

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN?

*The Female Face of
Right-wing Populism
and Extremism*

05

*Synopsis of the Six Country Studies of
»Triumph of the Women«, Volume I*
Eszter Kováts

**FRIEDRICH
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Forum Politik
und Gesellschaft

TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN? THE STUDY SERIES

All over the world, right-wing populist parties continue to grow stronger, as has been the case for a number of years – a development that is male-dominated in most countries, with right-wing populists principally elected by men. However, a new generation of women is also active in right-wing populist parties and movements – forming the female face of right-wing populism, so to speak. At the same time, these parties are rapidly closing the gap when it comes to support from female voters – a new phenomenon, for it was long believed that women tend to be rather immune to right-wing political propositions. Which gender and family policies underpin this and which societal trends play a part? Is it possible that women are coming out triumphant here?

That is a question that we already raised, admittedly playing devil's advocate, in the first volume of the publication, published in 2018 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung *Triumph of the women? The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe*. We are now continuing this first volume with a series of detailed studies published at irregular intervals. This is partly in response to the enormous interest that this collection of research has aroused to date in the general public and in professional circles. As a foundation with roots in social democracy, from the outset one of our crucial concerns has been to monitor anti-democratic tendencies and developments, while also providing information about these, with a view to strengthening an open and democratic society thanks to these insights.

The *Triumph of the women?* study series adopts a specific perspective in this undertaking: The country-specific studies examine right-wing populist (and occasionally right-wing extremist) parties and their programmes concerning family and gender policy. The analysis highlights the question of which political propositions appeal to women voters, making parties in the right-wing spectrum seem electable in their eyes. How do antifeminist positions gain ground? In addition, individual gender policy topics are examined, the percentage of votes attained by these parties is analysed and the role of female leaders and counter-movements is addressed.

While the first volume of studies focused on countries within Europe, the new study adopts a broader view and analyses individual countries and topics worldwide. Where do right-wing populist parties manage to shift the focus of discourse or even shape debates on family and gender policy, in addition to defining the terms of engagement when dealing with issues relating to flight and migration? And do their propositions concerning social policy respond to the needs of broad swathes of the electorate for greater social welfare?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is important to us that progressive stakeholders agree on these challenges and work together to combat the growing fragmentation and divisions within our societies.

Dr. Stefanie Elies and Kim Krach
Forum Politik und Gesellschaft
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

SYNOPSIS OF THE SIX COUNTRY STUDIES OF »TRIUMPH OF THE WOMEN«, VOLUME I

ESZTER KOVÁTS

// *Triumph of the Women, Volume I*, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2018, sketched a comprehensive picture of the gender politics of far-right and right-wing populist parties. Six country studies elaborated on the propositions that right-wing populist parties present to their female voters and considered why women vote for and become actively engaged in these parties. The studies on Germany, France, Greece, Poland, Sweden and Hungary provide a nuanced summary and move beyond common-place assumptions and conventional explanations.

This synopsis summarises the key findings of the first volume sketches out developments and provides an update. Particular attention is devoted to the studies on Hungary and Poland, where right-wing populist parties are in government and serve as models for other right-wing populists across Europe and globally. The synopsis subsequently analyses the counterstrategies applied and proposed. //

Looking at the parties examined in Volume I of *Triumph of the Women*, we can see that there are both similarities and differences in the characteristics of right-wing populist actors in the spectrum. The essay by Enrico Glaser, Marius Hellwig, Simone Rafael, Judith Rahner, Jan Riebe, and Rachel Spicker—the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung [Amadeu Antonio Foundation] authors' collective—focuses on the *Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany] (AfD), the most important party-political New Right protagonist in Germany. Christèle Marchand-Lagier discusses the *Front National* (renamed *Rassemblement National* [National Rally] in June 2018) and analyses the role of Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential elections and the support she received. Alexandros Sakellariou focuses his article on *Chrysi Avgi* [Golden Dawn], which was the third strongest party in the Greek parliament in 2018 and is openly fascist. Weronika Grzebalska and Elena Zacharenko address the small right-wing electoral alliance *Kukiz'15* and PiS (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [Law and Justice Party]), which has been in power in Poland since 2015. Ann-Cathrin Jungar's text analyses the party Sweden Democrats, the third strongest party in Sweden, which has been in parliament since 2010 and was elected in 2018 with 17.5 per cent of the vote. Anikó Félix discusses both the Fidesz-KDNP coalition that has governed in Hungary since 2010 with a sufficiently large two-thirds majority, allowing it to make amendments to the constitution, and *Jobbik*, which entered the Hungarian parliament as a far-right party in 2010 and has been trying for several years to position itself as moderate centre-right.

Right-wing Populism as a Link between the Parties Studied

Of the parties examined in the essay collection, only Golden Dawn in Greece can be described as unambiguously on the far right, because it is also prepared to use violence.

