

Report



The Anti-Gender Movement as a Threat to Democracy in the Western Balkans

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Summary

Over the past several years, the Western Balkans witnessed the rise of anti-gender movements that challenge fundamental human rights and threaten the region's fragile democratic structures. Anti-gender narratives target marginalized groups, particularly women and LGBTQ+ people. Political and legal frameworks in the region increasingly suppress basic rights, including access to health, education, and housing, driven by campaigns that falsely portray gender and LGBTQ+ rights as Western impositions. Society in these countries is still rife with misconceptions about people with LGBTQ+ identities.

Anti-gender actors in the Western Balkans are uniting to undermine inclusive policies in two major battlegrounds in particular: education and public assembly, particularly targeting Pride parades. In North Macedonia, educational initiatives like the comprehensive sexuality education program and gender-sensitive reforms have faced fierce backlash from coalitions of parents, religious groups, and right-wing organizations. In Serbia, similar anti-gender sentiment targeted a child sexual violence education package in 2017, framing it as a Western attempt to indoctrinate children. Such mobilization against inclusive education is part of a broader effort by anti-gender actors to dismantle protections for marginalized groups in the region under the guise of defending family values.

Pride parades have become flashpoints for anti-gender mobilization, with activists' freedom of assembly increasingly under threat. In Serbia, EuroPride 2022 faced violent opposition, with religious leaders and right-wing political actors framing LGBTQ+ visibility as a threat to national security and traditional values. A similar pattern was witnessed in North Macedonia in 2023, with the Orthodox Church leading protests against Skopje Pride and proposed gender-equality laws. Religious leaders like Patriarch Porfirije in Serbia and Bishop Jakov Stobiski in North Macedonia have used anti-gender narratives to promote conservative ideologies, aligning themselves with right-wing parties and far-right groups to gain influence and obstruct LGBTQ+ and gender rights.

In addition, the cutting of US foreign aid has had an immediate and severe impact on civil society in the Western Balkans, and organizations working on gender-based violence, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights were among the hardest hit.

Amid the growing challenges that LGBTQ+ communities and women face in the Western Balkans as a result of the rise of the anti-gender movement, building a strong, visible, and resilient movement is more crucial than ever for them. This is necessary to move toward a future in which they thrive, at a time when the global shift toward suppressing their fundamental rights is extremely challenging on many levels. In this context, feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations need to reassess, restructure, and expand their alliances. They must also prioritize safeguarding educational and cultural institutions from anti-gender influences, insisting that policies concerning comprehensive sexuality education, gender-sensitive curricula, and other inclusive educational reforms be guided by expert knowledge and the best interests of students. It is also key for the EU to integrate intersectional gender perspectives that address the rights of diverse minorities into the Berlin Process for enlargement in the Western Balkan. Finally, building sustainable networks of solidarity and prioritizing self-care for mental and physical well-being, as well as community support, for activists who face constant threats, harassment, and violence while advocating for marginalized communities are vital steps in the fight for equality in the Western Balkans.

Introduction

Over the past several years, the Western Balkans witnessed the rise of anti-gender movements. Not only do these challenge fundamental human rights, they also threaten the region's fragile democratic structures. While countries there grapple with deep-seated political instability, corruption, and socioeconomic challenges, anti-gender actors have mobilized public sentiment behind their agenda, leveraging nationalist, religious, and populist rhetoric to undermine gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. These movements portray "gender ideology" as an existential threat to traditional values, national identity, and social stability; and they use this to fuel a broader agenda that restricts human rights and weakens democratic norms.

In Freedom House's latest *Freedom in the World* report, all Western Balkan countries are rated as "partly free" hybrid regimes, with all of them experiencing fragile civic liberties.¹ In this volatile landscape, anti-gender movements have capitalized on institutional weaknesses, using misinformation and moral panic to influence policy and public discourse. Their opposition to reforms ranging from comprehensive sexuality education to legal gender recognition has not only curtailed rights for marginalized groups but also set a dangerous precedent for political decision-making. By exploiting fears of Western influence and of societal change in the region, anti-gender movements have found common ground with authoritarian forces in aiming to reinforce censorship, to restrict freedoms, and to undermine civil society organizations (CSOs) advocating inclusive policies.

The rise of the anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans is not an isolated phenomenon; they are part of a broader transnational network that strategically aligns itself with far-right politic actors, conservative religious institutions, and populist regimes across Europe. One study describes this as "highly organised (but not centralised), well-funded, transnational movement working to undermine women's rights, LGBTQI* rights, and civil society".² The region's countries, which find themselves in a political dilemma between their path toward EU integration and nationalist resurgence, have become a battleground where the struggle for human rights intersects with the fight for democratic stability. The erosion of gender and LGBTQ+ rights in these countries is not merely a setback for social progress; it signals a deeper, systemic crisis in governance in which institutions fail to uphold equality and to protect vulnerable communities from targeted discrimination.

This paper examines the influence of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans, analyzing their strategies, political alliances, and impact on democracy. It argues that countering these movements requires a multifaceted approach: strengthening democratic institutions, reinforcing the resilience of civil society, fostering inclusive narratives that challenge the fear-based rhetoric used by anti-gender actors and implementing targeted policy measures to safeguard vulnerable communities and uphold democratic norms. As the region navigates its way toward EU integration, addressing the threats posed by anti-gender movements is not just a matter of human rights; it is a fundamental necessity for securing democracy there. More specifically, this paper showcases instances in North Macedonia and Serbia in which anti-gender movements achieved institutional victories against the advance of LGBTQ+ and gender equality. It investigates the democratic tools anti-gender movements used to dismantle inclusive policies. The paper also shows how activists, human rights defenders, and advocacy groups can fight back, and perhaps achieve even better legal frameworks and accepting environments for the communities they serve.

Backsliding and Progress

Freedom House classifies all Western Balkan countries as “partly free” hybrid regimes, with scores, reflecting the fact that they have weak democratic institutions and fragile civil liberties.³ Albania (68 out of 100), Montenegro (69), and North Macedonia (67) are hybrid regimes making some democratic progress, but in these countries corruption and political influence over the judiciary continue to restrict civil liberties. Bosnia and Herzegovina (52), Kosovo (60), and Serbia (56) are also hybrid regimes, though Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia increasingly resemble electoral autocracies with government crackdowns on independent media, judicial manipulation, and police repression as growing concerns. Across all six countries, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women face systemic discrimination, and CSOs encounter pressure from the authorities. Bringing the upholding of human rights up to EU standards is a vital step for the countries in the Western Balkans to improve their level of democracy.

