Editorial

Gendering De-Democratization: Gender and Illiberalism in Post-Communist Europe

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Abstract
Many observers have written with concern about a growing “opposition to gender equality,” “anti-gender campaigns,” and even a “war on gender.” Often, these trends take place in countries that are witnessing a decline in democratic quality, a process captured by such labels as “democratic erosion,” “democratic backsliding,” or “autocratization.” This thematic issue brings together literature on gender equality and de-democratization with an emphasis on the role of illiberalism and a regional focus on post-communist Europe.

Keywords
autocratization; de-democratization; equality; Europe; gender; illiberalism; LGBTQIA+; populism

Issue
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1. Introduction

There is a growing concern about a global decline in democracy, a process captured by such labels as “democratic regression” (Erdmann & Kneuer, 2011), “democratic backsliding” (Waldner & Lust, 2018), and even “autocratization” (Cassani & Tomini, 2019). At the same time, many worry about “anti-gender campaigns” by “anti-gender movements” (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), “gender policy backsliding” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018), and even a “war on gender” (Korolczuk, 2014). Still, “there is a striking lack of research into the gendered aspects and implications of democratic backsliding” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 90). The contributions to this thematic issue aim to fill part of this gap by recounting and reconstructing how illiberalism and de-democratization have interacted to promote anti-gender politics in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia.

This introduction to the thematic issue is a plea for gendering research on de-democratization. It looks, in turn, at gender, de-democratization, and illiberalism before combining them in a tentative causal model that is put up for further investigation. In doing so, it makes several points. The first one is that anti-gender politics comes in different gradations and manifestations—and so does de-democratization. Another point is that illiberalism is both a cause of anti-gender politics and a specific form of de-democratization. Finally, to appreciate the impact of de-democratization on gender equality, these concepts should be kept separate—analytically—and examined empirically.

2. Gender

Contemporary literature often uses the term “anti-gender” to describe movements, policies, and ideologies that threaten the rights of women and sexual minorities (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Under this broad heading, three gradations/manifestations can be distinguished. First, opposition to gender is defined as “any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and
gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that
can be expected to influence or is actually influencing
politics or policymaking at any stage” (Verloo, 2018a,
p. 6). Second, gender policy backsliding is defined as
“states going back on previous commitments to gender
equality norms as defined in their respective political
contexts” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 92). Krizsán
and Roggeband operationalize gender policy backsliding
along four dimensions:

- Discursive delegitimation;
- Policy dismantling and reframing;
- Undermining of implementation;
- Erosion of accountability and inclusion mecha-
nisms.

Finally, state antifeminism is defined as “the actions
of agents or agencies of the state” that slow, stop,
or push back “the mobilizations of the feminist move-
ment (whether in or outside the state)” (Dupuis-Déri,
2016, p. 23). In other words, a change from a femi-
nist partner to a “hostile state” (Krizsán & Roggeband,
2021, p. 610). The contributions to this thematic issue
show that in post-communist Eastern Europe, all three
anti-gender gradations/manifestations can be found,
from opposition to gender in Slovakia (Maďarová &
Hardoš, 2022; Zvada, 2022), gender policy backsliding
in Romania (Dragolea, 2022), to state anti-feminism in
Poland (Grzebalska, 2022; Zbytniewska, 2022) and even
more so Hungary (Linnamäki, 2022; Parti, 2022; Takács
et al., 2022).

3. De-Democratization

Like anti-gender politics, democratic decline has vari-
ses gradations and manifestations. Autocratization
is defined through its direction as “a process of regime
change towards autocracy” (Cassani & Tomini, 2019,
p. 22). De-democratization (Bogaards, 2018) is defined
by its direction and its starting point. It does not preclude
that democracies turn into autocracies, but it leaves
the endpoint open. Democracies can become less democ-
ратic in multiple ways. Merkel and his collaborators iden-
tify four types of defective democracy: exclusive, delega-
tive, illiberal, and tutelary (Bogaards, 2009). Hungary
is a special case because it is defective across the board
(Bogaards, 2018), if it has not yet crossed the threshold
to an electoral authoritarian regime (Bogaards, 2020).

Freedom House’s Nations in Transit is critical of the
region’s many hybrid regimes, combining elements of
autocracy and democracy, and notes with concern
that even among the comparatively strong democracies,
scores have gone down (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022).
However, using the Democracy Barometer, Bochsler and
Juen (2020, p. 182) caution that “drastic cases, such as
Hungary, and more recently, Poland...do not seem rep-
resentative for the region.” Relying on data from the
Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, Stanley (2019)
is more pessimistic, but also notes substantial variation
in post-communist Europe.

4. Illiberalism

The contributions to this thematic issue see a close con-
nection between illiberalism and gender. Holzleitner
(2022) argues that illiberal political thinking is funda-
mentally at odds with gender equality, discussing many
examples of illiberal writing on gender. Linnamäki (2022)
explores the link between illiberalism and familialism,
which sees the family as a central cultural value. Her
empirical evidence comes from a content analysis of
anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in parliamentary discourses on
child abuse in Hungary. Gaweda (2022) reveals the sim-
ilarities in the discourse on the demographic crisis in
Poland and Russia. Dragolea (2022) provides a discourse
analysis of a new party, the Alliance for the Union of
Romans. She observes a shift from gender traditiona-
listanism to an explicitly anti-gender discourse that is illib-
eral in nature. Zvada (2022) analyzes anti-gender rhetoric
in the Slovak parliament. He finds that gender is pri-
marily mentioned by illiberal parties, though with varia-
tion according to ideological background. Other contribu-
tions link illiberalism to populist actors and conservative
ideology. Zbytniewska (2022) introduces the term “pop-
ulist skirmishers” to draw attention to the pioneering
work of individuals, mostly politicians, who seek to radia-
Ize the agenda. Often, they do this by focusing on gen-
der. Maďarová and Hardoš (2022) document the conser-
vative/liberal divide in Slovak media and link this to the
emergence of an anti-gender discourse.

