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De-democratization and opposition to gender equality politics in Europe

In the last decade, several European Union (EU) member states have experienced unprecedented processes of de-democratisation with negative consequences for equality and social justice. Democracy as an ideal and practice is connected to equality, openness, universality, rights, inclusion, participation, and contestation. De-democratisation, in turn, comes in many variants: in the spread of authoritarian radical right populism and explicit democratic backlash against democratic values and practices (Brown 2018; Runciman 2018). De-democratisation exposes the fragility but also the resilience of democratic institutions and practices. Its consequences for equality include the growth of far-right parties with an explicit anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-migration and/or homo-transphobic component. On the one hand, these have potential spill-over effects on more mainstream parties and politics, which can roll back their commitments to gender equality and even democratic values. On the other hand, civil society and movements, political parties and politicians, and political institutions can become more vocal about the gender equality agendas and policies in defense of equality and social justice. Gender equality is a central face in the polarisation caused by de-democratisation.

This special issue investigates, both theoretically and empirically, the profound challenge of democratic backsliding facing European societies and politics by addressing the intersections of de-democratisation processes with gender and other inequalities. We contend that contemporary gender politics cannot be fully understood and conceptualised without understanding its relationship to processes of de-democratization. A key concept for capturing the contestations around gender is that of ‘opposition to gender equality’, which Mieke Verloo (2018: 6) defines as ‘any activity in which a perspective of 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’. Opposition to gender equality is not a new phenomenon. However, in

the context of current ‘anti-gender’ politics (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), Verloo’s definition of opposition allows capturing who are the oppositional actors and what these actors actually do, their ‘activities’, to oppose not only gender equality policies but feminist politics as a whole (see Kantola and Lombardo 2020).

The Special Issue addresses two issues at the heart of feminist social and political analyses: democracy and feminist politics. It also provides theoretical and empirical tools to understand the processes of de-democratisation or democratic backsliding. We argue that attention to these issues is of crucial importance to feminist scholarship in social sciences very broadly, one that is needed to understand the societal and political context in which feminist activism, politics and scholarship is situated, and to counteract illiberal anti-gender politics and/or governments. Scholarly debates on democracy and feminist politics have brought evidence about the existence of an interdependent relationship between democracy and gender equality, that Verloo (2016: 36) summarizes as: ‘The more democracy, the more chances for gender equality; the more gender equality there is, the more chances for democracy’.

On the one hand democracy contributes to gender equality. In European democratic regimes, both the EU and member states support gender equality as a goal endorsed in their constitutions and public policies. In global comparative studies of political regimes, democracies show progress in women’s status on all indicators (Tripp 2013), greater influence of women’s organizations on the state (Htun and Weldon 2010), and public opinions more favourable to gender equality than autocracies (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

On the other hand, feminist politics is a key democratization force due to both its inclusionary and participatory procedures and its substantive equality and social justice aims. Feminist struggles contribute to the democratization of the political space through their ongoing challenge to processes of domination and exclusion (Verloo and Paternotte 2018; IPSP 2016). Such challenge is expressed through processes of politicization in which feminist subjects are involved in their activism (Schmidt-Gleim and Verloo 2003). Feminist collective processes favour the expression of different, non-hegemonic voices, that articulate a variety of feminist projects of society (Fraser 1989) and experiment with practices of inclusive participation (Martínez-Palacios 2017). Through

their activism, feminists challenge inequalities and social injustices, put issues of equality and social justice on the political agenda, claim rights for excluded or marginalised subjects, and make the state accountable with respect to gender equality and socio-economic commitments (Galligan 2015; Walby 2015). Due to its inclusionary and politicizing role, feminist politics has therefore a pivotal role for democracy.

The relationship between gender equality and democracy is, however, a complex one, that needs to account for historical and contextual developments. In particular, the development of historical trajectories and existing realities of gender equality, part of which are reflected in this special issue, show that after decades of institutionalised gender equality policies in Europe, we witness trends of de-democratisation and attacks to gender equality. The complex relationship between backsliding in democracy and feminist politics needs to be unpacked to better understand the processes and implications of de-democratization for gender equality in intersection with other inequalities, which is the interest of this special issue.