Although there is a lack of analytical and political clarity associated with the terms populism¹ and right-

¹ In political science, there is extensive literature on populism. The term is understood in a number of different ways, and approaches to addressing it are accordingly grouped and classified differently. I will not go into these debates here but will just briefly mention one of the best known classifications, which distinguishes between three approaches: 1) populism as an ideology, 2) populism as a political strategy, 3) populism as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Rovira

wing populism, all the other parties mentioned in the volume are subsumed under the concept of right-wing populism. It makes sense as the facets these parties have in common are their ideology and their political strategy of polarisation:

- The assertion of a pronounced and implacable conflict between an *us* and a *them* (the elite and the people),
- the aspiration to represent the entire people, i.e. an underlying anti-pluralist attitude,
- a more or less pronounced nativism/ethno-nationalism combined with a critique of migration,²
- the fear of the extinction of the nation,
- and a concomitant focus on the particular role of women.

Differences

However, the right-wing populist parties cited above also differ from one another.

The most pronounced difference between the parties lies in their significance within each country's party system: Are they part of the opposition (AfD, *Rassemblement National*, Sweden Democrats and Golden Dawn, *Jobbik*, *Kukiz'15*) or do they form the government (Fidesz-KDNP and PiS)? This is the most important factor determining the extent to which they can transpose their positions into actual policies and laws.

Kaltwasser et al. 2017). The first is advocated, for example, by Mudde who provided the perhaps best-known definition of populism: a »(...) thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups »the pure people« and »the corrupt elite«, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* [general will] of the people« (Mudde 2004: 543). The second approach defines populism as »(...) a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.« This approach emphasises the role of the (charismatic) leader in guiding the way, or determining the »will of the people,« and is not concerned primarily with what they say but rather with what they do, especially how they exercise and retain power (Weyland, in Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 74). In contrast to the supply-oriented, top-down explanations of the first and second approaches, the socio-cultural approaches view populism as a »two-way phenomenon«, a relationship between leadership and supporters, that is, they are less normatively disparaging and allow greater scope for sociological explanations (Ostiguy, in Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 105).

² Anti-immigration views or criticism of existing migration policies cannot be directly equated with right-wing populism but rather that this is the case for the way in which these parties pursue these policies: with a highly divisive strategy and a logic of being either friend or foe.

Another difference is what is referred to as the radical right gender gap: Is there a significantly smaller proportion of women than men amongst voters that support these parties? That is the case for AfD, *Jobbik*, *Kukiz'15*, Sweden Democrats and Golden Dawn, but not for the Rassemblement National, PiS and Fidesz-KDNP. The latter two formations are elected even with a slightly higher share of female voters (see below and Grzebalska, Kováts 2018).

A third difference is whether they participate in anti-gender-theory politics (Hark, Villa 2015) and thus engage in the discourse with which civil society or party-political protagonists agitate against the purported enemy of »gender theory« or »gender ideology« across Europe and beyond. In the German context, there is a debate around whether this constitutes a new discursive strategy of familiar, long-standing anti-feminism or whether it is a phenomenon in its own right. Movements that agitate against gender as the supposed enemy, display anti-feminist traits in some countries, although this is not the case everywhere. This transnational phenomenon overlaps in some case with earlier struggles in terms of content and the individuals involved, although it also involves new elements. With the concept of »gender ideology« as a call to arms, battle is joined along divisive lines on various issues: violence against women, reproductive rights and new reproductive technologies, same-sex partnerships, technocratic top-down approaches to gender equality such as gender mainstreaming, gender studies, and more recent developments (in the last five to ten years) of trans and queer activism in Western countries. The symbolic term »gender ideology« also encompasses a number of other issues identified as grievances by right-wing populist parties and their supporters (Grzebalska/Kováts/Pető 2018): an exclusive focus on human rights and identity politics, and a concomitant lack of attention paid to other forms of inequality; the interweaving of market interests and progressive demands; the role of supranational organisations and treaties versus national sovereignty; the scientific method and post-modern methodologies; and the relationship between the state and civil society, the state and academia etc. To sum up, these debates cannot be reduced to an opposition between progressive versus retrograde approaches, essentialism versus post-essentialism, but should

be considered in the context of a struggle for new hegemonies. The parties examined play various and different roles in these debates. The AfD, PiS, *Kukiz'15*, *Fidesz-KDNP*, and to some extent *Jobbik*,³ are the parties that decisively influence these debates in their respective countries.

In the Rassemblement National, an anti-gender slant has to date played only a small role in the official party discourse (in France, the movement *Manif pour Tous*⁴ is active on this front). The Sweden Democrats oscillate between a viewpoint that upholds conservative values and one that defends women's/gay rights against Islam. Golden Dawn adopts a classical anti-feminist stance.

Islam is the fourth point on which differences can be identified in the priorities for the right-wing populist parties addressed here. While these parties all take a vehement anti-migration stance,⁵ there are distinctions in whether/how they link this to women's rights. For example, the German study summarises the AfD's position as follows: »Women's and gender issues are an inherent part of the party's ideology and political objectives and frequently a key component of comments about refugees and Islam rather than a topic per se.« (Glaser et al., in: Gutsche 2018: 25) This stance plays a pronounced role in the studies on the AfD, the *Rassemblement National*, and the Sweden Democrats; the emphasis, however, lies elsewhere for Golden Dawn and for Polish or Hungarian right-wing populists.

