



# POLICY PAPER

on the effects

of the shrinking policy space for civil society -

Negative effects  
of anti-feminist policies  
and anti-gender movements





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# Helsinki Committee for Human Rights

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Skopje, 2023



This policy paper was created with the financial support of Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

## Introduction

As a continuation of Helsinki Committee for Human Rights efforts in addressing the negative effects of anti-feminist policies and anti-gender movements that are increasingly strengthening their anti-democratic and populist actions, this report serves as a summary of those efforts reflected in creation of a roundtables, as well as monitoring of the rise of those effects in North Macedonia. This report is done as part of a regional project with “Civic solidarity”.

For context, anti-gender movements present themselves as formal and informal associations of citizens, who actively act through propaganda campaigns, political mobilization against gender equality as a concept, value, and postulate of a society. They mostly use the narrative that they are representatives of concerned parents, although they rarely show their true personal identity (strategy of the symbolism of ordinary citizens and the silent majority), and in fact they are networked at the supranational level with organizations, religious associations, and political parties. Anti-gender mobilization plays a role in the wider cultural conflict surrounding modernity: in this case “gender” is a stretched category that serves as a cover for collective fears of change, loss of national identity, excessive influence of the West and its cultural hegemony (anti-gender and right-wing populism). Those movements have made a deep impact on the Macedonian society. It is important to note that in the public sphere there is an increased understanding of the negative impact and the security threats of the anti-gender politics – for example – initial meetings were done in 2022 in December, where only few activists and NGOs were present, but by the end of this project in 2023, both NGOs, institutions and media are trying to create a collective effort in resisting the regress of the Macedonian society. This is a good progress, however, from the other side, the rise and impact Anti-gender movements and politics has strengthened their position and made institutional changes with erasing gender equality on local level and stopping the process of passing the Law on Gender equality.

Right-wing agendas consistently view feminism, gender equality, and anti-racism as problematic, leveraging sentiments against ‘anti-gender,’ anti-feminist, and anti-migrant issues to gather support for nationalist, cultural, religious, or political causes. Presently, there is a global surge in ‘anti-gender’ attacks, manifesting in violence directed at feminists, LGBTQI communities, and the institutionalization of feminist theory in universities, NGOs, and governments. This wave of ‘anti-gender’ aggression is also intertwined with religious, ethnic, cultural, and nationalist funda-

mentalism across various contexts. In these settings, gender equality is often vilified as a foreign concept linked to increased migration, liberalization, or Westernization.

## **Mapping the stakeholders (CSOs, HRD)**

Systematically mapping and analysing these stakeholders, allows the activists and the civil society to create a comprehensive understanding of the diverse landscape of organizations and associations involved in creating a democratic resistance to the anti-gender politics and support North Macedonia towards gender equality, and EU integrations. This report attempts to create a Blueprint and Guide the development of a robust coalition that can effectively advocate for the rights of marginalized groups and contribute to democratic processes and EU integration efforts. Additionally, it maps out where potential collaboration and coalition building can develop, and also on the contrary it allows us to see the missing gap of where more entities of the civil society need to be brought together and have an unwaveringly standpoint against anti-gender movements.

### **Stakeholders in role of creating the space for continuation of gender equality efforts:**

As a part of this project the Helsinki organized a round table on the topic “Addressing the narrowed space for action of civil society organizations”. The roundtable discussion illuminated a diverse array of viewpoints, underscoring the significance of adopting a comprehensive and intersectional approach to comprehend the repercussions of policies labelled as anti-feminist and anti-gender movements within the context of democracy. This multifaceted understanding takes into account various aspects that intersect and influence one another, providing a more nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by the feminist movement.

As cooperation with institutions and media by civil society organizations supports the aim of unmasking the intentions of anti-gender movements and their anti-democratic actions: During the roundtable, representatives from the non-governmental sector convened with notable figures from institutions, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, along with two parliamentarians, and various other attendees as listed. The primary focus of the discussion centred around the imperative for a more profound examination of the adverse consequences stemming from the escalating influence of anti-feminist policies. These policies, gaining momentum in their anti-democratic and populist actions, have been observed to exert their effects both at the local level and within institutional frameworks.