In fragile democracies such as these, marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ communities are the first to experience the consequences of a dysfunctional system and to face challenges when it comes to protection from discrimination, elimination of hate speech and hate crimes, legal recognition and access to services, or freedom of assembly for improving the state of human rights.

ILGA-Europe’s Rainbow Map is an instrument that annually ranks 49 European countries on a scale between 0% (gross violations of human rights, discrimination) and 100% (respect of human rights, full equality) on the basis of laws and policies that have a direct impact on LGBTQ+ people’s human rights.⁴ It ranks each country on equality and nondiscrimination, family, hate crime and hate speech, legal gender recognition, intersex bodily integrity, civil society space, and asylum. In the 2025 Rainbow Map, the average score for EU countries is 51% and, except for Montenegro, the countries in the Western Balkans score low in the overall assessment. Montenegro (49%) comes closest to the EU score and scores higher than some member states, such as neighboring Bulgaria, which has recently experienced a crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights (21%). North Macedonia scores lowest (29%), preceded by Kosovo (34%), Albania (35%), Serbia (35%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (39%).

Across the Western Balkans, the legal framework and political environment is increasingly geared to suppressing the rights and visibility of marginalized groups, such as women or LGBTQ+ people, and in some cases their ability to obtain basic access to rights such as health rights, freedom of movement, education, or housing.⁵ In a 2023 public-opinion survey on attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people in the region:

- o Majorities in each country said that LGBTQ+ ideas were imported from the west, with an average of 62%. This view was highest in Bosnia and Herzegovina (66%) and lowest in Albania (51%)
- o Across the region, a majority said they would seek a cure for their child if they discovered that it identified as LGBTQ+, with the percentage highest in Kosovo (57%). Only 22% said would offer full support to their child with regard to sexual orientation or gender identity.
- o When asked whether being LGBTQ+ is a sickness, the average answer that it is was 51%. This view was highest in Kosovo (60%) and lowest in Albania (43%).⁶ These statistics show that society in the Western Balkans struggles to accept differences, and that people with marginalized identities, who are the most vulnerable, can be made into scapegoats to instill fear and distrust in society.

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Despite this context, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have in recent years adopted laws, implemented policies, and established bodies to safeguard the rights of gender and LGBTQ+ minorities, or organized for the first time public events, such as Pride Parades, that give visibility to these minority groups. These steps have been largely due to advocacy efforts by civil society. In 2020, North Macedonia adopted the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination that included gender and sexual orientation as categories protected against discrimination. This led to a more transparent process for establishing the new structure of the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination, which recognizes discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. That same year, Montenegro's parliament adopted in a narrow vote a law recognizing same-sex civil partnerships, which allows same-sex couples in registered partnerships to enjoy mutual legal benefits regarding health insurance, division of joint property in the case of divorce or death of a partner, and access to social or health security based on their partner's coverage. In 2022, the LGBTQ+ organization Forum Progress in Montenegro sued the state in a case regarding discrimination against a LGBTQ+ couple married abroad.⁷ The couple still could not register their partnership in Montenegro even though the law had been adopted two years previously, due to the failure of institutions to harmonize vital legislation for the further implementation of the law. In Serbia, despite advocacy by the national LGBTQ+ movement, a same-sex partnership law is yet to be adopted. In North Macedonia and Serbia, CSOs have piloted and developed educational programs by incorporating components of gender-sensitive education and comprehensive sexuality education. In 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia saw the organization of their first Pride parades in a safe environment, the last two countries in the Western Balkans to do so. All these important milestones were significant victories for progressive voices in the region.

Anti-Gender Movements

The development mentioned above also triggered the growth of and unified strong anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans, which are particularly active in North Macedonia and Serbia. As a result, many of these institutional and societal progressive victories are being challenged, leading to the revocation of laws, threats to inclusive education, and the erosion of rights for marginalized communities.

Anti-gender movements are international or transnational movements opposing what they call "gender ideology" or "gender theory". They comprise actors with various characteristics, depending on the time and local context of their activities. A unifying element for them is the ability to "cram various discourses into a single big threat" and to construct "gender ideology" as an "attack on at least one of the three Ns these actors claim to defend: nature, nation, and normality".⁸ For anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans and globally, "gender ideology" is an umbrella term that unifies the broad range of concepts that anti-gender actors stand against. According to two academics, David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar,

Defined by its opponents, the term 'gender ideology,' also known as anti-genderism, is an ideological matrix for the diverse reforms, current or future, that these actors try to oppose, which relate to intimate/sexual citizenship debates, including LGBTI rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education.⁹

A 2019 report by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and EuroMed Rights identified five key areas that anti-gender actors oppose: “LGBTIQ+ rights, gender studies, sexual and reproductive health and rights (not least abortion), and sexual and equality education.”¹⁰ As anti-gender movements are transnational and well-networked, they fight against the same policies, but they often also reflect their national context, try to stick to what is relevant at a given moment, and exploit local events with the long-term aim to prevent or reverse the adoption of inclusive institutional policies.

In the Western Balkans, and specifically in North Macedonia and Serbia, anti-gender narratives are significantly shifting how “average citizens” respond to words related to gender or LGBTQ+ people in general. Anti-gender narratives have promoted the claim that the population is being forced to become gay or transgender, spread false accusations that transgender people will enter bathrooms and rape women or children, labeled feminists as selfish women responsible for the decline of fertility rates, presented human rights defenders or minority groups as powerful elites that try to lure children into a homosexual agenda, and demonized the West as the exporter of these “toxic ideologies”.¹¹

These narratives are the main basis for instilling fear and creating moral panic in society, and they are afterward used in attempts to revoke inclusive policies for marginalized communities or reducing freedom of assembly by banning events for LGBTQ+ visibility. According to one study of the situation in North Macedonia,

all anti-gender narratives and visual tactics serve the purpose of pressuring the people and institutions to: advocate for amendments to current legislation, encourage a change of the government and positions of certain politicians in it, and participate in the creation of various policies.¹²

Anti-gender movements gain momentum from current and trending national or international events where diversity is represented or undermined. One such example was the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, when the opening ceremony was criticized by anti-gender actors and far-right groups as “too woke”. This event triggered anti-gender movements (and also public intellectuals, the media, and the public) in the Western Balkans, which argued—intertwined with anti-West rhetoric—how an international sports gathering event could go too far with progressive media depictions, with reference to drag queens being present at the opening ceremony. One prominent intellectual and university professor in North Macedonia wrote in an op-ed:

