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DIFFERENT FACES

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RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS: THE SAME COIN WITH DIFFERENT FACES

Nur Sinem KOUROU¹

Populism is one of the outstanding political phenomena in contemporary world politics for the last decade. This is not only about the election triumph of populist parties in several countries, but also it is about the impact of populism as a political strategy to other movements in different contexts. This paper focuses on the link between populism and gender. For this purpose, this paper aims to put one of the salient debates in the 2010s with the relational perspective to understand the new trends on rising right-wing populism and anti-gender movement at the same time. By so doing, this paper analyzes the common triggers of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements to see what makes them coherent. It is then concluded by asking why this relation is a matter while underlining the vulnerable position of women in populist politics.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the rise of right-wing populism and transnational anti-gender mobilization turned as one of the leading social and political quarrels in the World politics, and they have been discussing to understand what is the political motivation behind society in the times of rising right and why is this a matter?

Populist right-wing political parties are in rising across the globe and have become the main political actors in many of the political settings withholding the governmental power. These parties are some of newly emerged by anti-establishment emphasize towards national or international politics, or the old ones turn their position from marginals or extremist to mainstream ones. However, the primary claim of these parties is representing or reconstituting popular sovereignty as a reaction against the local elites or politicians who are deaf and dumb against ordinary people's demands and problems.

When this discourse reinforces the populist right-wing in local, they also increase their transnational existence by targeting international elites or international institutions in the name of people. To do that, they pick specific concerns and concepts to demonize them against the purity of people. In the year between 2012-2013, a target emerged by an existing reaction among the ordinary people: "gender". Overlapping discourse and strategies between populist right-wing parties and anti-gender movements turn the gender as a question.

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This question is reflecting the concerns about *decreasing the number of populations, the degeneration of tradition and family values, and the moral panic over the future of children*. By populist instrumentalization of gender meets a sort of public concern, which has called and organized as anti-gender movements, especially in Europe. In this vein, this paper focuses on one of the heated debates in the 2000s and examines it with a relational perspective to understand the new trends on rising right-wing populism and anti-gender movement at the same time. In other words, both gender and politics have multilayered characteristics through their collaboration in the political and social realm. As a particular version of it -populist right-wing parties and anti-gender movements- necessitates a critical and deepening analysis and explanation to see how these two interplays with each other. It should be accepted that these are the new extremisms of the old world, a new style of appealing people and representation of the voice of people. They are “the same coin with different faces” which is representing the contemporary world from political and social aspects.

Moreover, both populism and anti-gender movements raise themselves over the reaction and discontent of “ordinary” people who are constructed as against the established institutions and values. Additionally, It has to underline why the rise of populism and its alliance with anti-gender movements in society and politics is a matter. Without reasoning this relationship, description of causes and concerns would not clarify the picture of the globe explicitly. By bringing gender issue into the populism debate lead the focus of the paper to answer the following questions: What are the common triggers of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements? Why is the rise of these two movements a matter for the globe?

What makes them “Coherent”: The common triggers of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements

Since the last decade, anti-gender movements and populist right-wing politics seemed to have entered into the world of politics by combining their contents, characteristics and mobilizing the people under the discourse “we” against “other”. The demonization and separation process within the society is the critical feature of populism as identified with its most popular definition:

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous groups ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ and argues that politics should be an expression of the volunteer general (general will) of the people.²

² Cas Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, 39.4 (2004), p. 543.

When populism or populists divide the society between “people” and “the elite”, they claim themselves as the true candidates to do the right thing for the people by considering the commonsense. However, the elites only follow their interests while betraying the benefit of all people. Thus, populists make their claim on the people who are identified as oppressed people to emancipate against the elites.³

Needless to say, populist claims and separation necessitate a reason to clarify or justify themselves to emancipate oppressed people against the corrupt elite. The rise of conservative and fundamentalist social movements against “gender ideology,” “gender theory,” or “genderism” have observed particularly in Europe⁴ bring a new dynamic and useful content for the populists to justify their pro-people movement in terms of saving the nation/population demographically and morally.