Misogynist, regressive, reactionary, chauvinist: such designations are repeated in the media every day with reference to these parties, although they obscure more than they conceal and serve political rather than analytical purposes. As author Björn Klein explicitly notes, the country studies show that »(...) it is no longer adequate to dismiss this right-wing understanding as a simple »women back to the kitchen« programme, or to categorise right-wing women simply as »agents of the patriarchy« (Klein, in Gutsche 2018: 18). They likewise cannot be categorised as prisoners of a »false consciousness« who do not recognise their oppression

³ Fewer and more ambivalent since Fidesz has lurched to the right and in the wake of the party's opposition efforts.

⁴ Literally translated as »protest for all«, *Manif pour Tous* is a play on »Mariage Pour Tous« [Marriage For All], the term used to describe the 2013 legislation on same-sex marriage.

⁵ See footnote 2.

or as agents of racism/xenophobia that overshadows their interests as women (Grzebalska, Kováts 2018). This volume intends to rise above these simplifications that are often repeated in public debate and feminist politics. More in-depth analysis is required to understand the rise of right-wing populists and their popularity with female voters. Klein highlights one of the most important insights, which is echoed, more or less explicitly, in all six studies: »One central answer arising from this study points in particular to grave omissions in the containment of authoritarian tendencies by neoliberal politicians in the last few decades« (Klein, in Gutsche 2018: 19).

It's The Economy, Stupid!

Editor Elisa Gutsche's summary makes clear what is at stake:

»An extremely high level of temporary employment contracts, low pay for women in the service and care sector, exploding rents in urban areas, a lack of childcare facilities, unanswered questions about the consequences of digitisation, globalisation and immigration, problems in finding a balance between family and work, and the threat of poverty in old age place excessive strain, and not only on women and families in economically strong Germany« (Gutsche 2018: 13).

This makes it clear, firstly, that women are affected by many problems that are often not perceived or addressed by feminist movements or by progressive parties' gender politics while highlighting, secondly, that many of these problems are indeed not purely women's problems; women share these difficulties with men of their class. The comment by the French author, Christèle Marchand-Lagier that women do not vote as women should be viewed against this backdrop: It plays no role in voting decisions whether a party's actions and words are pro-women or anti-women, just as Marine Le Pen's sex is also immaterial in this context.

The fears of downward mobility, a lack of prospects, and loss of control and recognition reported by many right-wing voters are certainly justified.⁶ In the West

⁶ With regard to Germany, the study summarises many studies that explain the rise of the AfD in sociological terms. However, they do not subsequently relate this to the question of whether these factors might also determine women's voting behaviour (Glaser et al. in: Gutsche 2018: 33).

(for example, in former West Germany, France or Sweden), old certainties disappeared as neoliberalism advanced in the 1990s and 2000s. Meanwhile in the East (in former East Germany, Poland and Hungary), there is a sense of disappointment that we have not caught up with the West in recent years. In this precarisation (in the West) or in the ongoing precarious situation (in the East), the right-wing does more than simply point to scapegoats. Where they are in government, they also offer genuine economic improvements and recognition.

The Polish study reports in detail on the PiS government's »Family 500 plus« programme.⁷ A recent study (Paradowski et al. 2020) shows that this programme, the largest redistributive measure of the last 30 years, has led to a quantifiable reduction in poverty in Poland. Therefore, condemning the programme to be nothing more than a populist strategy of the right is too simplistic. Unlike opposition parties (such as the AfD), which supposedly criticise government policies in the interest of the »man on the street« but offer few concrete policies, the PiS is here implementing material social policies. The fears of mainstream economists of the »Family 500 plus« programme being irrational and causing economic damage have also not proven to be true. These attacks came primarily from liberal, democratic groups and those focused on women's rights. These critical voices predicted that this programme would be detrimental to women's participation in the labour market and that PiS was just trying to »buy votes« with it. The programme, however, remains popular (far beyond the ruling party's electorate) and the re-election of PiS loyalist Andrzej Duda as president in July 2020 may be owed more to this programme than to hyped-up anti-LSBTIQ* rhetoric (Orenstein 2020).

Right-wing populists in the West often link their criticism of migration to labour market issues. The French author quotes Marine Le Pen's 2017 election pledge: »Defend the rights of women: fight against

⁷ When first introduced, as summarised by the Polish study in the collection, the »programme, Family 500+, (...) offers families an unconditional monthly cash transfer of 500 PLN (120 EUR) for every second and subsequent child until it reaches 18 years of age; and for the first child in the case of families with a monthly income below 190 EUR per family member« (Grzebalska, Zacharenko, in: Gutsche 2018: 84). Since then, the system has been extended without restrictions to the first child.

Islamism that rescinds their [women's] fundamental liberties; implement a national plan for equal pay for men and women, and combat precarity both in the professional and social spheres. (Proposal n °9)« (Marchand-Lagier in: Gutsche 2018: 51). Combining the two issues in one campaign pledge suggests a connection between them. The paper on Sweden makes the same point with regard to the Sweden Democrats: »An opposition between the interests of the female workers in the public welfare sector and public expenditure in connection with immigration is constructed, and the SD has proposed reforms for improved working conditions (...)« (Jungar in: Gutsche 2018: 98).