A key takeaway from the discussion was the pressing need for **substantial institutional commitment to safeguard** the strides already made in gender equality, both on a **national and local scale**. This commitment involves not only acknowledging the importance of gender equality but actively implementing policies and practices that uphold and advance it.

The participants also highlighted the **importance of building a broad coalition** that includes not only those directly involved in feminist advocacy but also vulnerable groups and other political actors, such as research centres and organizations. This collaborative approach is seen as the next crucial step in strengthening the feminist movement in Macedonia. By **forging alliances with diverse stakeholders**, the movement can amplify its impact and address a wider range of issues, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and resilient advocacy network. Additionally, the discussion emphasized the significance of **internal education and knowledge** sharing within the feminist movement. This entails enhancing awareness and understanding among members about various facets of feminism, intersectionality, and the broader socio-political context. Such **internal capacity-building initiatives** are considered indispensable for creating a united front, ensuring that activists are well-informed and equipped to navigate the complexities of advocating for gender equality in Macedonia. Overall, the roundtable underscored the interconnected nature of these strategies and their collective role in consolidating and advancing the feminist movement in the region.

For the time of the analysis (November and December 2023) and the activities (June 2023) since that meeting there are several key aspects to introduce in to the mapping of the stakeholders, as **The Platform for Gender Equality, the Network for Protection against Discrimination and the National Network Against Homophobia and Transphobia**. Those were the platforms which also strongly condemned the call for a protest by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC-OA) made mid-June and conducting of the protest on the 29th, which was created the sole purpose of creating public pressure towards the withdrawal of the draft Laws on gender equality and on Legal registration from the parliamentary procedure.

### **Current tendencies in the civic space:**

**(legal restrictions, extra-legal barriers, restrictive policies, hate speech, harassment, intimidation or reprisals) targeting the civic actors in the regions**

The ongoing struggle for gender equality in Macedonia and the need to address issues within the current gender equality promotion system have led to pro-

posed legal solutions. Within the current constrained environment for civil society resistance against anti-gender movements, several key issues emerge:

### **Growing Institutional Support for Anti-Gender Actors:**

- There are noteworthy shifts on the local level indicate increasing support from institutional forces towards anti-gender actors.
- Policy restrictions further constrict the space for civil society resistance, limiting the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

### **Obstacles to Legislative Advances and Framework:**

- The impediment to passing the proposed Law on Gender Equality, intended to replace the 2012 Law on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, marks a decline in governmental support for gender equality on a national scale.
- This legislative setback raises concerns about the commitment to advancing gender equality at the policy level.
- The influence of anti-gender movements extends to setbacks in legal frameworks, as observed in the hindrance faced by proposed amendments to the Law on Civil Registry in 2020.
- The 2019 ECtHR case of X vs The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia highlighted a breach of the Convention on Human Rights, attributing it to an insufficient legal framework that hampers prompt and accessible procedures for correcting the registered gender on birth certificates for transgender people.

### **Diversification of Anti-Gender Movement Actors:**

- The anti-gender movement demonstrates resilience by diversifying its actors, utilizing social media platforms to establish new pages and expanding the scope of its work.
- As additions to *Coalition for protection of children, Take Responsibility*, new emerging entities like Reditelski Front and others contribute to this diversification, posing additional challenges to civil society resistance.

### **Role of Religious Leaders and the Macedonian Church:**

- The interference of religious leaders and the Macedonian Church not only represents a direct intrusion into the state's secularity but also constitutes a violation<sup>1</sup> of the Constitution.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://religija.mk/jakov-stobiski-zakonot-za-rodova-ednakvost-e-najgolemoto-zlo-protiv-zenata/>



- This interference underscores a disregard for the real-life situations of women in the country, raising questions about the separation of church and state.

### **Limitations within the Public Space - Media and Online Media:**

- Within the public sphere, limitations manifest in media and online platforms, where anti-gender movements exert influence.
- The manipulation of information, censorship, or biased coverage may contribute to a skewed narrative that hinders informed public discourse on gender equality issues.

