

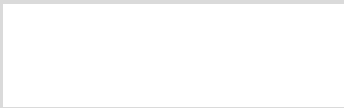
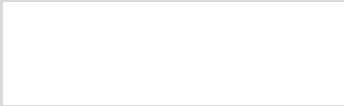
THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

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# **RESIST. RISE. REMEMBER.**

FEMINISM IN THE FACE OF BACKLASH:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## **THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION**

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993.  
For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard.

Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with over 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.

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# Foreword

**Petra Tötterman Andorff**  
Secretary-General, Kvinna till Kvinna

This publication examines feminist responses to the growing anti-gender backlash in the Western Balkans, building on a long history of feminist organising shaped by conflict, transition, and resilience. From the outset, activists in the region have fostered cross-border solidarity for peace, justice, and dignity – efforts that have grown into a strong regional feminist community.

A key lesson is that the pursuit of equality is ongoing, evolving with shifting political contexts and emerging challenges. The anti-gender movements analysed here reflect a broader regional and global trend. At the same time, they have prompted sustained and adaptive feminist responses, demonstrating the persistence and relevance of organised resistance.

The Western Balkans are often viewed through the lens of conflict and division. Yet the region's feminist experience tells a different story: one of solidarity across borders, sustained resistance to exclusion and violence, and a long-term commitment to justice and peace. These experiences have relevance far beyond the region and offer important lessons for societies grappling with conflict and polarisation.

They demonstrate the importance of maintaining dialogue across divides; of centring the experiences and leadership of those most affected by violence and discrimination; and of building lasting alliances. The region's feminist actors have also shown that peacebuilding is not only about ending conflict, but about addressing its root causes, challenging exclusionary narratives, defending human rights, and creating space for diverse voices in public life. Equally important is their persistence in advancing gender equality and confronting the legacies of conflict long after formal peace agreements are signed and international attention has moved elsewhere.

The experience of feminist movements in the Western Balkans offers insights on how to endure and respond in increasingly hostile political environments. In a time of growing global insecurity, it also reminds us that conflict and peace are not gender-neutral.

Bringing together perspectives from activists and scholars, this publication highlights both the dynamics of anti-gender mobilisation and the continued strength of feminist resistance.

# Introduction: reimagining a shifting region

**Lejla Gačanica, Editor**

This publication emerges at a moment of uncertainty: rapid political shifts, rising nationalist movements, and the reassertion of right-wing ideologies both globally and within our region. Paradoxically, in an age of unprecedented technological progress and social transformation, equality, dignity, and freedom remain fragile. Gender equality, long treated as secondary or optional, has again been reduced to a political bargaining chip, vulnerable to shrinking civic spaces, militarised priorities, and conservative movements that invoke tradition to justify limiting rights. In this environment, progress is neither assured nor stable; it must be actively defended and continuously renewed.

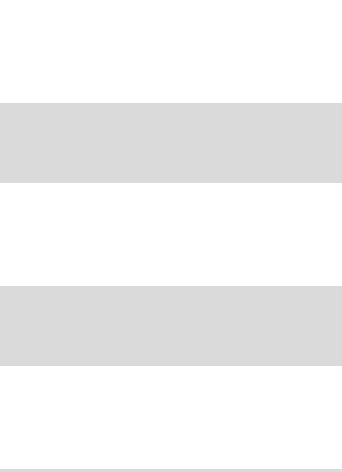
The Western Balkans occupy a liminal space, suspended between the remnants of past conflicts and an uncertain democratic future. Societies here are neither fully anchored within the European Union nor comfortably within the sphere of other geopolitical powers, leaving them in a state of political and social precariousness. Feminist experience shows that crises rarely occur in isolation: when societies tremble, gender equality trembles alongside them. Feminism, therefore, must constantly rebuild, reaffirm, and reimagine new forms of solidarity and resistance.

Yet this moment is not only about confronting present challenges, it is about defending rights that generations have fought to secure. Nothing today is guaranteed, and nearly all gains are at risk of being rolled back under the guise of “traditional values.” An old Balkan saying warns: *Dabogda imao pa nema* – may you have, then lose. Within this folk wisdom lies both caution and determination: what has been hard-won cannot be surrendered. Feminist memory, personal, collective, written, and unwritten, preserves the stories and struggles that dominant narratives often seek to erase. Memory becomes both shield and compass; it is inheritance, guide, and a source of strength for shaping the future.