If gender equality policy is market-oriented, if women's emancipation is defined by labour market participation (without addressing the inhumane working conditions and low wages that the majority experience), and if social issues are considered irrelevant or outdated, right-wing parties can accuse advocates of gender equality of »exclusively representing middle-class, highly educated and liberal-minded women, and not taking into consideration the concerns of the so-called ›ordinary‹ women employed in the public sector with low wages or females with low pensions.« This is how Jungar, the author of the study on Sweden, puts it (p. 98) but the same issue is raised in the studies on Germany, France and Poland.

The emancipatory potential inherent in propositions by right-wing populists must be understood in this context. Right-wing parties mostly address women in their role as mothers.⁸ Escape routes from the labour market (such as lengthy parental leave and generous child benefit) are liberating for women for whom the labour market entails exploitation and who find it simply impossible to balance work and family life due to the demands made in the workplace, particularly in contexts where community and care within individualistic societies are only maintained within the family circle. At the same time, for these women promises of emancipation through paid employment are hollow phrases that have nothing to do with their lives (Gregor, Kováts 2019).

⁸ The *Rassemblement National* and *Fidesz-KDNP* arguably also seem to affirm women in their role as part of the workforce (in Hungary this has been the case since a shortage of skilled workers arose after hundreds of thousands of people emigrated) (Szikra 2019).

What's New? Update of the Country Studies in *Triumph of the Women, Volume I*

The 2019 European Parliament elections did not bring the predicted breakthrough for right-wing populists and, instead, Ursula von-der-Leyen became the first female European Commission President (inter alia with *Fidesz* support).⁹ Observers who view female political representation as an indicator of progress also consider this latter point to indicate progress in gender equality. Nevertheless, factors beyond the candidate's sex should be taken into account when it comes to considering the substance of their policies. In this context, there should be a greater focus on whether a politician's policy agenda addresses gender inequalities and, in the case of a Commission President, her position on states in which women's rights are systematically disregarded should be addressed. As things stand, the von der Leyen Commission does not appear to perform well on either of these points. The EU's neoliberal gender policies, which address neither inequalities between women across Europe nor the structural causes of gender inequality, will not change under the new Commission—as evidenced by the gender equality strategy adopted in 2020 (Kováts, Zacharenko 2020a)—and the governments in Poland and Hungary will still be able to pursue their policies, as became apparent in the deal between Poland/Hungary and the German Council Presidency on the rule-of-law mechanism.

Since the first volume was published in autumn 2018, elections have been held in several of the countries examined: The Sweden Democrats notched up 17.5 per cent in September 2018, significantly increasing their share of the vote compared with 2014 (up from 12.9 per cent) and strengthening their position as the third strongest parliamentary group. Golden Dawn obtained just under three per cent of the vote in the July 2019 parliamentary elections and is, therefore, no longer represented in parliament. It was, furthermore, forbidden in October 2020 after being ruled a criminal organisation.¹⁰

⁹ It had a »razor-thin majority of nine votes« and thus needed *Fidesz'* twelve votes. <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article208774391/Viktor-Orban-Der-Lieblingsautokrat-von-CDU-und-CSU.html> (last accessed 15.8.2020).

¹⁰ See: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/eu-affairs/134518/golden-dawn-verdict-guilty-fascism-greece-party/> (last accessed 8.3.2021).

In Germany, a number of elections to the parliaments in the federal states have been held since autumn 2018. On 1 September 1st 2019, the AfD obtained 27.5 per cent of the vote in Saxony (an increase of almost 18 per centage points), 23.5 per cent in Brandenburg (a rise of 11.3 per centage points), and 23.4 per cent in Thuringia in October 2019 (up nearly 13 per centage points); in all three states, the AfD now represents the second largest parliamentary group. In the corresponding elections in the city-states of Bremen (May 2019) and Hamburg (February 2020), the AfD achieved single-digit results, 6.1 per cent in Hamburg (0.6 per centage point increase) and 5.3 per cent in Bremen (0.8 per centage points lower than in the previous elections).

Although Emmanuel Macron defeated Marine Le Pen in the second round of the 2017 presidential elections and won the parliamentary election with his new liberal party *La République En Marche* [The Republic on the Move], the problems in French society have not gone away. As his neoliberal policies unfolded, the *gilets jaunes* [yellow vests] movement came into being and, beginning in October 2018, organised protests calling for economic justice for months. There were particularly large women's protests in this regard, which comes as no surprise in the light of the strong women's rights movement and the economic injustices that particularly affect women.

