 2020), especially focusing on East-Central Europe, which seeks to examine regional differences and to move away from ideological oppositions to understand how neoliberal economic policies have affected women, and why this region has become susceptible to such attacks on modernism. By focusing on the individual rights of women, it is argued that the human rights paradigm of the EU does not mitigate the injustices that arose from the economic order that developed after the transition of 1989 and the austerity policies that followed the 2008 crisis which affect the everyday lives of women (see Kováts 2016). The two most comprehensive edited volumes on the topic are *Gender as Symbolic Glue* (Kováts/Poim 2015) and *Anti-Gender, Mobilizing against Equality Campaigns in Europe* (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017). On the one hand, it is argued that such attacks represent cultural backsliding against social changes (gender equality, sexual rights, abortion, in-vitro and assisted fertility treatments, interpretation of the causes of violence against women in line with the Istanbul Convention, gay and transgender rights and same sex marriage, and adoption by same-sex couples), a critique of modernity, or a “conservative revolution” (as in Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2015).

On the other hand, it has been shown that the meaning of “gender” itself has changed over time, and may be used differently by policy-makers and activists. Some issues monopolised by the “war on gender” also deeply divide the feminist movement itself (e.g., gender as an innate feeling in identity politics vs. gender as social construction, transgender rights for children, and surrogacy, just to name a few). As Kováts states, “First, in the English-speaking context gender became widely a substitute of biological sex (e.g., in the case when we speak about gender quotas or gender pay gap, what is meant is male-female ratio). Second, it came to mean women, e.g., gender analysis in policy-making is often used to describe how this or that measure would affect women (and less, as intended, gender relations). Third, it is an analytical category to describe the social quality of distinctions based on sex, the power structures in a given society, between men and women, and the roles, possibilities and constraints in society, assigned by being born male or female (e.g., if we speak about gender-based violence, it refers to the gendered nature of a specific type of violence, rooted in the prevailing patriarchal structure of our societies). Fourth, many use it in transgender and genderqueer activism to mean gender identity (a person’s felt sense of identity and expressions, meaning identifying or not with being born male or female)” (Kováts 2017: 9). On the criticism of gender identity from a philosophical point of view, Rebecca Reilly Cooper can be mentioned. (Reilly Cooper 2016). Kováts also argues that “...the vehement debates on the continent about ‘gender ideology’ seem to be connected to the current contestations in the Anglo-Saxon world about identity politics, a simplified notion of intersectionality and gender understood as identity” (Kováts 2018). In the future, especially with the general election of 2022 approaching, an increasing polarisation can be expected around reproductive rights and the concept of gender between actors with very different resources.

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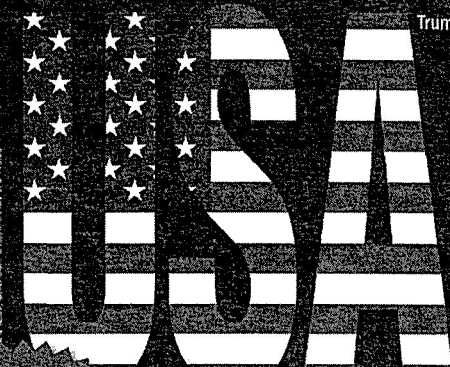
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