This publication serves as a deliberate homage to the achievements, tensions, and ongoing challenges of feminist work in the Western Balkans, situating the present as the critical juncture where past experiences, current needs, and emerging aspirations intersect. Drawing on contributions from activists, scholars, artists, and theologians, it examines the persistent structures of patriarchy and the gendered dimensions of nationalism, while highlighting feminist interventions that challenge, disrupt, and reconstruct these systems. By framing the present as a nexus of reflection, evaluation, and forward-looking strategy, the collection positions itself simultaneously as a recognition of historical labour and a guide for future feminist praxis.

The collection is organised around three interconnected currents: nationalism, anti-democratic tendencies, and anti-gender movements. Each is examined from a feminist lens, tracing how gender equality is shaped, threatened, defended, and reimagined in response to these pressures. Literature, activism, public policy, theology, and lived experience are treated as intertwined strands of knowledge and action, reflecting the many ways feminism survives, adapts, and evolves. Feminist solidarity has never been passive; it is a deliberate, sustained refusal to accept division, fear, or repression.

Our aim is to provide guidance and reflection – a map for navigating the fragile democratic landscape of the Western Balkans. The central question is urgent and ongoing: how can what has been achieved be protected while also advancing broader freedoms and rights that remain unrealised? This publication does not claim to offer definitive answers. Instead, it seeks to nurture the courage and insight necessary to keep asking, collectively and persistently, and to reaffirm the enduring human commitment to equality, freedom, and justice.



# Thematic area 1

## **Gender and nation(alism)**

# Introduction

**Tamara Šmidling**

*„We appeal to normalise the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in public space, as well as to stop the violence against the Serbian language and to abolish the provisions of the law that impose that violence, especially through the unconstitutional law that imposes the so-called gender-sensitive language behind which is hidden the fight against marriage and the family as of divinely established sanctuaries and natural forms of man's personal and congregational life". (Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, in the 2023 Easter Epistle)*

The fact that the supreme religious leader of one of the most numerous and influential religious communities in the Western Balkans chooses to touch on the issue of gender-sensitive language in his Easter epistle could only surprise a naive or uninformed observer. A closer look at this problem clearly shows that the issue of gender, gender equality and the fight against the so-called gender ideology is one of the most common topics that religious leaders and other important and influential national institutions and individuals in our region have been dealing with for almost two decades.

In order to better understand how a gender-sensitive language found itself in the precious company of established „big" topics (such as the survival of the nation, genocide and war crimes, state territories, etc.), even a cursory glance at the document of Matica Srpska „*The State of the Serbian Language*" can help us. Among the 21 points that explain the redundancy and inadequacy of the legal regulation of the use of gender-sensitive language, point 7 has found its place, stating, among other things: „*The inevitable consequence of the law (...) will be an additional and emphasised alienation of men from women, and vice versa. An unnecessary gap is introduced into society, which will increase over time, threatening marriage and family. Our society, which is already facing countless problems such as depopulation and biological disappearance, certainly does not need that.*"<sup>1</sup> If we were to replace the word „society" in the last sentence with the word „nation", we would get a simple formula that explains where such a close connection between sex/gender and nation and nationalism comes from, not only in this area but also globally.

In the words of Lana Bobić „*The construction and preservation of gender hierarchies and the control of reproductive potential is one of the key strategies for the construction of hierarchies and regimes of violence.*"

The wars fought in the (post)Yugoslav regions as well as numerous cases of mass violence have put this topic on the map of interest of academics, activists and the interested public at least since the early 1990s. The gender component of wartime violence, wartime rapes and new constructions of gender identities in accordance with ethno-politics are topics around which a significant and valuable corpus of texts and research has been produced.

For several generations of feminists born and raised in the areas of the Western Balkans (or more precisely, but also more politically accurate – in the post-Yugoslav region), this steel embrace of the nation and nationalism in many aspects was decisive in shaping their political positions, activist struggles and horizons of their hopes and expectations. Countless initiatives, actions, programmes were created and implemented over the course of almost three decades in relation to the prevailing challenge of ethno-politics and related war and post-war violence, exclusion, dehumanisation and xenophobia. For decades, the most articulate and persistent – although not the only – voices of resistance to wars and chauvinism came precisely from formal and informal groups of women who became politicised by not conforming to the roles assigned to them by national-chauvinist optics, which can best be illustrated by the famous right-wing slogan „She to give birth, he to defend."