Europe: a context of de-democratization and opposition to gender equality

Europe is a relevant case for studying de-democratization and opposition to gender equality politics because it offers enough diversity and yet a common context to make these explorations meaningfully focused. European countries have progressed in democratization and institutionalization of gender equality policies since the end of WW2 and the creation of the European Union, at a different pace in South, North, East and West, but developing common policies in a variety of areas including gender equality (Elomäki and Kantola 2018; Jacquot 2015; Verloo and Walby 2012; Krizsan 2012; Lombardo and Bustelo 2012). Yet, in the last ten years, different European countries have experienced backsliding in democracy and gender equality policies, concomitant with the rise of radical right and anti-gender movements and parties.

The presence of radical right parties and movements that actively defend an anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-migration, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and homo-transphobic agenda have grown exponentially in all of the European Union's member states (Dietze and Roth 2020; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Köttig, Bitzan and Petö 2017). Such organised

opposition to gender and intersectional equality is complex and multifaceted, as it emanates from a variety of actors who engage in multiple strategies and target different issues. When successful, however, they all have similar results, limiting the rights of women and sexual minorities, dismantling gender and intersectional institutions and often criminalising feminist and other social justice movements (Verloo and Paternotte 2018). Such attacks on gender equality and sexuality policies restrict democratic principles and rights in Europe.

Democratic backsliding has strongly occurred in Central and Eastern European member states such as Hungary and Poland (Krizsan and Roggeband 2018), in which radical right political parties such as Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) have employed ethnopopulist strategies of defence of ‘the people’ from a particular ethnicity/race, culture, nation, religion as well as majoritarian appeals to win over votes and concentrate power, while eroding liberal democracy through attacks against independent institutions and political opponents in both civil society and institutional domains (Vachudova 2020). However, illiberal shifts, with detrimental consequences for gender equality policies, have occurred in South and North European countries too, especially since the 2008 economic crisis and the rise of radical right populism (Dietze and Roth 2020; Geva 2018; Alonso and Lombardo 2018; Mayer and Sauer 2017). Besides, the European Union, which is committed to democracy and gender equality according to constitutional treaties and Human Rights conventions, is facing what Kelemen (2020: 482) calls an ‘authoritarian equilibrium’, proving incapable of addressing its own internal problems of democratic backsliding exacerbated by the presence of illiberal member governments. Developments in the European Union should therefore be scrutinised carefully as concerns the phenomenon of de-democratization and opposition to gender politics, to assess the extent to which Europe is effectively complying with its own constitutional and Human Rights commitments.

Theoretical explorations and empirical evidence on de-democratisation and gender equality

De-democratisation gives rise to a number of crucial questions, which the articles of this Special Issue address. Theoretically, there is a need to address a variety of concepts and relations between them including gender, intersectionality, de-democratisation and democracy. This theoretical exploration also needs to inquire into the role of knowledge in de-democratization and anti-gender

processes (Cavaghan and Kulawik 2020; Verloo 2018), exemplified among others in the attacks to academic freedom and gender studies in Hungary and several other European countries (Paternotte and Verloo 2020) and the production of anti-gender knowledge by radical right political and social actors (Dietze and Roth 2020). It further needs to investigate the challenges de-democratization dynamics create for liberalism and the state, as well as the limitations of liberal democracy's implicit centrality of the gender binary and the gendered division of productive and reproductive roles (Sauer 2020). This theorization will develop critical analytical tools for feminist scholarship, allowing a better understanding of the phenomenon of dedemocratization from gender and intersectional lenses and the challenges it poses to feminist politics.