What is the message of cartoonish figures that supposedly celebrate diversity, yet serve as examples with the true diagnosis of the disease of modern times—obesity (excessive body weight)? Without delving into all the controversial and tasteless details of that overly long event, one cannot help but notice that there were more morbid elements than a celebration of life. Or, if that was a celebration of life, then such a life is pitiable.¹³

In a display of their transnational nature, anti-gender actors in North Macedonia congratulated the government in Sofia when a law banning LGBTQ+ “propaganda” in Bulgaria’s schools was adopted in August 2024.¹⁴ The Coalition for the Protection of Children, an anti-gender umbrella organization in North Macedonia celebrated this decision to prohibit the promotion of nontraditional sexual orientations and gender identities to children, and it sent a congratulatory letter to its partner in the country, the Society and Values Association, for its years of efforts in

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promoting traditional family values and opposing gender ideology.¹⁵ The support of anti-gender actors in North Macedonia for Bulgaria's government only on the occasion when it deprived the country's citizens of basic human rights is notable: they have otherwise been quite fierce in opposing each step that Sofia has taken in relation to the negotiations between the two countries as part of their respective EU accession process.

The promotion of anti-gender narratives and fueling opposition to "gender ideology" in the long run is a fight to deprive women and LGBTQ+ people of their basic rights and a strategic step to further isolate them and place them on the margins of society.

Anti-Gender Actors in North Macedonia and Serbia

Scholars have identified three categories of anti-gender actors: old, new, and allies.¹⁶ Old anti-gender actors are usually considered to be the Catholic Church and right-wing institutions, usually located in the United States. New ones are members of the transnational anti-gender movement today and of its national and local incarnations. Most of the latter present themselves as "concerned parents" or "concerned citizens", using a common language and visual identity. Across different countries, these organizations use similar logos, colors, language, and tactics—ranging from umbrellas over the heads of heteronormative families protecting them from rainbows to visuals depicting the protection of children. Allies are supporters of the movement from, for example, academic, political, and media circles.¹⁷

A recent study notes the multidimensional nature of anti-gender actors and their areas of influence, arguing that:

An expanding alliance of states and conservative non-state actors is actively seeking to redefine global gender standards across major international bodies such as the UN, OSCE, and the Council of Europe. This alliance, which was once primarily influenced by the Vatican and a few religious regimes, now also features authoritarian governments, right-wing populist-led democracies in decline, and socially conservative democracies collaborating closely with powerful conservative civil society organizations.¹⁸

The anti-gender movement is not a novel phenomenon in Europe or globally. The Catholic Church has a strong presence in it. Tracking the movement's origins, Paternotte and Kuhar identified crucial moments in the church's reactions to two important UN events where sexual and reproductive rights were recognized: the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. They write:

At the time, the Holy See attempted to oppose the notion of gender because it feared that it would become, along with the institutionalization of sexual and reproductive rights, a vehicle for the international recognition of abortion, additional attacks on traditional motherhood, and a legitimization of homosexuality.¹⁹

In the Western Balkans religious leaders, priests, and churches of different denominations have tried to infiltrate political decision-making by pressuring institutions into including them in policymaking and legislative processes. Jakov Stobiski, a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church has consistently spread anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and has repeatedly claimed that the country's Draft Law on Gender Equality is the greatest evil for women. In 2023, the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD) ruled that he had committed discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in public media. The CPPD recommended that the bishop refrain from public appearances discussing gender identity, but he publicly rejected the decision, calling it a totalitarian farce, and refused to apologize for his actions. Stobiski continued to make public statements, promoting his stance instead of reconsidering his actions in accordance with the law.²⁰ The fact that the Law on Gender Equality is still not adopted, having been withdrawn from parliament in 2022, mostly results from its constant demonization by anti-gender actors.

Similarly, Patriarch Porfirije of the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a central figure in opposing his country's Law on Gender Equality, which was adopted in 2021, focusing specifically on its component regarding gender-sensitive language. In 2023, he was recorded at a closed church event where he called women "miserable", particularly those who work in gender equality, and classified their political fight as "sick".²¹ Religious figures and their allies have attacked these laws on their inclusive components such as gender-sensitive language, inclusion of trans women and other minorities, and in some instances even gender-based violence. Therefore, where such laws have been adopted, they have many flaws when it comes to full inclusive treatment of women in all their diversity. So far, religious leaders and new anti-gender actors have successfully advocated the rejection of new, more inclusive versions of these laws.

In North Macedonia, anti-gender narratives are mainly spread by new actors. Groups of "concerned parents" have emerged that, under the premise of protecting their children—and, in many cases, all children—from the alleged foreign homosexual and gender agenda, have propagated untrue, hateful, and even dangerous rhetoric. They operate through registered CSOs such as the Coalition for Protection of the Children, which consisted at the time of writing of 34 members including CSOs, private businesses, nonformal groups, and three political parties as well as two partners from the region: In the Name of Family from Croatia and the Society and Values Association from Bulgaria. The Coalition for Protection of the Children is supported by Gender Identity Challenge Skandinavia, and its main partner is the renowned anti-gender organization Family Watch International. The new actors also run nonformal groups on social media such as Take Responsibility or Save Marriage and Family, which they use to mobilize and strengthen anti-gender narratives.²² Since their formation during the Covid-19 pandemic, these groups have managed to gain inclusion as stakeholders in decision-making, through which they have stopped the adoption of inclusive gender laws and reforms related to gender-inclusive education. Through a national caravan, they have hosted in different cities dozens of screenings of the transphobic movie "What is a Woman" by the US right-wing public figure Matt Walsh, with thousands attending, and they have spread anti-trans views in the premises of theaters, cinemas, and schools.²³

Whereas in Serbia politicians and government officials have openly used anti-gender narratives, the approach of the national and local governments in North Macedonia has been more discreet. By providing spaces and venues where anti-gender actors can host transphobic movie screenings, workshops, and discussions, they legitimize and

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support their viewpoints without necessarily having a politician or minister publicly expressing anti-trans attitudes. For example, in November 2024, the nonformal group Parent Front organized panel discussion titled “Are there legalized ideological indoctrinations in Macedonian education?!” at the Cinematheque of North Macedonia in Skopje, a state cultural institution—an event that spread anti-gender rhetoric and featured, among others Bishop Stobiski.²⁴ JADRO—The Association of the Independent Cultural Scene criticized this public institution for providing space for an event that promoted discrimination, hate speech, unscientific views, and exclusionary policies. It stated that “Spaces funded by the public budget should not be places for the promotion of retrograde and anti-democratic narratives based on the stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination of citizens on the basis of gender, gender identity, and sexuality”.²⁵