Poland and Hungary

After the re-election of *Fidesz-KDNP* in April 2018 with a two-thirds majority, local elections were held in Hungary in October 2019, in which the governing parties lost all the major cities, Budapest districts and the principal office of mayor of Budapest to the opposition. After ten years, the opposition now also have scope to pursue gender policy at the municipal level. Although *Jobbik* notched up 20 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections, its chairman resigned on election night. Since then, the party has primarily been preoccupied with internal conflicts. The party has split, with the neo-Nazis leaving (along with their strongest and most visible (female) politician, Dóra Dúró) and founding a new party called *Mi hazánk* [Our Fatherland]. It had around three per cent support in surveys in the summer of 2020. It is still uncertain

whether the *Jobbik* party, which has seven per cent support, will pursue its ambition to move more towards the political centre, will be swallowed up by the opposition alliance that is preparing to stand in 2022, or will have ceased to play a role in the Hungarian party landscape by then. Since 2018, the Hungarian parliament has had its highest proportion of women since 1990: 12 per cent of MPs are women. However, Hungary still has the lowest proportion of women of all national parliaments in the EU.

Changes can also be observed in Poland. During the 2015–2019 legislative period, the *Kukiz'15* parliamentary group disintegrated. In the parliamentary elections in October 2019, *Kukiz'15* ran as part of the *Koalicja Polska* [KP; »Polish Coalition«] led by the PSL [Polish People's Party], which received 8.55 per cent of the vote. As a result, *Kukiz'15* now has only six deputies in the Sejm. PiS was re-elected in 2019 (Beate Szydło had already been replaced by Mateusz Morawiecki as prime minister in 2017), and, in the summer of 2020, President Andrzej Duda, who remains loyal to PiS, also gained the upper hand in the vote.

Right-wing populists have been in power in Hungary since 2010 and in Poland since 2015 and are forging ahead with a transformation of liberal democracy. In Poland, they do not hold a large enough majority to be entitled to make changes to the constitution, so they cannot reshape the state system as profoundly as their Hungarian colleagues; nevertheless, there are many similarities.

Populism is one aspect of their politics: they use divisive rhetoric and claim to represent the people. However, examining these parties solely through the prism of populism does not capture the scope of the changes being implemented and the restrictions imposed on civil liberties; on the other hand, as a term utilised as a prescriptive political call to arms, it tends to evade serious analysis.

Popularity of Parties and their Policies—Also Among Women

Exit polls or opinion surveys conducted shortly before the elections in these two countries reveal that not only is there no radical right gender gap in the two governing coalitions, that is, a pronounced overrepresentation of men among those voting for these parties, but that,

on the contrary, there is an almost equal gender distribution amongst voters with women being slightly over-represented (Grzebalska, Kováts 2018).

There may be several reasons for this, for example, that women do not vote as women but base their voting decisions on criteria other than the parties' gender equality policies (e.g., government opposition or the topic of migration, etc.). It is also evident that women's degree of awareness of issues is no different from that of men in the same class. The popularity of the family policies pursued by the two parties is striking. In Hungary, for example, two studies (Biró-Nagy, Laki 2020; Róna et al. 2020) examining satisfaction with the Orbán government (one study being representative of the population, the other focused on the poorest classes) were presented in the summer of 2020. Both found that the government's family policies were its most popular, along with migration policy.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, the concept of practical versus strategic gender interests can be helpful. The Polish study (Grzebalska, Zacharenko 2018) cites Maxine Molyneux's concept of women's practical gender interests, which arise from the specific conditions they face in the context of a particular gender-specific division of labour. In contrast to this, there are also strategic gender interests. As a function of ideological orientation (e.g., liberal, queer, socialist), these approaches make differing feminist strategic demands but essentially aim to change the gender order. The right wing, the Polish study argues, could be said to represent the practical gender interests of many (although not all) women. The study also notes that it would be desirable to link the two types of interests (see below for counterstrategies).

Class Politics

It should be emphasised that, compared to Polish family policy, Hungarian family policy is far more inequitable in class terms: Many of the measures, such as tax cuts or housing subsidies, are conditional upon having a job or a high income. Universal benefits, such as child benefits, have been frozen at a very low level since 2008.¹¹ On the one hand, this can be attributed

¹¹ Equivalent to about 35–45 Euro per child per month (depending on the number of children and whether the family is a single-parent household); in Poland, PiS has just raised child benefits to about 120 Euro per child.

to the Hungarian government's political ideology, which aims primarily to strengthen the middle class and support only those in work. On the other hand, there are also racist or antiziganist facets to the Hungarian government's policies: Roma are overrepresented in the poorest classes and the government probably does not want to expose itself to the accusation of supporting this population group and its reproduction.

Culture War

A further aspect that links the Polish and Hungarian governments is their strong focus on what is dubbed the »culture war«, meaning polarisation on the basis of culturally defined conflicts, including a very pronounced sense of »gender ideology« as the purported enemy. In Poland, many PiS-led cities declared themselves »LGBT-free zones« in 2019. In response, the EU subsequently froze its funding to them in July 2020.¹²

Andrzej Duda's campaign in June/July 2020 was based on accusing his main opponent, Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski of the centre-right PO (*Platforma Obywatelska* [Civic Platform]), of being pro-LGBTIQ*. Duda initiated the controversy by proclaiming that LGBTIQ* »are not people, but an ideology.« In adopting this stance, the campaign focused more on questions relating to identity politics issues than on achievements/plans for the presidency. Meanwhile, the controversy over LGBTIQ* rights continues: in August, a person who self-identifies as non-binary was arrested. The individual in question had damaged a government-funded campaign bus that equated homosexuality with pedophilia. Protests erupted across Warsaw in response and open letters were written by international figures to the Polish government calling for an end to discrimination against LGBTIQ* people.¹³ The long-standing topic of abortion returned to the agenda: The Constitutional Court, which is loyal to PiS, ruled that one of the remaining grounds for an abortion permitted under Europe's strictest abortion law, namely the option to abort severely damaged and non-viable fetuses, was unconstitutional and should no longer be authorised;

¹² See: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/29/eu-funding-withheld-from-six-polish-towns-over-lgbtq-free-zones> (last accessed on 15.8.2020).