Some of the interpretations of lived reality that seemed so self-evident and obvious to us during the 1990s – such as, for example, that exclusive and violent ethno-nationalisms through the re-traditionalisation and re-patriarchalisation of society shaped a new order of gender roles that repeatedly oppresses women – have been problematised and complicated over time by the introduction of new factors in the equation. The harsh reality of the economic transition that left desolation in its

1 <https://priviprinaskali.com/clanci/slikom/glagoljanja/ovaj-zakon-treba-ukinuti-i-doneti-nov-matica-srpska-o-zakonu-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti.html>

wake (which, unsurprisingly, affected women in multiple ways as well<sup>2</sup>) led us to enrich the existing explanations with additional dimensions and insights. Thus, the issue of the global capitalist system – within which the encounters and mutual influences of gender and nationalism take place – has become very important for understanding the current political moment.

The issue of race and racism is another aspect that needs to be taken into account when considering the relationship between gender and nationalism, since, as Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis show, *„‘race’ and racism serve as a structuring principle for national processes, by defining both the boundaries of the nation and the constituents of national identity.”* Furthermore, *„two central social divisions, those of ethnicity/race and gender (...) interplay with each other, both in terms of their conceptual similarities and differences, and in terms of the ways they intermesh in concrete social relationships.”*<sup>3</sup>

Taking everything mentioned into account, admittedly quite simplified, we can say that it is still true that social relations shaped by ethno-national policies resulted in reductionist and oppressive gender roles. Not only were the roles of mothers and motherhood key ideological parameters in the consolidation of national policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they largely remain so today, as Ksenija Vidmar Horvat shows<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, it is crucial to approach the analysis of the relationship between gender and nation/nationalism contextually and taking into account the variety and diversity of female (and queer) positions. It is necessary to avoid the trap of essentialisation

and to recognise that not all women have the same role in the nationalist, racialised order, just as they do not have the same role in the process of social reproduction. Consequently, not all women have an equal and identical attitude towards nationalist policies and projects of building and consolidating national communities.

In this sense, it is very important and instructive to keep in mind that, as Marijana Stojčić says in the text presented here, „It is imperative to acknowledge the intricate intertwinement of gender, class, race, nation, and the reluctance to distinguish between injustices.”

What Nira Yuval-Davis long ago labelled as „transversal politics”<sup>5</sup> still has its relevance in an ever-changing world, in which identity politics are exposed in their harmfulness and in which the multiplicity of exploitation and oppression invite us to continuously consider new forms of resistance.

The two articles presented in this chapter provide a good overview of what are the main neuralgic points of current gender politics (text by Lana Bobić), and offer an important historical reminder of the connection between peace, anti-nationalist and feminist action in the post-Yugoslav areas (text by Marijana Stojčić). Both texts address the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of different struggles and of historical perspective when analysing them. They are also a call for further research and the theoretical and practical shaping of adequate and organised resistances in a world where threats to freedom and equality are multiple, well-funded and increasingly part of the political mainstream.

2 See: [http://stage.rosalux.rs/sites/default/files/publications/FEMINIST\\_SRPSKI.pdf](http://stage.rosalux.rs/sites/default/files/publications/FEMINIST_SRPSKI.pdf)

3 Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis “Racialized boundaries”, Routledge London, 1992.

4 Ksenija Vidmar Horvat u “Imaginarna majka – rod i nacionalizam u kulturi 20. veka”, Akademska knjiga Beograd 2021.

5 “A mode of coalition politics in which the differential positionings of the individuals and collectives involved will be recognized, as well as the value systems which underly their struggles” (Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation, London: Sage Publications 1997: 25)

# Gender hierarchies, control of reproduction and regimes of violence

**Lana Bobić**

*Im Westen nichts Neues.* Despite the recognition of reproductive rights as human rights that guarantee the control of one's own sexuality, the autonomy of decision-making about childbirth and access to reproductive health, we are witnessing a growing threat to these acquired rights in the "West". Anti-gender movements, as part of the extreme, radical, populist and/or religious right, moved abortion from the sphere of the health system (where it belongs) to the sphere of morality. From a matter of the availability of health services, abortion became a matter of "defending (unborn) life and family" and thus the legitimacy of the procedure itself is under question. As such, the issue of abortion enters the centre of the political arena and becomes the focus of political debate.