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Anti-gender actors in Serbia include a combination of all three groups, acting as complementary forces. The Serbian Orthodox Church, through Patriarch Porfirije, is the strongest voice among the old actors. It has significantly mobilized not just on issues such as women’s rights, the Law on Gender Equality, and gender-sensitive language. Mostly as the result of this, in 2024, the Constitutional Court suspended the adoption of acts based on the Law on Gender Equality, specifically so as to remove those parts concerning fines for institutions that would not use the female version in of job titles, ranks, titles, and occupations.²⁶

There was high opposition to hosting EuroPride in Belgrade in 2022, against which anti-gender actors organized public religious services and petitions to unite opposition to the “threat” of the LGBTQ+ community, which they claim wants to undermine the notion of a healthy family being based on the union between a man and a woman. Interviewed activists, members of advocacy groups, and researchers stated that the government and President Aleksandar Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party are perhaps the most dangerous actors that suppress gender and LGBTQ+ rights in the country.²⁷ Vučić attempted to stop the hosting of EuroPride in Belgrade through a ban while allowing the Serbian Orthodox Church, far-right groups, and extremists to rally in the streets of Serbia, placing local and foreign LGBTQ+ individuals at risk.²⁸ He has regularly attended the Budapest Demographic Summit, an international event organized by Hungary’s Prime Minister Victor Orbán that brings together right-wing leaders and prominent populist figures who hold strong conservative views regarding gender issues and traditional family values.²⁹ Minister for Family and Demography Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski and her ministry dominate the public discourse with anti-gender rhetoric and have set up cultural counter-events to Pride, such as the Belgrade Family Days, which celebrates heteronormative families. She claimed that it is not a counter-event to Pride, but in the same interview, while she said that she respected different opinions and orientations, she also said that she did not think that “everything should revolve around” the LGBTQ+ community.³⁰ This ultimately shapes the minds of people who, through government-aided platforms, are directed to just accept the rhetoric in which certain families are worthy of celebration while others are to be banned from celebrating and confined to their private spaces.

Finally, the allies in the anti-gender movement in Serbia are the intellectuals who were the first to raise their voices against reforms in education (see below for more) as well as the various far-right groups that attach themselves to symbolic and value-oriented messaging connected to Russia and President Vladimir Putin. Far-right nationalists have joined the crusade against gender and LGBTQ+ equality as they view LGBTQ+ people and feminists as a threat produced by the West to the family and ultimately the nation, with the traditional family considered a precondition for the national stability they claim to seek to maintain.

The Education Battleground

Education and institutions that implement educational policies are the main battleground for anti-gender actors, particularly in response to progressive educational policies or reforms. Restrictions on LGBTQ+-inclusive education have been adopted in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.³¹ As noted above, in Bulgaria, in 2024, the education law was amended to ban from schools' educational content that includes what it calls propaganda, promotion, or incitement related to "ideas and views of nontraditional sexual orientation and/or gender identity other than the biological one".³²

In North Macedonia and Serbia, there has been a tremendous rise in anti-gender rhetoric surrounding similar educational policies. In North Macedonia, this has been around the pilot program on comprehensive sexuality education, an initiative proposed by the CSO HERA that the government approved for the formal education system starting in 2021, as well as the gender-sensitive approach and elements to educational reforms outlined in the Conception on Primary Education, an initiative of the Ministry of Education and Science that has involved the wider expert community, teachers, university professors, psychologists, students and CSOs.³³ The latter addresses gender roles, stigma, and stereotypes as part of the reform process for primary education. In Serbia, the Educational Package: Learning about Child Sexual Violence for Primary and High Schools proposed by the CSO Incest Trauma Center was targeted in 2017. According to one expert,

Over the course of ten days, there was a storm in a teacup. The war on family values transformed into a blitzkrieg against the education package. On April 21 the new Minister of Education confessed that 'Europe' was demanding sexual education and to appease the raging public promised adjustments to the existing text.³⁴

The aim of these inclusive educational proposals is to foster dialogue, to increase knowledge, to bring down barriers, and to create support mechanisms for pupils on topics that are often absent or marginalized in the educational system or society at large, such as consent, body image, sexual and reproductive health, and relationships. They also aim to address the roots of violence, particularly those related to gender and sexual orientation, and they have a strong focus on child and female survivors of sexual violence.

Anti-gender actors have intervened at various stages of the policy process in these cases, but they have used similar tactics. In North Macedonia, the movement mobilized itself from 2019 after the pilot program had been adopted and had allowed comprehensive sexuality and gender-sensitive education a limited institutional presence

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for some time. In Serbia, however, the Ministry of Education made a significant and swift turnaround. The Ministry and the Incest Trauma Center had previously toured the country together, training teachers on how to talk to pupils, analyze, and work with these topics, and promoting the educational package. The policy was overturned after five months due to pressure from far-right intellectuals, anti-gender groups, and clerics.³⁵ In both cases, a strong anti-Western rhetoric emerged, framing the modernization of education as a threat and labeling both proposed policies as contrary to tradition and a danger to the traditional family structure. Disinformation tactics were often employed, such as claiming that these policies aimed to sexualize children, to teach them about sex at an early age, and to change their sexual orientation or gender identity—and, in extreme cases, alleging that they promoted necrophilia and group sex. The first prominent intellectual voice against the educational packages in Serbia has been identified as the Serbian conservative academic Slobodan Antonic, who criticized the policy on a Russian-Serbian website, stating:

Will our children soon also learn about SM, sex with animals, necrophilia, group sex, swinging, and other kinds of 'normal sexual activities' which are perfectly fine if they are, according to our Ministry, a matter of 'consent between persons making love'? Who gives them the right to do that?³⁶

The targeting of inclusive educational policies extends beyond the policies themselves to the organizations that propose them, their partners, their values, and their ideological stances in society to demonize and discredit these organizations to weaken the policies they advocate. For example, in North Macedonia, anti-gender actors distorted the content of the pilot program on comprehensive sexuality education, spreading disinformation that it aimed to encourage early sexual activity or to promote homosexuality. The website of the Coalition for Protection of Children has a section on 15 harmful elements on why comprehensive sexuality education is harmful, all of which are either misinformation or not based on facts, such as that it promotes homosexual and bisexual behavior, independent and group masturbation, or the use of condoms in an inappropriate manner.³⁷ This approach served the goal of portraying the organization as promoting a “gay” or “transgender” agenda in society. A 2021 report by the Incest Trauma Center provide a detailed overview of instances of backlash, hate speech, physical attacks, and media smear campaigns faced by the organization, perpetrated by fascist and right-wing groups and clerics.³⁸ The report shows that, even before the backlash in 2017 against its educational proposal, the organization was targeted for its antiwar stances, its peace vigils for the genocide in Srebrenica, and its work on lesbian rights, which right-wing groups used as grounds to question its legitimacy in protecting victims of sexual abuse and educating representatives from institutions, including the Ministry of Education. This included falsely claiming that the organization distributed lesbian materials so as to delegitimize its work.