Indeed, anti-gender movements are not new phenomena which have been initiated in the mid-1990s as an organized reaction from Catholic Church and conservative groups in the various country against the decisions of World conferences on Women in Cairo (1994) & Beijing (1995)⁵. Yet, anti-gender movements are developed and mainstreamed after its encounter with right-wing populist actors.⁶ Anti-gender movements are mobilized conservative and fundamentalist sectors of society against the women’s right of bodily integrity (e.g., restriction on reproductive rights in Spain), raise the concerns towards LGBT issues (e.g., the reaction against the same-sex marriage in Croatia, France and Slovenia), reversed gender-mainstreaming strategies by opposing government gender policies (e.g., delaying ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Poland, the reaction against gender-sensitive education in schools in France).⁷ Besides, it seems that anti-gender movements have burst not only in Catholic strongholds like Poland and Ireland, but also in progressive countries like Germany and France, and likely soon the U.S. as well. ⁸

Under such circumstances, “gender has served as a symbolic glue”⁹ by establishing right-wing populism a fruitful base to actualize their political vision towards society by crushing gender ideology and reinstating traditional gender roles throughout society.

³ Mudde, p. 546.

⁴ Eszter Kováts, ‘Questioning Consensuses: Right-Wing Populism, Anti-Populism, and the Threat of “Gender Ideology”’, *Sociological Research Online*, 23.2 (2018), 528–38 (p. 528) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418764735>>.

⁵ See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>.

⁶ David Kuhar, Roman and Patternote, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

⁷ Kovatz, *The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* p.175

⁸ Gillian Kane, ‘Right-Wing Europe’s War on “Gender Ideology”’, *The Public Eye*, 2018, p. 2

<<http://feature.politicalresearch.org/right-wing-europes-war-on-gender-ideology->>.

⁹ <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2019/05/03/curious-feminist-gaze-right-wing-shift>

It is important to underline the common triggers of them to mobilize people or instrumentalize the discourse by doing politics. By examining the cases across Europe, the paper has outlined three significant triggers to acknowledge the intimacy between them.

1. Anti-institutionalism: Right-wing populism in the 21st century has emerged by the intersection of several characteristics like being anti-establishment, anti-elite, leader-centered, nativist, authoritarian and so on. Anti-institutionalism is one of the key features of right-wing populism to mobilize ordinary people against the institutions, their norms and values. Indeed, rising anti-EU sentiments in European politics is derived from the populist anti-institutionalism; such as Brexits is the prominent case in this regard.

In the case of gender, the reaction against the EU's gender-mainstreaming strategy has a pivotal position for the anti-institutional face of the relationship between the populist right-wing parties and anti-gender movements. As the key topic, gender-mainstreaming is defined as "an approach to policymaking that takes into account both women's and men's interests and concerns."¹⁰ In its official recognition in the Council of Europe defined as:

The (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policymaking.¹¹

To advance the position of women and to increase their presence in the various realms, gender equality aimed to be mainstreamed by a political tool of the EU. Yet, this perspective causes to rise of two activism who claim, "Gender ideology is being peddled by Western elites who want to destabilize the traditional family and the natural order of society."¹²

Against the gender-mainstreaming approach, right-wing populist parties introduce a family-mainstreaming policy strategy. By establishing this approach, they keep the family in the center of their political agenda, which also includes several sub-actions to perform it. Body politics and conservative attitudes towards women are the prominent discourses and agendas for them. Promoting reproduction (anti-abortion campaigns or policies like in Poland, Italy, Russia), keeping women at home as housewives or lead them to the part-time jobs (as in Austria), preserving anthropological roots of the family (reaction against same-sex marriage or other civil partnership in France, Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy), and exclusion gender studies from academia or education curricula (in Hungary, Russia, Germany) are the most common triggers towards a family-mainstreaming approach which has also put women in a disadvantageous position.

¹⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

¹¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>

¹² Kane.

Additionally, anti-gender movements establish itself as a kind of populist antagonism when they expand their reactions against the local/national governments, which are willing to introduce and implement the norms and decisions of international communities. The point where populist right-wing and anti-gender movement unites their reaction is the gender-mainstreaming strategy of international institutions. According to them, implementing the norms of international institutions causes to undermine the principle of national sovereignty.¹³ For instance, resistance against the Istanbul Convention is one of the most indicative cases to analyze the anti-institutional face of these dual activisms.