Why? Control of women's reproduction extends to almost all spheres of social, economic, and political life. The construction and preservation of gender hierarchies and the control of reproductive potential are one of the key strategies for the construction of hierarchies and regimes of violence. I use the term regimes of violence as a common denominator for ideologies and structures in which violence is inherent, such as patriarchy, nationalism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, militarism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Regimes of violence refer to alleged historical, biological or geopolitical facts and present them as a natural or realistic state of affairs, thus obscuring the fact of violence as their source, essence and goal. The paradigm of naturalness of hierarchies will serve to construct social hierarchies, ("Others" on the basis of gender, class, race, ethnicity, culture, disability, etc.) in which dominance over the „Other" will be presented as a consequence of the natural state of affairs. The paradigm of the unquestionable violence of human nature will serve to justify violence in which oppression, exploitation and even the elimination of the „Other" will be a question of the safety of the, again constructed, "Us"

and „Ours". It is „Us" or „Them". Except for patriarchy, the gender dimension is most often marginalised in the study of the mentioned ideologies, although present in all of them. Moreover, one of the first signs of a regime of violence is precisely the effort to preserve gender hierarchies and control the reproduction of women.

Feminist theoreticians have developed theories crucial for understanding the structures and relations of power and the intertwining of different forms of violent regimes. But the rich feminist knowledge does not enter the sphere of formal education and politics, and this is not accidental. Silencing, ignoring and excluding knowledge that questions power structures and relations is a necessity for maintaining positions of power and all regimes of violence.

## **Gender and nationalisms**

Feminist approach rarely finds space in theoretical considerations of nationalism and political theory. Gender is considered a „secondary" category in relation to ethnicity, race, religion, culture, as fundamental categories that construct both a certain national identity and „Otherness". This ignores the key role that gender plays in the construction and preservation of nationalist projects. „Nationalisms are multiple, multidimensional and historically specific", but in their dimensions of genealogy and origin, culture and tradition, state and citizenship, gender relations play a key role „because they construct concepts of femininity and masculinity, naturalise power relations and biologically, culturally and symbolically reproduce national communities"(Yuval Davis 2003, 0228).

Nationalist projects, like all regimes of violence, are hierarchical systems of domination. As such, the construction of the "Other" is inherent to them because „the symbolic system of nationalism in fact requires the construction of the 'Other' as an

intermediary means for its domination" (Iveković 1995, 11). Given that patriarchy is inherent in nationalism, a woman is the "Other" even as a member of the nation. Maybe not the „Other" that should be fought against, but certainly the other that should be controlled and exploited in order to achieve the goals of nationalist projects. According to Žarana Papić, androcentrism, an arbitrary conceptualisation of women burdened by existing assumptions about women and their role in society and her supposed biological assignment, means that „a woman in her own, as well as in other cultures, is the ‚Other'". „Her diversity is interpreted as her ahistorical, natural essence, once and for all knowable. The claim about the unchanging essence of a woman is closely linked in many theories with her unchanging place that does not go beyond the scope of her reproductive role" (Zaharijević, Ivanović and Duhaček 2012, 78). Nationalism „as a state ideology accumulates state and patriarchal control over the productive and reproductive powers and rights of women" (Kesić 1995).

Women are biological reproducers, incubators of the nation, which is in line with the patriarchal order where men are subjects and women are objects, valued in relation to men. Accordingly, women's bodies in nationalism do not belong to women. They belong to the state and symbolically represent a territory. Recognising the rape of women in war as a war strategy perhaps most vividly shows the relationship of nationalism to women's bodies.