Rather than debunking false claims about these policies, fostering dialogue to educate society inclusively (particularly by engaging parents and other stakeholders), and clarifying what these policies entailed, government institutions in North Macedonia and Serbia decided not to publicly denounce them. What is more, they have instead started to involve anti-gender actors in decision-making processes, allowing them to pose as a silent, concerned minority and legitimizing their voices in policy development.³⁹ Educational and other institutions in the Western Balkans often lack strategic approaches for adopting new policies that place experts at the center of policymaking. This tendency has become more visible with the rise of certain populist political parties that attempt to involve every citizen equally in policymaking. This approach has led to a situation where groups advocating for

the erasure of entire demographic groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ people, feel empowered to voice these views within institutional decision-making. While consultations with various interest groups are inherently part of adopting new laws and policies regarding education—typically involving students and parents—a group organized solely on the basis of parental identity and holding strong anti-gender stances should not override the expertise of professionals—such as university professors, psychosocial workers, and members of CSOs—who work to develop policies in the best interest of all children. This is crucial as nuanced expertise defines what constitutes the child's best interests.

Anti-gender actors in the Western Balkans have inserted themselves into education policymaking with a determined message, agenda, and vision of education liberated from a “liberal, Western agenda”. Their ultimate aim in challenging inclusive educational policies is to maintain the status quo and prevent the visibility of gender and LGBTQ+ minorities. In 2017, the Incest Trauma Center lost its battle with Serbia's Ministry of Education, which withdrew its support, under the influence of right-wing groups, intellectuals, and religious figures. In North Macedonia, in April 2025, the Law on Primary Education and the Law on Textbooks were amended to remove discrimination categories based on gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity, as well as the term “gender equality”. These changes were made in a nontransparent procedure, without involving civil society experts, and in violation of domestic and international regulations. The civil society organization Coalition Margins condemned this institutional backsliding, stating that they presented “the erasure of gender equality, of inclusion, of protection from violence and discrimination, of the right to information related to sexual and reproductive health”.⁴⁰ These changes were made following pressure from anti-gender mobilizations. In a joint statement, the Network on Protection of Discrimination and the Platform on Gender Equality said that “neither the expert public nor youth organizations have called for such types of legal changes in education” and asked if “the Government and Parliament [are] directly connected to informal and formal radical groups, who, under the guise of ‘protecting children's rights,’ promote daily—discrimination, hatred, violence, and spread conspiracy theories?”⁴¹

Pride Parades

Pride parades have a strong political significance for the LGBTQ+ community in the Western Balkans. LGBTQ+ movements insist that these events should be primarily seen as protests rather than celebrations, as they embody the political struggles that the community confronts daily. Beyond being a platform for public visibility, Pride parades convey crucial political messages and demands in response to the inadequate institutional framework for securing the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. For instance, the 2021 Belgrade Pride took place under the slogan “Love is the law”, directly addressing the urgent need for legislation that ensures a dignified life for LGBTQ+ individuals. Demands included the adoption of laws on same-sex partnerships and gender identity, improved healthcare services for transgender people, local action plans for the LGBTQ+ community, formal apologies to those persecuted based on their sexual orientation and gender identity in the past, and improved educational policies on these issues.

The Pride parade in Skopje was established in 2019, the same year as the first Sarajevo Pride. This made Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia the final countries in the Western Balkans to host such events. Skopje Pride has

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been a political platform to voice the demands of the community in North Macedonia as well as to highlight the legal and societal challenges it faces. The LGBTQ+ movement has consistently advocated the adoption of a law on gender legal recognition, which the country is obligated to implement, following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights stating that North Macedonia must amend its laws to include transgender people and ensure they can obtain this recognition in line with the court's standards.⁴² Such a law would enable transgender individuals to access a quick and transparent legal gender-recognition process based on self-determination. Additionally, activists have made long-standing demands, including for action from the Public Prosecutor's Office with regard to unresolved hate crimes targeting the LGBTQ+ community.

Pride parades in the Western Balkans have played a crucial role in bringing the LGBTQ+ community into public spaces, countering the tendency to confine its members within private spheres. However, these efforts have provoked intense resistance and backlash, including hate speech and death threats. Different institutional and noninstitutional actors have placed obstacles in the way of the Pride parades in Belgrade and Skopje, using unconstitutional bans, limitations on freedom of assembly, and threats to the physical safety of LGBTQ+ individuals. Two cases illustrate this opposition: the issuing of a ban on EuroPride in Belgrade in 2022 and the protests around Skopje Pride by the Macedonian Orthodox Church in 2023. While the methods used by the state to challenge these parades differed, the actors involved in mobilizing opposition were strikingly similar. In both cases, the Orthodox Church played a central role in mobilizing opposition.

Pride parades in the Western Balkans have played a crucial role in bringing the LGBTQ+ community into public spaces, countering the tendency to confine its members within private spheres.

In 2022, the Serbian Orthodox Church organized large-scale mobilization against hosting EuroPride in Belgrade. Days before the event, it gathered thousands of people for a "Litany for the salvation of Serbia" in front of the Church of Saint Sava. Patriarch Porfirije led a religious service focused on the "sanctity of marriage and family".⁴³ Participants carried religious icons as well as banners reading "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia", flags of Imperial Russia and the Russian-controlled "Donetsk People's Republic" in Ukraine, and photos of Vladimir Putin.⁴⁴ At the last moment, the government announced the cancellation of EuroPride, despite lacking the constitutional authority to ban public gatherings. However, the event ultimately went ahead, albeit on a reduced scale, thanks to persistent efforts from CSOs and pressure from the international community. It was heavily policed, and attendees faced hate speech and physical violence.⁴⁵

In 2023, the Macedonian Orthodox Church organized protests not only against Skopje Pride but also, a week later, against the Draft Law on Gender Equality and the Civil Registry Law. Protesters, many of whom were transported to the event at the church's expense, gathered in front of the Church of St. Kliment Ohridski with banners reading: "We don't want men in female bathrooms", "Stop the modern inquisition", and "Protect the children". Prominent religious leaders, including Archbishop Stefan, condemned the "promotion" of homosexuality in the education system and warned against parents being deprived of their rights. Katica Kulavkova of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts addressed the crowd, describing transgender identities as Western constructs imposed on the region. She

falsely claimed that access to EU funds were contingent on “transgender balancing”.⁴⁶ Such statements, rooted in moral panic, are based on misinformation—North Macedonia does not legally recognize same-sex marriages, parental rights remain unchanged, and EU funding is not contingent on transgender-related policies.