¹³ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/18/writers-actors-directors-call-end-to-homophobia-in-poland-in-open-letter> (last accessed on 15.8.2020).

women in this situation must thus carry the foetus to term. The measure was implemented in February 2021.

In Hungary, the government abolished gender studies MA programmes by government decree in October 2018. This affected the American-run Central European University and the ELTE University Budapest. Courses can still be offered and taught in the respective disciplines; it is solely these two Master's programmes that are no longer available. This measure caused enormous international outcry because of the attack on academic freedom,¹⁴ probably also because of Gender Studies' symbolic character, and fears that it could create a precedent for the right-wing in Europe.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Hungarian government found it indispensable to hold a vote in parliament on non-ratification of the Istanbul Convention¹⁵ and on banning changes in official documents to the sex registered at birth, in both cases with reference to the alleged »gender ideology«. This can be understood as a diversionary tactic at the start of a severe economic crisis or as restoring the dividing line in the conflict between the government (presented as caring about the people) and the opposition (painted as becoming upset about such matters instead of concentrating on essentials) (Kováts, Zacharenko 2020b).

In the summer of 2020, the Polish Minister of Justice announced that Poland would withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, which it had ratified in 2015. Slovakia voted at the end of February not to ratify the Convention. In the summer of 2020, the same debate also began in the Czech Republic.¹⁶ Polish religious fundamentalist Ordo Iuris is also agitating against ratification of the Istanbul Convention at the European level with a petition entitled »Stop Gender Convention«. Instead, an alternative »Family Rights Convention« has been initiated that—unlike the Istanbul Convention—contains chapters on abortion and same-sex marriage.¹⁷

¹⁴ C.f., for example, Gagyi and Gregor 2018 for the contexts in which this decision is embedded.

¹⁵ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

¹⁶ On the Europe-wide debates on the Istanbul Convention, c.f. Balogh 2020.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy/the-culture-war-over-the-istanbul-convention-in-east-central-europe-4826/> (last accessed on 15.8.2020).

Gender Definitions

The same arguments are used to attack the Istanbul Convention in Eastern and Central European countries as are marshalled against gender mainstreaming in Germany or Austria, the main assertion being that it propagates multiple gender identities. Accordingly, it is alleged that gender is taken to mean self-perceived gender identity. It should be noted here that the gender definition given in the Convention is clear: Article 3.c. states »gender« shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.« The Convention, therefore, does not challenge the existence of two biological sexes and nor does gender mainstreaming. The right-wing accusation is, therefore, a deliberate distortion of the facts. Nevertheless, it cannot simply be claimed that the accusation is rooted in a misconception or misrepresentation. While the context is misrepresented with reference to the Istanbul Convention, this is not true if a more general perspective is considered, as the aforementioned gender definition as self-perceived gender identity does exist: In an increasing number of EU documents and in LGBTIQ* awareness-raising materials gender signifies subjectively felt, self-perceived gender and is defined as gender identity. Often this ambiguity is not noticed by progressive protagonists (they treat the definitions of the Istanbul Convention and those used in queer politics as synonymous) or it is celebrated in the name of diversity, which is presented as conflict-free. It is precisely this ambiguity, which is not noticed or acknowledged as a problem, that is instrumentalised by right-wing parties that have no interest in differentiated theoretical debates (Kováts 2018). Accusations are, thus, made that talking about gender stereotypes constitutes the Trojan horse of gender ideology, which will lead to the introduction of myriad gender identities in keeping with the Anglo-American example. In this context, it should be noted that it is not the same to question, from a feminist perspective, binary gender-based role ascriptions (the idea that women and men should be a particular way) or to question the binary nature of sexes (that humans are born—with exception of the few intersex people—male or female). Queer feminism represents this latter strand of thought, hence the idea that gender cannot be read from the body but is only

an interpretation and can, therefore, be deconstructed; in this approach, identities are accordingly held to be better and fairer indicators of an individual's gender: man, woman, or something else. But this approach cannot be held to constitute a social or global consensus or communicated as such. Those views seem to be out of touch with reality for large parts of society, even in the core countries, where these approaches originate, and constitute a manifestation of colonisation in countries where this theory and policy are viewed as imports and communicated as the only valid route to progress.