Although reduced to the biological reproduction of the nation, women are deprived of the symbolic and cultural potential of reproduction. That potential is attributed to men – intellectuals, state officials (Yuval-Davis 2003, 0208). The nation does not have a mother; it has a „Father of the Nation" where male dominance and the male principle as the principle of creation and virtue are outlined through this figure. At the same time, nationalism exploits the emotionally symbolic potential of the mother as, again an object – the Motherland. „Homeland-mother', 'Motherland', and similar metaphors from the notorious arsenal of blood and soil ideology, which identify women with their biological procreative function and, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis state, use them as reproducers of ethnic ideological constructs" (Kesić 1995). The defense of the motherland as a „supreme" reason becomes a strategy for the recruitment and motivation of soldiers. Although Žarana Papić recognises the construction of a desirable type of masculinity ready for aggression as a key precondition for men's preparation for war, she claims that the nationalist movement must create a 'supreme' reason that would justify brutal

war violence (as we witnessed in the wars after the breakup of Yugoslavia). „Because for someone to be able to be mercilessly violent and, even worse, to be ready for such cruel crimes, that 'someone' must be subordinate and obedient to some 'Higher' Reason or Call. Without that submission and obedience, this kind of transformation into violent and murderous masculinity would simply not have been possible, nor on such a massive scale." (Zaharijević, Ivanović and Duhaček 2012, 189).

## Gender and religious nationalisms

After the democratic changes in the 1990s in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the process of politicisation of religion and sacralisation of politics develops to the extent that religions in the newly formed states become „the main catalyst of nationalism and the key discriminatory label that defines the parties in the conflict (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015, 4)". Even when states are secular, ethnic and national affiliation is closely linked to religious affiliation. The construction of a clear and pure national, ethnic and religious identity and the construction of constant threat, fear, and then hatred from the „Other" remains an inherent determinant of religious nationalisms. The politicisation of religion and the sacralisation of politics are strategies for justifying and legitimising regimes of violence with their allegedly transcendental nature.

The key elements of religious nationalism are not only the separation of „Others" on the level of ethnicity and religious affiliation, but also the separation of others on the level of sexuality and disciplining of the body and sexuality. Religious nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe, including the countries of the former Yugoslavia, are heteropatriarchal and organised around the often militarised masculinity and gender order of society, which leads to specific moral regimes (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015, 7). While the militarisation of masculinity takes place under the nationalist construction of the necessity of power to defend against the "Others", specific moral regimes are realised through the religious control of sexuality in public discourse.

Anić and Spahić-Šiljak claim that in both Christianity and Islam (in the countries of the former Yugoslavia), the dominant „traditionalist approach to gender is based on a complementary model of gender roles with an emphasis on preserving traditional values, marriage, family and morality through clearly divided gender roles" (Grozdanov and Odak 2023, 158). According to this understanding, God created man and woman as equally worthy, but by no means equal, their different natures result in different roles.

Caricatured, women are there to give birth and raise children, men to defend women, children and the homeland. Given that God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, marriage is a union of only a man and a woman, the meaning of which (just like sexual intercourse permitted only in marriage) is procreation. Those who deviate from clearly prescribed gender roles and those whose sexuality or gender identity do not fit into the heteropatriarchal matrix represent an unnatural deviation and the greatest threat to the sanctity of heteronormative marriage and the family as the basic unit of society, and in religious nationalisms and nation states.

Those who deviate from clearly prescribed gender roles are also women who decide to have an abortion (if they have the legal right to do so) and who will therefore be morally condemned as murderers of unborn children and the nation. In countries where abortion is legal, and where religious nationalism is present, there will be attempts to ban or criminalise abortion. In Yugoslavia, abortion is protected by the constitution of 1974, and in the countries of the former Yugoslavia abortion is legal to this day. However, there are tendencies to ban or criminalise it. In Croatia, for example, although legal, abortion is too often unavailable because of the „clericalisation of gynecology“. More than 60% of gynecologists in public healthcare institutions in Croatia refuse to perform abortions due to their conscience objection. At the same time we are witnessing the rise of moral panic due to the continuous decline in the birth rate and insisting on demographic policies that focus on encouraging women to give birth without too much concern for improving the general socioeconomic conditions in which women live.

Within the last two years, so-called prayers appeared on public squares of Croatian cities. Men who pray publicly once a month for their homeland, spiritual authority over women, life in premarital chastity, chastity in dressing and behaviour, renewal of Catholic marriages and, of course, the end of abortion. We classify these actors as anti-gender movements.