Religious mobilization against Pride parades has been strongly supported by political actors at the institutional and grassroots levels. The far-right Serbian Movement Dveri and its leader Boško Obradović played a key role in institutionalizing the demands of the anti-Pride protests. Its members participated in the rallies organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church and later pushed for legislation banning “homosexual and transgender propaganda” among minors while advocating the introduction of a Family Day national holiday.⁴⁷ In North Macedonia, smaller right-wing parties, such as Rodina Makedonija and Integra, have incorporated anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender rights policies in their political platforms.⁴⁸ These parties have also provided support to organizations like the Coalition for the Protection of Children, which campaigns against LGBTQ+ rights.

Mainstream politicians have co-opted anti-gender rhetoric, leading to direct interventions against Pride parades. In Serbia, Vučić cited security concerns and the state’s alleged inability to protect peaceful protesters from far-right violence as reasons for issuing a ban on EuroPride in 2022. Another key reason given was the ongoing Kosovo issue, with government officials arguing that the state could not simultaneously address national security concerns and civic liberties. This presented a false binary, suggesting that Serbia had to choose between civil rights and national security.⁴⁹ In North Macedonia, Prime Minister Hristijan Mickovski, who came to power in the 2024 elections, uses similar rhetoric, in which he centers the prosperity of the nation, which can only be achieved if young people have more babies, while promoting the heteronormative definition of marriage as a union between a woman and a man.⁵⁰ Mickovski is not the only one who spread such rhetoric. In the last few months, his ruling VMRO-DPMNE party has put out conservative messages, especially when it comes to young people and demography politics.

The opposition to Pride parades goes beyond restricting LGBTQ+ individuals’ right to assembly. These counter-mobilizations have been strategically used to undermine broader legal protections, including laws on gender recognition, same-sex partnerships, and hate crimes. The argument that LGBTQ+ individuals should remain in private spaces has been instrumentalized to erode legal protections and reinforce institutional discrimination. To counter these efforts, a unified response by CSOs, movements across the identity spectrum, and advocacy groups—one that firmly supports the organization of Pride parades in public spaces and advocates policies that safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Resistance, Care, and Political Strategy

Amid the growing challenges that LGBTQ+ communities and women face in the Western Balkans as a result of the rise of the anti-gender movement, including as shown above when it comes to promoting educational reforms and the hosting of events like Pride parades, building a strong, visible, and resilient movement is more crucial than ever

Turning Anti-Gender Campaigns Into Opportunities for Change: The Case of Slovenia

Slovenia has followed a political trajectory similar to that of the other countries in the Western Balkans that were formerly part of Yugoslavia, although its adoption of inclusive policies has progressed much further. Despite this, the country's anti-gender movement managed to obtain the organization of two referendums on same-sex partnerships in 2012 and 2015. These overturned laws—respectively on the family code regarding same-sex partnerships having the rights of married couples and on a bill defining marriage as a “union of two” with specific their gender. Anti-gender groups were the primary force behind bringing the issue to a vote, aware that public opinion at the time was in their side.

But, though these were victories for anti-gender actors, according to the sociologist Roman Kuhar, the referendums also created space for LGBTQ+ people to become more visible and helped to keep the issue of marriage equality on the country's political agenda.⁵⁸ The media began inviting more LGBTQ+ individuals to speak, amplifying their voices. As the community gained presence in public discourse over the years, the concept of marriage equality gradually became normalized in society, eventually allowing it to be formalized in law. In 2022, Slovenia became the first country in the Western Balkans to legislate a comprehensive same-sex marriage framework for LGBTQ+ citizens, following a ruling by the Constitutional Court.

As anti-gender movements in different countries often share strategies, similar scenarios of putting equal-rights issues to a referendum could unfold in other Western Balkan countries. The most effective strategy for the LGBTQ+ movements in the region should be based, first, on opposing such issues being put to referendums, for two key reasons, not only because support in a straight vote for these equal rights is likely to be low, but also because heterosexual citizens hold their rights without these having never been put to a public vote. Instead, advocates should focus on parliamentary and judicial pathways while working to increase this community's visibility and to normalize LGBTQ+ identities through storytelling and public engagement, and in this way build up support among the public. In this way, LGBTQ+ actors across the Western Balkans can apply the lesson from the paradoxical experience of Slovenia's referendums to achieve long-term societal change, while building resilient coalitions and avoiding political traps set by anti-gender movements.

for them. This is necessary for them to move toward a future in which they thrive at a time when the global shift toward suppressing their fundamental rights is extremely challenging on many levels.

The cutting of US foreign aid has had an immediate and severe on civil society in the Western Balkans, and organizations working on gender-based violence, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights were among the hardest hit. According to one analysis of the impact on LGBTQ+ organizations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, the cuts have had a profound impact on CSOs in the Western Balkans, with 73% having had to reduce their program activities, 60% to close projects, and 40% to lay off staff or terminate contracts. Additionally, 33% report being

unable to pay rent and utilities, and some have been forced to temporarily suspend all operations.⁵¹ In the six countries of the region, these funds sustained vital services: support for survivors of gender-based violence, housing assistance for LGBTQ+ individuals at risk of homelessness, free legal aid for reporting abuse, and access to psychotherapy. Safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and shelters for homeless LGBTQ+ individuals were closed, free psychological support for victims of violence was discontinued, and advocacy initiatives came to a halt. The foundations of the community's support systems—an infrastructure upon which the most vulnerable heavily depended—were lost. Human rights defenders and CSO staff lost their jobs overnight while being exposed to growing smear campaigns. The Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, Michael O'Flaherty, has expressed serious concerns regarding the US aid cuts for their severe impact on CSOs in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. He has highlighted that, as a result, many CSOs face ending critical services, such as those supporting minority rights and LGBTQ+ individuals. O'Flaherty also noted that human rights defenders, particularly those working in hostile environments, are being directly affected, with reduced funding threatening vital programs like crisis hotlines and shelters.⁵²

At the time of writing, it is difficult for the region's LGBTQ+ communities to imagine a new, better reality. They are not only operating in a global climate where their identities are exploited as political tools for culture wars led by politicians and billionaires; they are also navigating a highly organized and rigid anti-gender movement. While it is crucial for them to strategically resist these forces, they also urgently need to focus inward so that their members can stand with each other, resist isolation, strengthen their ties, and build up systems of care. These systems may not fully replace institutional mechanisms that disappear due to lack of funding, but they can help these communities weather this crisis as they determine their next steps.