Women in Leadership Positions

The most visible woman in the Hungarian government is Katalin Novák, the State Secretary (since October 2020: Minister without Portfolio) for Family Affairs and also one of *Fidesz's* deputy chairpersons. The politician, who is very active in the media, defends the demographic focus of family policy and broaches the issue of work-life balance for working mothers. In this respect *Fidesz* is not trying to coerce »women back to the kitchen«. However, the party still ignores the challenges of care work, especially in old age (home care and salaries and infrastructure of institutional care for the elderly). Moreover, *Fidesz* favours employers over employees (e.g., by relaxing provisions on health and safety in the workplace or on working hours). This does not suggest that the tensions between paid work and unpaid care work that affect Hungarian women (and men) are actually being addressed politically by the government (Gregor, Kováts 2019). In the midst of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a »civil society« organisation run by the State Secretary (*Women for Hungary*, made up of politicians and employers) offered awards for women who attained extraordinary achievements during the pandemic. Instead of working as a government to improve the disastrous working conditions and salaries in the health care, education and social sectors, individual women were highlighted as role models and as examples of heroic work. The commonalities that link conservative and neoliberal ideologies are readily apparent here.

East-West Inequalities

One aspect that often shines through in the gender discourse of PiS and *Fidesz-KDNP* is their revolt against

Western dominance, which also has a material basis. The COVID-19 crisis has made many East-West inequalities visible to broader strata of the general public, to a much greater degree than was previously the case. This is particularly evident in Germany's actions. Despite border closures in the Schengen area, the German government sought to conclude bilateral agreements with Eastern European states to ensure that the asparagus harvest, the meat industry, and the care sector did not collapse. Care work is an increasingly blatant example in this context, now rendering visible issues that experts have been talking about for years: Care infrastructures are constructed unfairly because they are based primarily on inequalities (including among women) (Uhde 2016). They are not sustainable. Care deficits in the West are remedied with (underpaid, in some cases exploited in households) labour from the South and East. This creates shortfalls in the countries dispatching workers and these are in turn compensated by drawing on other—poorer—countries or classes.

Against this backdrop, interpretations claiming that societies are *not there yet* or have not yet overcome inequalities come across as arrogant—a stance that in turn is used by the right as legitimisation for their policies.

Hungarian sociologist József Böröcz once aptly put it like this:

»In order to think of any contemporary social form as the desirable ›already‹ for the desirous reformers of the ›not yet, it is necessary to assume, as liberal thought does invariably, that the ›backwardness‹ of those that are ›not-yet‹ advanced has no causal connection to the previous advancement of the more ›developed‹ role model. If the achievement of the ›advanced‹ social forms is acknowledged to be due to benefits derived from somebody else's wretchedness, or if the suffering of the wretched is recognized as having been caused by the ›advancement‹ of the developed, the teleological blueprint becomes morally unacceptable and even nonsensical.« (Böröcz 2006: 117).

For instance, measuring the degree of gender equality in terms of women's labour market participation does not simply signify failing to take account of the not particularly emancipatory working conditions and salaries experienced by the majority, as mentioned above; it also entails ignoring the way in which labour market participation of some women is based on the

exploitation of others. In countries considered less advanced due to a dearth of care workers caused (also) by care migration, women have to do this work in the home themselves and are, thus not available to the labour market.

It is, therefore, crucial to engage once again in a vigorous discussion on how gender equality is actually measured. Just as political representation of women masks structural issues (those who can take part in politics may not have a husband who participates in care work but instead a Polish cleaning lady and nanny), other indicators need to be examined, in part to understand why right-wing populist parties are an attractive electoral option for many women, but also with a view to developing viable political solutions for as many women as possible.

The Appeal of Poland and Hungary

The situation in Poland and Hungary in gender-politics terms cannot be reduced to a misogynist or conservative backlash. In many respects, the developments unfolding are genuinely worrying, for example the repeated resurgence of threats to further restrict women's reproductive rights in Poland or the way in which feminists or LGBTIQ* people are singled out as enemies in both countries. Yet the unfolding trends concern broader issues too: *Fidesz* and PiS are striving to create a new order, and in the process, over and above hate propaganda, they are deploying policies that tally with the reality of people's lives. In this context, their discourse can draw on many shortcomings in the transformation processes and subsequent years until 2010 or 2015, as well as referencing current hierarchies within the EU and erroneous developments in progressive politics. As right-wing parties in Europe and beyond look to Poland and Hungary with curiosity and in search of inspiration, it is worth seeking a better understanding of these processes.

Counterstrategies

The six studies identify various strategies that parliamentary parties or civil society use or should use. Substantial differences exist depending on whether the right-wing parties in question are not represented in parliament at all and, moreover, engage in criminal acts (like

Golden Dawn), whether they are in opposition, such as AFD, *Rassemblement National*, Sweden Democrats, *Kukiz'15* or *Jobbik* or in government, as, for example, *Fidesz-KDNP* and PiS with a huge wealth of resources (scope to adopt legislation and, in the case of Hungary, scope for constitutional amendments, media dominance, powers to attack academic or press freedom, etc.).

Better Understanding

In all three cases, it is possible and essential to gain a greater understanding of the contextual factors (whether national, regional, or others) that foster the popularity and rise of the parties in question. The six studies make a very important and nuanced contribution which is only summarized selectively in this overview. One point that all six studies make clear is that talking about better communication and »better narratives« does not go far enough—the crux of the matter is content.