Among them are those who call themselves The Warriors of Mary (Mary as the Virgin Mary), which is not a coincidence but clearly indicates how the legacy of religious nationalism is carried over into new forms of ultra-conservative mobilisation. Although they are considered extreme, the positioning of extreme ultraconservative ideas in the public space serves to better accept somewhat milder ultraconservative ideas as non-extreme and therefore contribute to the re-traditionalisation of society.

## Gender and anti-gender movements

Anti-gender movements are “transnational constellations of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023, 4)”. Unlike religious nationalisms, which will be based on religious arguments, anti-gender movements are mostly organised through non-governmental organisations and try to defend their position with non-religious arguments, using secular tools and the language of human rights. They are not religious movements, although they are often associated with religious actors, they are religiously inspired and are considered part of the Christian right (LoMascolo 2023, Gergorić 2024). Anti-gender actors will present themselves as a resistance to the “political and cultural elites of the West” which impose destructive constructivism on man, family and society, and destructive globalism on nation states and their sovereignty and culture.

The most successful discursive framework of these movements (Gergorić 2024, 8) is „gender ideology“, an empty signifier, that is, a term created to oppose the deconstruction of the essentialist and naturalistic understanding of gender and sexuality (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, 16). In addition, the discourse of „gender ideology“ is recognised as a strategy that „serves the anti-gender movement to create a single enemy, unite religious and non-religious actors for broad mobilisation, create moral panic in the public sphere“ (Gergorić 2020, 154), with the aim of creating a strong opposition to sexual freedoms, reproductive rights, gender equality and liberal democracy. The “defense of family and traditional values” (against the „gender ideology“, ideological colonisation carried out by liberal globalist elites) will thus become a factor in uniting political, non-governmental and religious actors, advocates of theocratic, hyper-capitalist and/or illiberal projects. Despite all the differences, the radical, populist, extreme and/or religious right in the „West“ will not differ from the rhetoric and policies of Putin’s Russia regarding the heteropatriarchal order wrapped in „family and traditional“ values.

Here it is necessary to point out that the economic crisis and the crisis of liberal democracy, and the success of far-right parties due to the implementation of familialist policies as a response to the crisis, are not only the discursive framework on which the anti-gender movement relies, but also a necessary condition for the mobilisation of anti-gender movements (Gergorić 2024, 177). The extreme right will not recognise complex processes

underneath social, political, and economic changes and will not offer complex solutions that require long-term, and strategic efforts. Their strategy is to find scapegoats to blame. Be it women who, due to selfishness and careerism, do not give birth to (enough) children, queer people who threaten the natural order with their existence, or anyone of a different ethnicity, race, religion, culture, i.e., those who represent an alleged threat to our often invented tradition and culture.

### Resistance to regimes of violence

Regimes of violence in their various forms are always connected. It is no coincidence that the extreme right, along with limiting reproductive rights and sexual freedoms, also tries to limit the rights of minorities, especially migrants, "Others", spreading xenophobia, racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia and homophobia, chauvinism. There are a variety of complex factors that influence the political, economic, and social context within which regimes of violence will develop and transform their strategies of social control. For example, the

emancipation of women, effectuation of a greater degree of sexual freedoms and reproductive rights transform the strategies of the regime of violence in order to preserve gender hierarchies and control reproductive rights. Essentially, it is the same textbook adjusted to different contexts. If history and feminist authors have taught us anything, it is that the construction and preservation of gender hierarchies and the control of women's reproduction are among the first symptoms of the creation of a paradigmatic framework for the social change that regimes of violence strive for. The constructed dichotomy of the "pro-choice" and the "pro-life" (anti-choice) obscures the real dichotomy of a society of freedom and a regime of violence. Discussing this as a moral issue instead of a question of the availability of health care means giving up on one of the pillars of a healthy society and leaving the regime of violence to metastasise. Defending the right to choose is therefore not only a matter of reproductive justice, but also of resistance to totalitarian control of women's bodies and reproduction, that is, resistance to regimes of violence.

