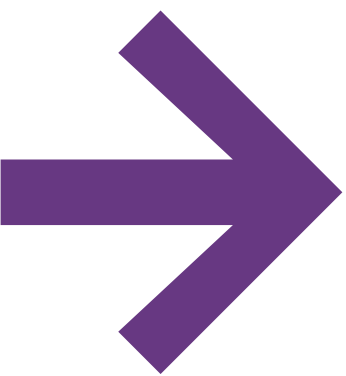




## Policy Brief

# The Anti-Gender Shift in Europe: Ways to Respond to the Challenge to Democratic Values and Human Rights

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November 2025

### Summary

Across Europe, a coordinated anti-gender turn has taken shape, characterised by political, legislative and discursive attacks on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. In some EU member states, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, governments and far-right actors increasingly frame gender equality as “ideology,” advancing restrictive laws and targeting feminist and LGBTQ+ organisations.

In Eastern European and Central Asian countries (EECA), the anti-gender agenda has taken more repressive forms, including “LGBT propaganda” bans and systematic dismantling of civil society. These measures not only endanger local communities but also reverberate into Europe through transnational alliances, financing channels and narrative diffusion. Therefore, a robust and coordinated response is essential to safeguard democratic institutions, the integrity of EU law and the Union’s global human rights leadership.

EU should tie resources to respect for fundamental rights, independently monitor anti-gender policies as rule-of-law breaches, integrate anti-gender indicators into democracy and rule of law mechanisms, address digital disinformation and expand funding for NGOs and grassroots initiatives.

\* The policy brief has been prepared in cooperation with the Civil Society Forum’s Working Group on Gender Equality

### Problem Overview

The anti-gender turn is a transnational trend to dismantle gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, sexual and reproductive rights and sexual orientation and gender identity protection. Its central narrative against “gender ideology” functions as a global countermovement against liberal democracy and human rights<sup>1</sup>. By appealing to “traditional values” and “national sovereignty,” anti-gender actors portray equality norms as alien impositions and

Brussels as a cultural coloniser in an “anticolonial frame”<sup>2</sup>. This threatens the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on EU (TEU) and the EU Charter.

The rise of right-wing populism provides electoral legitimacy for dismantling equality institutions, which is reinforced by religious-political alliances

in international conservative networks<sup>3</sup>, and digital disinformation — intensified by algorithmic targeting and AI — amplifies stigmatising narratives<sup>4</sup>. National actors increasingly rely on transnational strategies<sup>5</sup> that include restrictive NGO laws and foreign funding bans silencing human rights defenders.

Recent evidence shows that U.S. conservative Christian legal groups have invested over US\$ 88 million from 2007 to 2018 in anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ advocacy across Europe — including legal interventions, litigation and policy campaigns<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, the European Parliamentary Forum’s report “The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Reclaiming Power” documents that between 2019 and 2023, anti-gender groups in

“ **Anti-gender groups in Europe raised roughly US\$ 1.18 billion, with a portion of this funding traced back to Russian oligarch-linked networks and conservative donors** ”

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“LGBT propaganda” laws, abortion restrictions, education censorship or politicised court rulings – anti-gender rhetoric is progressively mainstreamed in party politics, shifting discursive baselines throughout Europe<sup>8</sup>, lead to the erosion of the rule of law, institutionalised discrimination and democratic backsliding in the EU and its neighbourhood<sup>9</sup>. The anti-gender turn defies the *acquis* and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) system. For EU institutions, confronting this challenge is essential to uphold TEU commitments, citizens’ rights and the Union’s credibility as a global human rights actor.

## Current Trends (2024–2025)

Whereas right-wing parties held 118 seats in the European Parliament (within the European Conservatives and Reformists – ECR<sup>10</sup> and the Identity and Democracy group – ID<sup>11</sup>) before 2024, by September 2025, representatives of the ECR, the Patriots for Europe (PfE) and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) held 191 seats<sup>12</sup>. They have been able to unite around an anti-gender and anti-migration agenda<sup>13</sup>, presenting it as a defence of Europe’s “cultural identity” based on “traditional family”<sup>14</sup> values and heteronormative unions<sup>15</sup>. This change pressured traditional parties to consider it in debates on the budget and social policy<sup>16</sup>.

Here are a few examples from Wider Europe countries that confirm this shift.



### Georgia

Anti-gender movements are closely intertwined with anti-EU rhetoric. Anti-Pride rallies have been organised, often accompanied by violence. Activists have been attacked, while the authorities employ a discourse of “national values” to restrict international cooperation<sup>17</sup>. In autumn 2024, Georgia passed a law that banned gender transition (legal and medical), marriage for LGBTQ+ people, adoption of children by LGBTQ+ persons, dissemination of information about LGBTQ+ people in the media and educational institutions and freedom of assembly.



### Germany

The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has succeeded in mainstreaming anti-gender narratives, particularly through campaigns against sexual education curricula that address gender equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools. These campaigns reinforce broader far-right discourses and contribute to the normalisation of anti-gender rhetoric in public debate<sup>18</sup>.



### Hungary

The 2021 “Child Protection Act” remains in force, banning the display of information about same-sex couples and gender transition in schools and the media<sup>19</sup>. The authorities restricted the organisation of public events, including Budapest Pride, under the pretext of “protecting minors”<sup>20</sup>; upon proposal by the mayor of Budapest, the 2025 pride was still possible in the form of a municipal event. These steps are regarded by the European Commission as a direct violation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights<sup>21</sup>, but effective sanctions have been limited so far<sup>22</sup>.