No Go: Excluding and Ignoring

With reference to the parliamentary right-wing, the German and Swedish studies consider the strategies that have been used: »excluding/penalising«, »ignoring« and »confrontation/demarcation«. The first two strategies proved ineffective. They enable right-wing populists to portray themselves as victims of what is dubbed the mainstream. In practical terms, these strategies have also proven to be flawed: Exclusion has not led to the disappearance of either the AfD or the Sweden Democrats.

Accurate Analysis of Causes

Debating content-related issues and drawing demarcation lines should not only be about demonstrating that one is »taking a stand« but should also involve dealing with the social and political causes that boost the appeal of right-wing populist parties.

This is what the Polish study suggests when it states:

»What is needed (...) is an opposition that both questions the processes which propelled it [PiS] into power and proposes an agenda simultaneously addressing women's practical and strategic gender interests. There is also a need to critically reassess the dominant framework for transforming the gender order and formulate strategic gender interests outside of the

(neo)liberal paradigm. Without a political agenda that addresses the persisting socio-economic disparities in Polish society as well as proposes extensive and inclusive social safety nets, political actors in Poland will not be able counter the illiberal but socially-minded policies of the populist right-wing» (Grzebalska, Zacharenko in Gutsche 2018: 90).

In the case of Hungary, the example of Péter Ungár, a member of parliament from the Green party LMP (which currently seems to be disappearing) could be cited; he (unfortunately single-handedly) addresses the care-work crisis, including pension provision and underpayment of public employees in a media-savvy campaign. In adopting this strategy he opts to engage not with *Fidesz-KDNP* but with their voters, focusing on the factors that drive demand for the party's policies and the kind of vision that could counteract this, rather than concentrating on why the governing coalition's approach is wrong.

Proactive Rather than Reactive

Several studies in this essay collection also cite strategies adopted by feminist protagonists as examples: the »Black Protest« in Poland that prevented the government from making abortion laws even more restrictive in 2016; the hashtag campaigns #aufschrei [outcry] and #ausnahmslos [noexceptions] in Germany, which drew attention to sexualised violence against women. It became apparent in this context how difficult it is to organise proactively rather than only as a reaction to shocking events or draft legislation.

No Go: Open letters

In Poland and Hungary, open letters (from Polish or Hungarian intellectuals, foreign celebrities or MEPs) are often used, as in the case of the legislative amendment prohibiting legal sex change or the decision to close down gender studies master programmes in Hungary or recently in Poland in response to the LGBTIQ* incidents. In the case of the illiberal governments in Poland and Hungary, however, this does not function effectively as a means of exerting pressure, as it tends to play into the hands of the ruling parties, who exploit these letters to demonstrate that purported (Western or liberal domestic) elites are supposedly out of touch with reality.

Alliances

Potential and necessary alliances constitute another important aspect. Elisa Gutsche emphasises an aspect that is typical in Germany and beyond:

»The lack of two-way communication between trade unions and the civil society feminist movement is especially evident in Germany. The Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (German Trade Union Confederation) represents more than two million women, yet the feminist movement in Germany makes hardly any use of this potential and these structures. Why is unclear. To hazard a guess: different »languages«, subject areas and accesses« (Gutsche 2018: 15).

Intersectional alliances could and should also be interpreted in this sense: seeking dialogue on analysis and strategies for change in terms of material circumstances.

Outlook

Volume I demonstrated that right-wing populists, despite all due criticism, do also highlight genuine grievances through their policies, especially social issues that have been neglected; that equality is viewed only from the perspective of labour market participation—in a labour market that entails exploitation for many women; intra-European (or even: intra-German) inequalities form a backdrop that makes pronouncing moralising lessons appear hypocritical; the ambiguity concerning the concept of gender in progressive politics; and the potential conflicts within what are described as progressive parties. The right, however, expresses outrage over these grievances in a divisive vein, portraying them as life-or-death choices and instrumentalising these issues. These debates serve other political purposes. Homogenisation and polarisation are important strategies in right-wing discourse.

The way in which the right is gaining strength should, therefore, be viewed as a rallying cry: They are not just constructing images of the purported enemy but are re-politicising genuine contradictions and failings. Better responses to these issues are needed; it is not merely about offering »better narratives« or tirelessly explaining why the right is mistaken.

The explanations we find for the rise of the right, especially among women, also have political consequences as they give rise to different political strategies. Do women vote for the right for racist and nationalist reasons? Or are their voting decisions a consequence of material inequalities and their own experiences of exploitation? As a function of the answers to such questions, the issue can be tackled with better political education or with political strategies to combat social and economic inequalities. A number of painful debates about appropriate explanations and the requisite conflicts concerning viable counter-strategies will continue to demand our attention for some time to come. *Triumph of the Women, Volume I* and now the *Triumph of the Women* study series provide important impetuses to resolve these points.

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AUTHOR

Eszter Kováts is a PhD student in Political Science at ELTE University, Budapest. She worked for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung from 2009 until the end of 2019. From 2012 to 2019 she was responsible for the Foundation's gender programme for East-Central Europe in Budapest. She currently lives in Berlin.

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