The special issue proposes the need to empirically address de-democratisation in different contexts – **such as** Central and Eastern European Countries, Germany, Spain and the whole European Parliament - which provides knowledge about the different context-specific dimensions it takes in relation to radical right populism and opposing gender ideology. The battles are played out not just in the sphere of politics but also in legal and judicial spheres (Mos 2020). Indeed, constitutional struggles are proliferating **in Europe**, with some courts accepting and other resisting the invitation to react against the gradual disestablishment of gender roles triggered by the advances of women's and sexual minorities' rights (Rubio Marín 2022). The different constitutional tactics **of anti-gender equality actors** include outright attempts to amend the constitution to (re)inscribe a traditional gender and family order that is presented as threatened, or the overturning or narrowing down of precedent through judicial interpretations that would limit previously recognized rights in favor of women and sexual/gender minorities

The tactic of constitutional entrenchment to seeking the reaffirmation the traditional family and its supporting gender order is exemplified by the constitutional ban or discriminatory treatment of same-sex marriage and unions and the limiting or abolishing of, sex education, and trans rights. At the same time, new constitutional interpretations are being offered to back conscience objections against contraception and abortion rights but against same-sex marriage and LGBT antidiscrimination legislation (NeJaime and Siegel 2020).

These legal battles spill over to fundamental societal debates such as those on demography or what is the construction of the demos, the family, the citizen, and the politics of reproduction of the nation, that anti-gender and radical right populists put forward, which subjects are included and excluded in such construction, depending on their gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, and class. In Austria, for instance, the far right constructs a gendered, ethnicized and racialized concept of ‘the people’ in which, argue Mayer, Ajanovic and Sauer (2020), a heterosexual, patriarchal and ethnically ‘pure’ family is defended as part of ‘We the people’ against a supposed threat posed by Muslim, migrant, feminist, and LGBTQI* people that are presented as ‘Others’ that would oppose the traditional gender order of the family and nation.

Anti-gender, de-democratization struggles shape feminist engagements with the state. For example, anti-gender opposition against the Istanbul Convention in Central and Eastern European Countries, argue Krizsan and Roggeband (2021), has moved feminist NGOs to change their mobilization strategies. On the one hand they have to defend themselves from the attacks of an illiberal state on pro-equality and pro-democracy activists, and readapt to a context of more limited state opportunities for participating in the implementation of gender-based violence policies. On the other hand, though, anti-gender attacks have favoured the creation of new, broader, alliances of feminist with Human Rights activists, which could integrate gender equality issues in democratization struggles against illiberal states (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021). Indeed, addressing these questions provides knowledge about the causes, consequences, and the extent to which de-democratisation shapes European societies and politics today, but also what counter strategies there are. The articles in this issue, authored by experts in gender equality and sexuality policies from political science and sociology, address these questions and challenges, contributing to feminist debates on the relation between democracy, de-democratization and gender equality politics and policies in contemporary Europe.

Articles in this special issue

The theorization and empirical analysis of the relationship between democracy, de-democratization and feminist politics in Europe, is important for understanding gender and

intersectional changes in states and international settings, in which a multiplicity of areas - work, care, families, politics, migration, and knowledge - are involved (Sauer 2020; Verloo 2018). Radical right populists contest progressive changes in family rights, with the aim of promoting a traditional heterosexist family. Liberal democracies have been constructed on a heteronormative gender binary of men as breadwinners, argues *Myra Marx Ferree* (this issue). The present demographic transition undermines hegemony of binary gender relations in Germany, re-organizing political conflict on an axis of reproductive politics in which the Green party reflects intersectional societal ideals that de-masculinize democracy, while reactionary populist party AfD re-politicizes masculinity to defend the family-state relations of the breadwinner-brotherhood gender system.

Knowledge is strictly interwoven with polity, having a crucial role in the construction of democratic or illiberal projects of society (Verloo 2018). Along these lines, *David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo* (this issue) argue that the politics of knowledge matters to the current wave of de-democratization in European societies. Focusing on academic institutions, and taking gender studies as an illustration, the authors show that far right populist actors and increasingly authoritarian regimes do not only aim at dismantling existing institutions of knowledge production, illustrated by attacks on academic freedom, but also at promoting a new politics of truth. Through the construction and diffusion of a frame about 'Cultural Marxism' in which the Left would supposedly dominate culture and academia, far right populists in Europe attack science and engage in a project of deep transformation of knowledge aimed at attaining hegemony over people's minds.