### **Narrative context:**

- In navigating these challenges, it becomes crucial for advocates of gender equality and civil society to address these multifaceted issues collectively. This involves strategizing against institutional support for anti-gender actors, advocating for inclusive legislative measures, countering the diversification of anti-gender movement actors, safeguarding secularity, reforming legal frameworks, and promoting unbiased narratives within the public space. Only through a comprehensive and collaborative approach can the spaces for gender equality promotion be protected and expanded in the face of persistent anti-gender movements.

Pursuant to the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, more than ten years ago, on February 20, 2013, the Parliament adopted the “Strategy for Gender Equality 2013-2020” published in the “Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova”, in which the expression “gender” is defined equality” after the expression “gender equality”. In this national strategy, signed by the President of the Assembly Trajko Veljanovski and voted at a time when VMRO-DPMNE has a parliamentary majority and executive power, it is stated that “Gender equality is one of the values of the Constitutional order of the Republic of Macedonia.” However, this was not reflected in the implementation of the policies, or a law, most clearly shown by the limitations of the right to abortion and lack of reporting in GBV.

Gender equality is a well-established commitment, not only globally but also at the local level, as evidenced by the adoption of the “Strategy for Gender Equality of the community of local self-government units of RM-ZELS 2018-2030.” This strategy goes beyond viewing gender equality merely as a human right; it recognizes it as a democratic value that should be integrated into all aspects of local life (p. 1).

Local self-governments have taken concrete steps to implement gender equality, with the establishment of commissions and the adoption of policies and strategies in certain municipalities. For instance, the Municipality of Aerodrom established the Commission for Gender Equality in 2005.

The commitment to gender equality extends to international organizations, including the UN, the Council of Europe, and the EU. The OSCE, in collaboration with the Assembly, has issued a Handbook on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, emphasizing the need for a collective effort from various stakeholders, including state institutions, civil society, media, and academia (p. 11). In North Macedonia, UN Women, a United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment, actively collaborates with several state institutions. The pursuit of gender equality is also integral to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal no. 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. As a member of the Council of Europe, our country is actively engaged in promoting gender equality through its participation in the Commission for Gender Equality. This commission, guided by the "Strategy for Gender Equality (2018-2023)," is instrumental in ensuring the integration of gender equality into all policies of the Council of Europe.

In the context of EU accession negotiations, North Macedonia aligns its efforts with the "Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025," along with considering recommendations from annual reports addressing gender equality. For example, the 2022 report emphasizes the need for additional measures to promote gender equality in the media industry (North Macedonia Report 2022). This underscores the ongoing commitment to advancing gender equality within the framework of EU accession negotiations.

For example, the analysis titled "Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation," conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) focused on events spanning from May to July of the current year, with particular attention to news reports related to the Pride Parade (Skopje Pride 2023) and the counter-protest organized by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) and other conservative and religious organizations in June. With the comprehensive examination of more than 1,000 online reports, and by analysing over 7,000 comments posted on Facebook in response to these news reports. This shows the resistance to this initiative became evident as anti-gender movements began disseminating misinformation regarding the incorporation of the term "gender equality" within the proposed legislation. Moreover, in their discourse, these movements deliberately separate the term "gender" from "gender equality." This separation becomes a focal point for additional manipulation, particularly through the purported inclusion of the term "gender identity" in the context of the new legal measures. Aside from the gendered disinformation there is reporting of hate crime and harassment in the online sphere.

Notably, disinformation campaigns are also orchestrated by opponents of "gender ideology," a term that, when intentionally spread to mislead the public, falls squarely within the category of disinformation. The correlation between the surge

of the anti-gender movement, characterized by heightened misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, and the rise of Russian propaganda is discernible, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine<sup>2</sup>. Well before 2022, Russian propaganda had been targeting the West and Europe, aiming to instigate discord on LGBTI+ rights matters among EU member states and candidate countries. While the Russian government isn't the sole anti-gender actor, it stands out as a "key actor" in foreign influence campaigns that disseminate disinformation about LGBTI+ individuals within the EU (EU Report).

Post Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, the surge in anti-gender disinformation campaigns poses an additional ethical challenge for journalism. This is especially true since narratives infused with homophobia, transphobia, and anti-gender sentiments are integral components of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns. These campaigns are observable not only in EU member states but also in the Western Balkans. Among the main Russian disinformation narratives is the notion of "endangered values" in the West, often conflating Western values with women's rights, LGBTI+ rights, and the rights of other minorities. Recognizing and responsibly reporting on these interconnected challenges becomes crucial for maintaining ethical journalistic standards and combating the influence of disinformation campaigns on public perception.