Restructuring and Expanding Alliances

To counter the anti-gender movement and to create an environment and institutional infrastructure in which women and LGBTQ+ communities are free from violence, can thrive, and fully enjoy their rights, it is essential for them to expand the range of their allies. At the same time, they must critically assess which alliances are worth maintaining and which may be counterproductive or even harmful to their causes. The restructuring and expansion of alliances should take the following factors into consideration.

First, there is a need for analyzing and questioning structures and networks affected by generational clashes among feminist activists, in which trans-exclusionary radical feminism is often framed as a form of women's-rights protection. In North Macedonia and Serbia, there are ongoing such tensions, with several feminists and feminist organizations formed in the 1990s spreading transphobic viewpoints.⁵³ This often occurs within semi-structured platforms, umbrella organizations, or networks in which various organizations, movements, or activists gather around the common cause of feminism. Feminist and LGBTQ+ communities must challenge these attacks on transgender people—by establishing a shared value framework that strictly prohibits anti-trans propaganda and allows for the exclusion of members from their networks on this basis, or by boycotting structures that tolerate such rhetoric, leaving these networks, and questioning their legitimacy in decision-making policy processes.

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Second, it is necessary to create channels for knowledge-sharing across generations, developing strategies, and the preservation of the legacies of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism. Two key challenges hinder alliance-building in this area. First, senior and more experienced activists often lack the time or resources to pass down their knowledge to younger ones. At the same time, younger activists sometimes overlook these legacies, failing to recognize that their activism does not start from scratch. Bridging this gap requires efforts to bring together different generations of activists and to foster nonhierarchical knowledge exchange. Strengthening the channels for this must be approached with a focus on movement sustainability and long-term impact.

The institutional support for LGBTQ+ rights in the Western Balkans remains extremely limited, particularly regarding the adoption and implementation of policies that would enhance the inclusion of LGBTQ+ minorities and women.

Third, it is important to preserve existing alliances with pro-inclusion actors within state and other institutions. The institutional support for LGBTQ+ rights in the Western Balkans remains extremely limited, particularly regarding the adoption and implementation of policies that would enhance the inclusion of LGBTQ+ minorities and women. However, feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations have some allies within institutions. While these allies may not hold the highest ranks necessary to enact new policies or laws and are a minority within their institutions, they can still play a crucial role in supporting and furthering short-to medium-term efforts. For instance, identifying and targeting supportive individuals within institutions related to education could facilitate the implementation of sensitivity-training programs for teachers. This, in turn, could help build a network of educators equipped to support LGBTQ+ students. Even one or two allies in institutions can be of vital importance. Maintaining strong relationships with them while ensuring their privacy and minimizing their exposure may be necessary to protect them as they could face internal institutional pressures or directives against their inclusive stance.

Fourth, there is a need to form new alliances with groups and individuals that may not work explicitly on women's empowerment, gender equality, or LGBTQ+ rights but demonstrate liberal and progressive values in their work. This process should be thorough and based on past interactions that indicate a willingness on the part of these actors to join such alliances. It also requires adaptability to their ways of working. Potential allies could include musicians, artists, influencers, writers, environmental activists, public space defenders, or even pop stars. The movement's messaging will often be more effective when voices not directly involved in gender issues publicly express support for women's and LGBTQ+ rights. To build these alliances, activists and CSOs must move beyond traditional approaches and experiment with new formats, including storytelling, music, and engagement with intersecting topics like public-space rights. This can, in turn, create opportunities for feminist and LGBTQ+ perspectives to be integrated into different decision-making processes, such as in urban planning or cultural policy.

These approaches offer pathways for feminist and LGBTQ+ activists to expand their reach and to influence policy decision-making. However, it is crucial that they are implemented simultaneously. While some actions, such as removing transphobic influences from certain structures, require immediate intervention, others, such as knowledge-sharing across generations and alliance-building with new actors, demand long-term commitment and patience.

Influencing Decision-Making in Education and Culture

The path to creating communities where women and LGBTQ+ people can access their rights, move freely and live safely and with dignity requires not only fostering inclusive environments but also shaping legislation that directly impacts these communities. Therefore, active participation in policy decision-making remains crucial. The challenge outlined in this paper highlights a new battleground where anti-gender actors have forcefully inserted themselves into institutional legislative processes and established a presence within political parties and other political entities.

Feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations must prioritize safeguarding educational and cultural institutions from anti-gender influences. Resisting the populist strategies employed by anti-gender actors, such as pressuring decision-makers through mass letter campaigns or demanding their inclusion in policymaking, can be difficult. However, advocacy organizations, activists, and allies must insist that policies concerning comprehensive sexuality education, gender-sensitive curricula, and other inclusive educational reforms be guided by expert knowledge and the best interests of students. While consultations with parents, teachers, students, and the broader community is valuable, policy decisions should be grounded in nondiscrimination, human rights, and the creation of a learning environment where all identities are equally protected.

This approach not only challenges the anti-gender movement but also sets a broader standard for policy adoption beyond women's and LGBTQ+ issues, aligning with EU mechanisms for policymaking, particularly in the Western Balkans. For example, the 2024 EU Progress Report on North Macedonia recommends reducing the overuse of fast-track legislative procedures to ensure more transparent and inclusive processes for passing laws. It emphasizes the need to enhance stakeholder engagement, particularly through greater involvement of civil society and more consistent public funding mechanisms for CSOs.⁵⁴ Additionally, working with allied experts is essential: advocacy groups should actively invite and facilitate their involvement in structures such as working groups. Failing to engage these allies risks allowing governments to appoint individuals who may merely echo the anti-gender rhetoric promoted by self-organized groups of "concerned parents".

Education and culture are key fronts for social change, with the potential to foster more open and accepting environments.