In the area of politics, de-democratization becomes particularly visible through the polarized political context and democratic and equality backsliding that feminist approaches fruitfully illuminate in a variety of ways. *Andrea Krizsan and Conny Roggeband* (this issue) propose an amendment to the theories of state feminism so to account for the reconfiguration of state and social movement relations that takes place in the current context of de-democratization in Central and Eastern Europe. Their contribution, illustrated by empirical data from Croatia, Hungary and Poland, explains how the understanding of triadic relationship between state and movements -both women's movements and anti-gender equality movements- replaces understanding of bilateral

state and women's movement relations. In the Southern European context, *Alba Alonso and Julia Espinosa* (this issue) analyze de-democratization and policy backsliding in gender equality after the rise of the far-right in Spain. The authors argue that studies of populist radical right parties, while analyzing the potentially damaging impact of these parties on democracy, tend to overlook the analysis of gender equality policy backsliding, which they regard important for understanding the role of populist radical right parties in processes of democratic backsliding. Through the analysis of the case of Vox in Spain, they demonstrate how far right parties can be effective in dismantling and reframing crucial policies, even when not in office.

Feminist approaches allow indeed to grasp or even anticipate dynamics of democratic backsliding that other analytical approaches had overlooked. In the European Union polity, for instance, while the existence of a democratic deficit has long been recognised, the rise of nationalist radical right populism as a challenge to democracy had not been anticipated. Yet, observing EU political and social developments from gender and intersectional perspectives allows capturing de-democratization shifts in Europe. Gender **equality** is a litmus test for the democratic health of Europe: when gender is under attack, this signals democracy is under attack (Lombardo and Kantola 2019). Along these lines, *Barbara Gaweda* considers the framings and trajectories of the main gender equality and antidiscrimination institution in Poland as a litmus test for both policy backsliding in gender equality and de-democratization. Looking at Europeanization dynamics in Poland from institutionalist and discursive gender approaches allows the author to detect that, in the hands of ultra-conservative and nationalist governments, Europeanization can lead not only to gender equality policy progress, but also to democratic and equality backsliding.

To understand the politics and effects of radical right populist parties on democracy and gender equality in the European Union, *Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo* (this issue) study from feminist perspectives democratic practices in the increasingly polarized European Parliament. Their article investigates how democratic practices in relation to gender equality manifest in political groups and how democracy is constructed through the discourse and enacted in the practices of political groups in the 2014-2019 and 2019-2024 legislatures. The analysis shows a complex picture of the politics of the political groups in the European Parliament in which

antagonistic dynamics of targeting gender and human rights coexist with agonistic deliberation which creates opportunities for improving democratization practices.

Overall, European states have diverse histories of relation to democracy, some being more consolidated democracies, other living with the legacy of authoritarian past and at different stages of democratization and integration in the European Union, as it is the case for Central and Eastern European states, democratizing from the 1990s, Spain, democratizing since 1975, and Germany since the end of WW2. They are also different in relation to the development of their gender and intersectional politics in specific institutions, with generally more attention paid to gender and class as compared to race, ethnicity and sexuality inequalities, but with specifically different institutional configurations of intersecting inequalities (Verloo and Walby 2012). The special issue presents analysis of current developments in Croatia, Hungary and Poland as examples of more ‘recent’ democracies with institutionalised equality policies in Central and Eastern Europe and in Spain, Germany and at the level of the European Union.

Analyses show that democracy and gender equality are under threat in different parts of Europe, from democratic backsliding and attacks on gender equality in Central and Eastern Europe, to radical right populism rising in Germany, Spain, and in the European Parliament. Gender equality is a central aspect in the opposition to gender and other inequalities that the far-right populist political parties and anti-gender movements analysed in this issue are enacting. This is so because, as this issue contributes to show, by delegitimising and dismantling gender equality, oppositional actors seek to promote the illiberal project of society they envision and to expand the hegemony over what social relationships, which groups of people, and what knowledge and truth are to be considered legitimate in the world they seek to construct. In this context it is all the more relevant to dedicate scholarly efforts to the study of de-democratization and policy backsliding in gender equality, granting feminist approaches a central role in social and political analyses of de-democratization.

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