On another note, on institutional level the following municipalities have excluded the term gender equality, or have taken a firm stand against advancing it:

- Strumica
- Novo Selo
- Kocani
- Gevgelija

### **Restrictions on liberties such as the freedom of association, freedom of speech or freedom of assembly**

The intersection of anti-gender movements with restrictions on fundamental liberties poses a significant challenge to democratic values. Addressing in the Macedonian context these challenges requires a commitment to protecting and upholding the freedoms of association, speech, and assembly for all individuals, fostering an inclusive and democratic society where diverse perspectives can be expressed without fear of reprisal. During gatherings and meetings of activist and people working in the civic county directly towards gender equality and sexuality issues<sup>3</sup>, there are

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ima.mk/2023/08/03/anti-rodovoto-dvizenje-vo-makedonija-i-ruskata-propaganda/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://coalition.org.mk/archives/11998>

unofficial reports of harassment both digital and in person, death threats and several attempts of physical attacks. Concrete examples are the following:

### **Impact on Marginalized Communities:**

The negative consequences of anti-gender movements are often disproportionately being felt by marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals and women. Restrictions on liberties create an environment where these communities may feel marginalized, silenced, or hesitant to assert their rights, contributing to a broader climate of discrimination, but also violence, as they are using narratives of dehumanisation and degradation of people coming from those communities. Anti-gender movements have been known to target organizations and groups advocating for gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's rights. They may employ tactics such as smear campaigns, intimidation, or legal challenges to hinder the functioning and association of these groups. This curtailment of freedom of association undermines the diversity of voices in civil society, hindering the pursuit of inclusive and equitable societal goals.

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Critics within anti-gender movements may attempt to suppress diverse perspectives by limiting freedom of speech. This suppression can manifest through online harassment, threats, or campaigns to silence individuals, activists, or organizations advocating for gender equality. By stifling open dialogue and the expression of diverse viewpoints, these movements undermine the democratic value of free speech. Anti-gender movements interfere with public gatherings, or events that promote gender equality and human rights, especially on local level. Attempts to disrupt or prevent peaceful assemblies infringe on the freedom of assembly, a cornerstone of democratic societies. Such actions not only impede the exercise of democratic rights but also contribute to a chilling effect, dissuading individuals from participating in public discourse and advocacy.

## Extraordinary measures and restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic which disproportionately affected the civic actors and good practices of civil society responses to the restrictions

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the implementation of unprecedented measures and restrictions, impacting various aspects of society. Among those significantly affected were civic actors and the commendable practices that civil society had established in responding to these restrictions. This broader context in North Macedonia sets the stage for understanding how these challenges gave rise to particular vulnerabilities and opportunities for disinformation campaigns.

In the Macedonian case, where the repercussions of COVID-19 were keenly felt, reports indicate that the pandemic and vaccination efforts became focal points for fake news and disinformation campaigns. These campaigns, as observed in the analysis by Cvetovikj and Velichkovska, not only targeted public health narratives but also became instrumental in the inception and growth of anti-gender movements and politics. The origins of the anti-gender movement in Macedonian society are directly linked to disinformation disseminated on pages created to spread false information about vaccination, COVID-19, and educational policies.

The disinformation platforms that emerged during the pandemic evolved into sources for anti-gender movements, contributing to a broader transnational pattern of misleading narratives. The narratives, as identified in detailed analyses, demonstrated a level of sophistication, mimicking trends observed in anti-gender campaigns at the transnational level as it is a trend in other regions. This connection underscores the impact of the pandemic not only on public health but also on the informational landscape, where disinformation becomes a tool for shaping social and political agendas. This has to be followed in the year 2024, due to having the elections.

Specifically, the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights has raised concerns about the **dual threat** posed by anti-gender movements. Beyond their role in shaping regressive policies on gender equality, these movements have become a security threat due to their reliance on foreign influence as a primary source of funding and capacity building. This signifies a broader and more systemic challenge that extends beyond the immediate health crisis, highlighting how the consequences of the pandemic have rippled through societal structures, influencing not only public health but also broader issues related to gender equality, security, and foreign influence.