Education and culture are key fronts for social change, with the potential to foster more open and accepting environments. For example, in North Macedonia in 2020, Coalition Margins, and the Network for Protection against Discrimination, filed the first lawsuit against a higher education textbook under the new Law on Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination.⁵⁵ The case challenges a textbook used in the Faculty of Philosophy at Saints Cyril and Methodius University for its discriminatory content since it blames women for rising divorce rates, condemns abortion, and labels same-sex relationships as deviant. For instance, it includes statements such as "Parental divorce in childhood is a strong social predictor of premature death in adulthood" and "If people were to become homosexual, the human species would cease to exist, die out, and culture and civilization would be destroyed." Despite this textbook being removed from the online list of readings at the faculty, it is unclear whether some professors continue to use it in their teaching. Coalition Margins has identified approximately 20 additional textbooks containing serious misinformation and scientifically unsubstantiated claims that further

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marginalize women, LGBTQ+ people, children of divorced parents, people from low-income backgrounds, and individuals with diverse body types. Work in the field is not only crucial for defending scientific integrity and ensuring fair representation of marginalized communities in the formal education system, but also for evaluating how generations of professionals—especially those in counseling and psychotherapy—are educated. It directly affects how marginalized groups are treated, healed, or misrepresented, with significant consequences for their mental and physical well-being.

Integrating an Intersectional Gender Perspective in the EU's Berlin Process

The EU enlargement process and the integration of Western Balkan countries need to incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective, along with an intersectional approach that addresses the rights of diverse minorities. The Berlin Process, initiated by Germany in 2014 amid EU “enlargement fatigue”, is a multilateral diplomatic initiative aimed at supporting the countries of the region in their path to EU integration through high-level cooperation between them and select member states. It includes platforms like the Civil Society Forum, which fosters dialogue between civil society and government representatives to influence policy and promote regional cooperation. Last year, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Berlin Process, it was criticized for lacking an intersectional and gender perspective. As a report by the Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation identified the following challenges:

The Berlin Process lacks a comprehensive gender perspective in its structure, content, and outputs, treating gender equality as a standalone topic rather than a horizontal issue integrated across all working groups and formats. There are no specific laws or mechanisms for systematic gender mainstreaming, and the representation of women's civil society organizations and other marginalized groups remains unmonitored and insufficient. Additionally, the rise of anti-gender movements, closely linked to nationalist and authoritarian narratives, undermines democratic progress but is largely unaddressed by the Process. One of the recommendations the report suggests is to address the impact of anti-gender and populist movements by integrating strategies to mitigate their effects on regional cooperation and democratic progress.⁵⁶

The CSOs represented in the Berlin Process through the Civil Society Forum should unite to emphasize that the impact of anti-gender movements goes beyond endangering the rights of women or LGBTQ+ people. They also pose significant security concerns for the region, obstructing freedoms of assembly and interfering in critical areas of the integration process, such as education and culture. Integrating an intersectional gender perspective in the Berlin Process could lead to new policy interventions in Western Balkan countries and the EU accession process, reflecting the shared realities of the multiple communities affected by anti-gender influences.

Care Systems and Well-Being

Feminist and LGBTQ+ activists (including the author of this paper) have faced crises that directly threatened their personal safety: they have been smeared in the media and attacked on the streets, had their offices vandalized, been target of hate speech and calls for their erasure and received death threats. While having to face immense physical and psychological risks in their work, members at the forefront of these communities' movements and CSOs have ignored for too long the warning signs when it comes to their physical and psychological well-being.

These frontline activists tend to be so dedicated to and consumed by their work that they often miss the signs their own bodies send them about the need to slow down, to prioritize themselves, and to take a temporary step back to focus on self-care and building sustainable community care systems.

Jelena Višnjić, the executive director of the Serbian feminist organization BeFem, says that she has observed profound exhaustion within feminist circles and that some old models no longer serve. Therefore, BeFem has a well-being fund for all its staff that allows them to access such services as massages, spa treatments, yoga, or psychotherapy. This exemplifies how to build resilient human rights defenders. Such models should be flexible, allowing organizations to reflect on the needs of their members and ensuring that self-care is a normalized practice rather than an exception. The donor community must be made to recognize that this is not a luxury but a necessity, because activists are facing burnout, withdrawal, and the erosion of their basic bodily boundaries as a result of their work, and only by prioritizing their well-being can they continue to serve their communities.

The care model outlined here carries a strong political message. It does not replicate a consumerist and apolitical version of self-care; instead it seeks to cultivate an understanding of physical and emotional needs while fostering well-being practices that can extend across communities and movements. This, in turn, fosters gentler, more caring forms of activism that resist replicating the very patterns of violence activists fight against.

Discussing and strategizing about organizational care practices is difficult when feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations are facing existential threats due to the funding crisis.

However, discussing and strategizing about organizational care practices is difficult when feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations are facing existential threats due to the funding crisis. LGBTQ+ people are losing access to shelter, food, healthcare, alternative education, and platforms for political mobilization. For many, the shock of this crisis has led to withdrawal and isolation. Now more than ever, activists, their communities, and their allies need each other.

Healing may take unconventional forms, but these, too, hold deep political significance. For example, the American journalist and LGBTQ+ activist Dan Savage recently shared an inspiring call to reclaim dancing as a political act:

During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis, we buried our friends in the morning, protested in the afternoon, and danced all night. And it was the dance that kept us in the fight, because it was the dance we were fighting for. It didn't look like we would win then. It didn't look like we would win marriage equality in 2004, but we did. Right now, it doesn't feel like we can win, but we can.⁵⁷

Being together—refusing to be isolated—is a form of resistance. It is one of the small revolutions activists can enact right now. And it is a time to sow new seeds of hope, preparing themselves for the bigger revolutions ahead.

Conclusion

The future of organizing in feminist and LGBTQ+ movements faces an enormous challenge as they are confronted with a very well-structured regional anti-gender movement. Furthermore, anti-gender rhetoric has become a global phenomenon that influences the work of human rights organizations, shut down vital services, and affected the capacities of human right defenders for political strategizing for the advancement of fundamental rights. The current crisis might seem like one of the hardest that have hit feminist and LGBTQ+ people, but they have been quite experienced in managing crises. The key formula to the path forward would be to strengthen their system of care, to be in touch with each other and build alternative models of community support to replace those that have ceased to exist, to rethink which alliances serve them and which they have still not explored enough and to safeguard the institutions where change in attitudes is possible.

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As Central and Eastern Europe faces mounting challenges to its democracy, security, and prosperity, fresh intellectual and practical impulses are urgently needed in the region and in the West broadly. For this reason, GMF established the ReThink.CEE Fellowship that supports next-generation policy analysts and civic activists from this critical part of Europe. Through conducting and presenting an original piece of policy research, fellows contribute to better understanding of regional dynamics and to effective policy responses by the transatlantic community.

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