The convention establishes its strategies as “preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is based the understanding that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is committed against women because they are women.”¹⁴ Ratification of the convention gives obligations to the state to “take measures to prevent violence against women, protect its victims and prosecute the perpetrators.”¹⁵ The root of the convention is based on the reality in the societies: there is no real equality between men and women; if so, then there should not be violence against women. The convention anticipates some prevention that has to be taken by the state to “save lives and reduce human suffering” through the convention by underlining the prosecution of perpetrators by the criminalization of various forms of violence against women. It means that the state has to introduce new forms and inclusive definitions of violence into their national criminal law, which have not existed before.

Yet, the Istanbul Convention has identified as a danger for authentic family life, traditions of ordinary people, attack for national sovereignty by populist and anti-gender local groups. This reaction is more than a movement or discourse in somewhere such as in Poland or Hungary, where the struggle against gender ideology turns into a state policy¹⁶, populist right-wing in power. Thus, in the current situation, the rising tide of these two activism meet when gender is an institutional concern and organize anti-institutional reactions with different aspects by promoting family-mainstreaming approach and nativist values.

2. *Nativism*: According to Mudde, nativism is also a characteristic of the current right-wing populist parties. In the case of gender and populism, nativism shows itself in two ways: family-mainstreaming and anti-immigration.

¹³ Kuhar, Roman and Patternote.

¹⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

¹⁵ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

¹⁶ Kuhar, Roman and Patternote, p. 12.

As discussed above, family-mainstreaming is a reaction for the gender mainstreaming policy tool of the EU from raising the anti-institutional sentiment of two activism. When it comes to the presence of populist right-wing and anti-gender movements in the local, they underline facing problems and concerning issues in terms of their own culture, and lives of ordinary people. Therefore, when they constitute skepticism towards the EU and the Brussels elites, they focus on their national authenticities which is called nativism and causes to promote family-mainstreaming policies to protect such as being French, German, Polish and so on. By this way, dual activism underline their claim by giving a voice back to the people.¹⁷

Beyond the reaction against the EU, preserving native culture and society has an impact on the local political agenda. The populist right-wing parties bring new dynamics and explanations on gender inequality issues through define women within the familial sphere and promoting heteronormative family as their cultural components. All around the world, there are organized movements against the dangers faced by families. These dangers are seen as the legalization of same-sex marriage (La Manif pour Tous¹⁸ movement in France), abortion (debate on “culture of life” vs. “culture of death”) and gender studies.

Fear of the future is the critical point for nativist concerns, which is used as an important trigger in anti-gender movements. In terms of addressing fear of the future, it mobilizes the parents to save their children.¹⁹ As a part of the moral panic, anti-gender movements target the woman’s body in terms of being against abortion to sustain the population. For this, they claim that abortion is Holocaust²⁰, which is genocide for the future of the nation.

Family-mainstreaming and pro-natalist argumentation to save the future is one side of the nativist trigger for populism and anti-gender movements. The impact of such a perspective on gender issue is associated with the protection of “family, body and nation are part of national identity politics”²¹ and gender ideology in populist right-wing parties are based on regulation over woman’s bodies.²² On the other side, gender has also turned a symbol of anti-immigrant wave and nativism in the European context.

¹⁷ Paternotte and Kuhar, p. 13.

¹⁸ Paternotte and Kuhar, p. 8.: in France, where protests by the “Manif pour tous” were organized as a reaction to François Hollande’s pledge to introduce same-sex marriage

¹⁹ Kováts, ‘The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy’.

²⁰ Beisel, Nicola and Sarah Lipton-Lupet, ‘Appropriating Aushwitz: The Holocaust as Analogy and Provocation in the Pro-Life Movement’, <https://www.asanet.org>, p.3.

²¹ Wodak, 74-81.

²² Wodak, 179-182.