## Recommendations:

Through the different sections of this report there was addressing of key gaps, situational awareness, and potential space for change. By implementing these recommendations, a multifaceted approach can be developed to counteract anti-gender movements. This involves building collaborative networks, reshaping language for broader understanding, conducting thorough research to unmask actors, addressing anti-establishment sentiments through strategic communication, and tailoring messages to specific target groups. The goal is to create a comprehensive and inclusive narrative that promotes gender equality and counters the divisive rhetoric propagated by anti-gender movements. During the round table, the participants, especially the activists shared concrete and detailed recommendations based on their experience, knowledge and aspirations:

### 1. Mapping and Creation of a Comprehensive List of supporters and allies:

- *Objective:* Develop a comprehensive list of journalists and representatives from civil society organizations.
- *Example:* Establish a collaborative platform where journalists and civil society representatives can share insights, coordinate efforts, and collectively address anti-gender narratives. This fosters a network for informed reporting and advocacy.

### 2. Development of New Terminology and Discourse:

- *Objective:* Introduce educational and inclusive language to counter elitist and detaching discourse.
- *Example:* Initiate a guerilla-style campaign for visibility that introduces accessible and educational terminology. This could involve creating engaging content, infographics, and social media campaigns to reach a broader audience.



### 3. Consolidation of the Platform for Gender Equality:

- *Objective:* Strengthen the existing Platform for Gender Equality to enhance collaboration and amplify advocacy efforts.
- *Example:* Host regular meetings, webinars, or conferences that bring together diverse stakeholders, including activists, academics, and policymakers, to exchange ideas, share resources, and coordinate strategies.

### 4. Unmasking Anti-Gender Actors:

- *Objective:* Conduct thorough research to expose and understand the actors behind anti-gender movements.
- *Example:* Establish research teams or collaborate with academic institutions to conduct in-depth investigations, publish reports, and unmask the funding sources, strategies, and motivations behind anti-gender movements.

### 5. Anti-Establishment Messaging and Communication Package:

- *Objective:* Address anti-establishment sentiments by developing targeted communication packages that simplify and humanize the discourse.
- *Example:* Craft narratives that resonate with diverse groups, emphasizing shared values and goals. Utilize social media, podcasts, and grassroots campaigns to reach segments of the population influenced by anti-establishment rhetoric.

### 6. Targeted Communication Strategies:

- *Objective:* Tailor messages to resonate with specific groups susceptible to anti-gender ideologies.
- *Example:* Identify key demographics, such as religious communities or youth, and develop targeted communication strategies that address their concerns, debunk myths, and highlight the positive impact of gender equality on their lives.

## 7. Promotion of Gender Equality Benefits:

- *Objective:* Articulate the benefits of gender equality to the public through positive and constructive narratives.
- *Example:* Launch awareness campaigns that showcase real-life examples of the positive outcomes of gender equality, emphasizing economic, social, and cultural benefits. Activate young people as advocates and ambassadors for gender equality through youth-focused initiatives, educational programs, and engaging content on digital platforms.

Attendees underscored the significance of fostering a robust coalition that extends beyond the confines of traditional feminist circles. This broader alliance aims to include more vulnerable categories within society, along with engaging diverse political actors such as research centers and organizations. Building on the groundwork laid by the feminist movement in Macedonia, the next critical step involves the consolidation of efforts to form a united front against anti-gender agendas.

The discussion emphasized that internal education and knowledge-sharing are pivotal components of this collective endeavor. In order to fortify the coalition and enhance its effectiveness, ongoing education within the movement and the dissemination of knowledge play crucial roles. This includes fostering a deeper understanding of the nuanced intersections within the anti-gender movements and developing strategies to counteract them.

In essence, the roundtable discussion highlighted the interconnected nature of the challenges posed by anti-democratic and anti-gender movements. The call for institutional commitment, the formation of a broader coalition, and internal education collectively represent a strategic roadmap for furthering the feminist movement in Macedonia and effectively countering the multifaceted issues presented by anti-gender agendas.



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