This is in line with what other scholars have observed.
For Laruelle (2022), traditional visions of gender rela-
tions are a defining feature of what she sees as the new
ideology of “illiberalism.” Mancini and Palazzo (2021,
p. 410) write that “gender conservatism is a common
trait in all illiberal scripts.” The relationship between
right-wing populism and gender is more complex (Hajek
& Dombrowski, 2022), but Enyedi (2020) sees the hetero-
sexual, married family as the core constituency of what
he terms “paternal populism” (see also Fodor, 2022)
Because of the close connection between illiberalism
and anti-gender politics, several contributions to this the-
matic issue call for “gendering illiberalism” (Dragolea,
2022; Gaweda, 2022).

Sometimes, the gendered critique of illiberalism is
difficult to distinguish from earlier critiques of neoliberal-
ism. For example, Pető’s (2021, p. 320) discussion of the
gendered consequences of the “illiberal polypore state”
ties in seamlessly with her critique of the “neoliberal
polypore state.” The two are even causally connected,
as illiberalism “can best be understood as a majoritarian
nationalist response to the failures of the global, neoliberal
model” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 164).

The analogy extends to the relationship between
neoliberalism and de-democratization. For Walby (2015,
p. 117) “the neoliberal project of deregulation is a project
of de-democratization” (see also Alonso & Lombardo, 2018, p. 80). Whatever the merits of this argument, it is important to keep illiberalism and neoliberalism separate when studying their impact on gender equality.

5. Gendering De-Democratization

Several contributions to this thematic issue establish a direct link between de-democratization and anti-gender politics. Parti (2022) argues that de-democratization further undermined the reporting of sexual violence in Hungary. Through interviews with members of civil society organizations, she shows that the illiberal climate created by the Hungarian government discouraged victims of sexual violence to come forward. Takács et al. (2022) detail how gender-phobic policies in Hungary now even extend to children’s literature. They trace this development to prime minister Orbán’s return to power in 2010. Grzebalska (2022) explains the growing presence and normalization of women in the Polish defense sector by the pragmatism of illiberal policy-makers. Ergas et al. (2022) examine how “illiberal policymaking” has threatened gender studies programs around the world. They also briefly highlight three resistance strategies.

An investigation of the relationship between de-democratization and gender backlash requires an analytical separation between cause and effect. A model can be found in Vachudova’s (2020) careful analysis of the relationship between ethnopopulism and democratic backsliding. The concept of “gender democracy” (Galligan, 2015; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2019a) is less helpful. If less gender equality equals less democracy, if an attack on gender is an attack on democracy (Lombardo et al., 2021, p. 527), then there is no point in examining the impact of de-democratization on gender.

While for analytical purposes it is necessary to keep de-democratization and anti-gender politics separate, empirically, the two can go together and both can be cause and effect. For Biroli (2019, p. 2), for example, the “gender backlash” and the weakening of democracy are mutually reinforcing. She identifies four mechanisms of “engendered backsliding” (Biroli, 2019, p. 3): majoritarian conceptions of democracy that come at the expense of minorities, acceptance of hierarchies and inequalities as natural, criminalization of opposition, and replacement of individual rights with rights for narrowly defined families. Future research should explore the causal relationships and mechanisms of gendered de-democratization in more depth.

A common pattern is that concentration of power (Verloo, 2018b, p. 226) and reduced civic space (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2019b) make it more difficult for women’s associations to organize effectively, make themselves heard, and exert influence on policy-making. Krizsán and Roggeband’s (2021, p. 622) social movement perspective interprets increasing state hostility towards gender equality as the result of state capture by anti-gender actors. One limitation of this approach is that it leaves little autonomy for political parties and the state. In Hungary, it was the government itself that invited, constructed, and funded anti-gender actors after it started a backlash against gender (Datta, 2021).

Figure 1 presents a basic overview of the causal relationships between illiberalism, de-democratization, and anti-gender politics. One can see that illiberalism, which is at the heart of this thematic issue, is both a cause of and part of de-democratization, through the phenomenon of illiberal democracy. De-democratization is separate from anti-gender politics and the arrow runs in one direction only, though in practice the relationship can be mutually reinforcing. At this stage, these causal claims are best treated as hypotheses in urgent need of theoretical development and empirical testing. Moreover, the picture is far from complete. It might be that populism and illiberalism have a direct impact on gender regimes, without the intermediate process of de-democratization. Also, the gender regime may be impacted by other factors.

6. Conclusion

Tripp (2013, p. 529) concluded that “there is still much that is not known about how regimes influence gender quality.” What is true for regime type holds even stronger for regime change. Post-communist Europe is witnessing a rise in illiberalism, de-democratization, and anti-gender politics. The contributions to this thematic issue have examined these processes in a variety of countries and a variety of spheres, policy domains, and institutions. Several contributions also identified strategies of resistance, sometimes in unexpected places, as in the article by Ergas et al. (2022). For Chenoweth and Marks (2022), “understanding the relationship between sexism and democratic backsliding is vital for those who wish to...
fight back against both.” This thematic issue seeks to contribute to that fight, agreeing with Verloo (2018b, p. 228) that the best way to protect feminist gains is to protect democracy, notwithstanding democracy’s own troubled history with gender equality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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