The immigration crisis in Europe has been engaged with gender ideology, and the rise of populist right-wing parties has an impact on these “renewed interest of gender issue as part of their anti-immigrant programs.”²³

As mentioned repeatedly, the instrumentalization strategy of populist right-wing parties for various concepts has also applied to “gender and women’s right discourse to draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders”²⁴. For this, “anti-gender discourse is the concept of gender ideology proved to be a tool to create a them/us divide in the sense of antagonism and through it delegitimize different groups in society and politics.”²⁵ To protect nativist identity, populist right-wing and anti-gender movements have created their scapegoats among ethnic minorities in their context, immigrant groups or international elites by identifying them as the source of problems in the society.²⁶ In other words, gender has been instrumentalized to polarize the society by addressing the “other” as odds with society/majority.

3. Conservative nature of populism and anti-gender movement: Anti-gender movements can be recognized as conservative movements. Yet, populism is rarely considered with conservatism. When populism is generally identified as an illiberal democracy or authoritarian style of politics, its conservatism remains a hidden part. When it comes to analyzing the relationship between populism and anti-gender, conservatism shows itself as the primary indicator to comprehend it. As Akkerman notes, the conservative attitude of the (right-wing populist) parties activates in the domain of family relations which all have traditional ideas.²⁷

Needless to say, populist right-wing parties are not classified as a traditional conservative party, actually these parties could not be defined to any familiar forms or terms of politics. Yet, as a new mainstream actor, populist includes several features and ideologies that are generally based on the right side of political spectrum. Due to its right-wing characteristic, it becomes a congenial partner for anti-gender movements. As Kuhar and Patternote note that “the shift towards right reinforces these campaigns and provides them with new supports who took over a concept of gender ideology which shares some ideology structures with the right-wing populist ideology.”²⁸

In the relationship between right-wing populism and anti-gender campaigns, this paper has presented three major common triggers as: anti-institutionalism, nativism and conservatism.

²³ Tjitske Akkerman, ‘Gender and the Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Agendas’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49.1–2 (2015), 37–60 (p. 39) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1023655>>.

²⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/rethinking-populism/the-gender-turn-of-the-populist-radical-right/>

²⁵ Kováts, ‘The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy’, p. 178.

²⁶ Paternotte and Kuhar.

²⁷ Akkerman, p. 37.

²⁸ Kuhar, Roman and Patternote.

In the earlier forms of this unification, these triggers showed themselves over a reaction against EU's gender-mainstreaming policy tool by promoting family-mainstreaming. Nowadays, anti-immigration discourse has been added this reaction as well to identify the "other" against "us" in populist sense.

Why is this a matter?

The above analysis depicts the shared reasons and characteristics of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements, especially in the European context. Examining their reaction uncovers how they centralize women in their discourses and political agendas by defining them within the familial sphere and with traditional motherhood responsibilities. As Mudde defines the women and right-wing relation as, the equating of women's politics with family politics²⁹ which is also deepening its relations with anti-gender agenda. In other words, the cooperation between right-wing populism and anti-gender agenda shapes the women identity to tackle the demographic and moral crisis has become the salient concern for them.

From the critical perspective, anti-gender movements and populist right-wing parties' women agenda create a significant challenge for the half of the population by undermining gender equality. When they politicize family and women by concerning depopulation, moral panic, degeneration of family, being children in danger, they employ woman as the key actor of this "save the nation" propaganda.

Therefore, as a new global rising tide of right-wing populism and its collaboration with contemporary transnational anti-gender movements seem as an example for the expansion and normalization of extremist actors and ideas in the world politics. Especially where populist right-wing parties are in government, the anti-gender movements, campaigns or ideas find chance to turn as the state policies. For instance, in Poland, through Law and Justice Party anti-gender ideology by statement as "conservative welfare state with pronatalist policies, cash transfer to parents and a strong focus on the heterosexual family"³⁰ turns as a state policy. This kind of cases cause question about how far can anti-gender ideology effect the progressiveness of a society and situation of women? By changing policies, it seems quite problematical for freedoms and positions of women in society as well as sexual minorities. Indeed, this is a war on gender³¹ that has been waged to change established liberal gender norms and values.

²⁹ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>>.

³⁰ Korolczuk and Graff.

³¹ Kane.

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