### Italy

In 2021, the failure of the Zan Bill against homophobia and transphobia highlighted the strength of catholic and far-right coalitions. Debates on surrogacy and trans rights are increasingly framed as threats to the family and national identity, consolidating conservative mobilisation<sup>23</sup>.



**North  
Macedonia**

Anti-gender groups intensified their activities, using a “transnational toolkit” – online networks, foreign funding and religious coalitions – to exert pressure on education and public events<sup>24</sup>.



**Poland**

Although the Constitutional Tribunal effectively banned abortion in 2020<sup>25</sup> and several municipalities adopted resolutions establishing “LGBT-free zones” since 2019, some of these measures were repealed in 2023–2024<sup>26</sup> due to external pressure, but the rhetoric of “family protection”<sup>27</sup> still mobilises right-conservative forces, particularly at the local level<sup>28</sup>.



**Russia**

In December 2022, a full ban on “LGBT propaganda” was adopted<sup>29</sup>. In July 2023, a federal law prohibiting legal and medical gender transition entered into force<sup>30</sup>. In November 2023, the Supreme Court declared the non-existent “International LGBT Public Movement” an extremist organisation, enabling the criminal prosecution of individuals promoting LGBTQ+ “agendas”<sup>31</sup>. In 2024, a law banning “childfree propaganda” was passed<sup>32</sup>. These measures, justified as adherence to “traditional values”, are often disseminated through “traditional values alliances” with EU far-right parties<sup>33</sup>.



**Slovakia**

Following the 2023 elections, parties employing anti-gender rhetoric gained greater influence. In 2024, the Slovak parliament debated amendments restricting the legal recognition of transgender people.



**Turkey**

An anti-gender agenda has intensified, leading to the country's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Under the banner of protecting the “traditional family,” President Erdoğan declared 2025 the “Year of the Family,” while the media regulator RTÜK labeled it the “Year of Combatting LGBTQ+ Content.” A draft law aims to restrict gender transition and introduce criminal liability for the public expression of LGBTQ+ identities. There are proposals for courts to punish LGBTQ+ partnerships and non-state wedding ceremonies, while prides and public demonstrations remain banned.

A key trend in 2024–2025 has been the use of social media and artificial intelligence through deep-fakes, fake news and memes targeting feminist NGOs and LGBTQ+ activists. Despite the entry into force of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and the adoption of the AI Act, regulatory effectiveness remains limited, while anti-gender networks further exploit loopholes in national legislations.

The **EU** faces **social challenges** from rising discrimination and violence against women and girls, LGBTQ+ people and human rights defenders; **legal challenges** owing to contradictions between anti-gender laws and Article 2 TEU and the EU Charter; and **political challenges** due to the threat to EU unity from member states' increasing divergence about “Union values.” Thus,

the anti-gender turn is evolving into a transnational movement capable of influencing EU politics and undermining the foundations of the democratic order.

## **Policy Recommendations for EU Institutions and National Governments**

### **Financial Conditionality and Sanctions**

**Mechanisms:** Link access to EU structural and investment funds to compliance with gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights analogous to existing measures on the rule of law; establish an independent monitoring body under the European Commission to track anti-gender practices, publish regular reports and treat anti-gender rhetoric as

an early indicator of democratic erosion; apply targeted sanctions against governments violating women's and LGBTQ+ rights (e.g. restrictions on European Regional Development Fund and NextGenerationEU grants); and promote inclusive values in collaboration with bloggers, journalists and educators.

**Support for Civil Society:** Expand funding for human rights NGOs under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), include a similar component in new programmes (such as AgoraEU) and facilitate NGO participation in such initiatives in all EU member states, but focusing on Central and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus where activists are more often limited in their rights; develop dedicated support programmes for NGOs operating under restrictive conditions in the EU and its neighbourhood, which includes legal assistance, digital security and sustainable funding; and invest in educational and awareness-raising initiatives on digital and media literacy and human rights to counter the spread of disinformation.

**Countering Disinformation and Regulating Digital Platforms:** Require major online platforms, especially Meta, Telegram, TikTok and X, to provide transparent public reports on anti-gender content under the DSA.

**Foreign Policy and International Cooperation:** Support independent media and civil society initiatives in EU member states and neighbouring countries (Georgia, Moldova, Western Balkans) where anti-gender rhetoric is used as a tool of anti-Western propaganda; make gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights mandatory conditions in EU agreements with third countries, including trade and investment deals; and promote the creation of international alliances against anti-gender movements, e. g. within the Council of Europe, OSCE and UN.

## Conclusions

The anti-gender turn in Europe and the EECA countries has become a systemic challenge to democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights. It is characterised by local and transnational coordination of shared narratives of "gender ideology" and "traditional values," the transfer of strategies from "LGBT propaganda" laws to attacks on NGOs and the use of digital technologies to amplify disinformation, which is reinforced by alliances between the far-right,

right-populist parties, religious networks and external authoritarian actors. The anti-gender agenda indicates a broader authoritarian trend that is accompanied by the restriction of civic space, judicial independence and free media and legitimises discrimination.

Passivity or delayed responses will lead to a loss of EU legitimacy as a defender of rights and freedoms, increased fragmentation within the Union and further export of authoritarian models. This directly affects the EU's strategic priorities – from strengthening the rule of law and value cohesion to external influence – and values in the TEU and EU Charter. Proactive, multi-level and coordinated measures are therefore required. Preventive strategies are also required, since timely EU action will protect vulnerable communities and safeguard the democratic resilience of the Union under conditions of mounting pressure.

“ **Timely EU action will protect vulnerable communities and safeguard the democratic resilience of the Union under conditions of mounting pressure.** ”

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