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# The past is coming<sup>6</sup>: a resistance that will not fade away

## Feminist resistance to war and nationalism during the Yugoslav wars

Marijana Stojčić

The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not fulfil the hopes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. Instead of prosperity and justice for all, what frames the social reality and states, which originated from wartime disintegration of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, is the normalisation of capitalism in its neoliberal form with all the following effects on the global scale: drastic increase of inequalities and poverty, ravaging of the social state, explosion of interstate and intrastate conflicts, ecological devastation, planetary interventionism, xenophobia and racism, and globalisation of diverse fundamentalisms. In recent decades, observers have noted phenomena that certain theorists have designated as „neofascism,” „postfascism,” or „new fascism.” The aforementioned terms collectively delineate the rise of extreme-right groups, nationalism, the tendency to suppress plurality, and intolerance towards divergent identities that deviate from traditionalist ones. This phenomenon has led to a rerouting towards complete suppression of workers' rights, violence towards migrants, and further brutalisation of free speech. A cursory examination of these seemingly disparate options reveals a common thread: the pervasive pursuit of total control over women's bodies, accompanied by an escalating onslaught against reproductive rights and a staunch opposition to gender equality in its broadest sense. This constitutes the point of agreement among diverse actors on the right-wing political spectrum, encompassing both the traditional conservative right and anti-gender movements. These movements engage in a persistent struggle against what they perceive as „feminist and LGBTQI+ attacks” on „traditional family” and

„normalcy.” The basis of these concepts can be found in conservative-traditionalist discourse, where the family is regarded as a metonymic representation of a nation. Within this discourse, women are primarily viewed as mothers, serving as the embodiment and symbolic carrier of the nation and/or state. Additionally, they are seen as the mechanism for the nation's sustenance (or destruction). This organicist understanding of the nation plays a role in patriarchal expansion of the family with rigidly defined gender roles in clear hierarchies. The traditionalist family structure, predicated on an essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality, as well as gender asymmetry, serves to ensure the acceptance and survival of hierarchical society, the state, and the nation. Consequently, it is not unexpected that the fundamental tenets of „modern attacks on family” are associated with two pivotal revolutions: the French Revolution of 1789 and the October Revolution of 1917. The two revolutions, with their ideas of democracy, freedom, and equality, as well as the means by which these can be obtained, have had a crucial impact on modern history. The first of these revolutions, in particular, gave rise to the concept of universal equality, thereby laying the foundation for the emergence of the women's rights movement and feminism. The second revolution, marked by its radical commitment to gender equality, built upon these foundations to push forward the social and political empowerment of women.

For many people in the (post)Yugoslav region, these processes seem like a frightening déjà vu from the war decade of the 1990s. Within Serbia, as well as

6 This part of the title is borrowed from the book by Dubravka Stojanović, *The Past Is Coming: Changes in the Interpretation of the Past in Serbian History Textbooks 1913–2021* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2024).

in the broader region, which is occasionally referred to in a more euphemistic manner, ethnonationalism and the ideology of self-victimisation have been the prevailing political forces for the past three decades. Consequently, the collective understanding of the world, history, and other groups is predominantly shaped by a perception of superiority and martyrdom of the collective, its historical legitimacy, and the perceived historical guilt of others. As is evident in the contemporary context, the ethnonationalist political matrix, which is predicated on fear, a sense of endangerment, and confrontation with the hostile “Other”, exhibits a gendered dimension. In the case of Serbia, the late 1980s witnessed the inception of a nationalist mobilisation that was orchestrated through the intensive media propaganda of „threatened Serbian peoples” from other Yugoslav nations and of „world conspiracy against the Serbs.” Concurrently, traditional gender roles, abortion bans, and „demographic renewal” of the endangered nation were advocated. At times, the emancipatory achievements of socialism – even those concerning the position of women – are proclaimed as “anachronistic” and „anti-Serbian.” This is often accompanied by a masking of the elementary places about the return of liberal democracy and „liberation from communist repression.” Concurrent with the escalating mobilisation and militarisation of the nationalist movement, there has been a marked acceleration in the processes of repatriarchisation and retraditionalisation. A notable illustration of this phenomenon is the minimal representation of women in the Serbian parliament following the initial multi-party elections in December 1990, wherein women constituted a mere 1.6% of the total seats. Of the 250 members of Parliament, only 4 were women. That similar processes were taking place in the rest of the region is evident from the representation of women in the parliaments of, for example, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina following the elections in the same year – 4.6% and 2.92%, respectively.

It is not surprising that feminist groups recognised the dangers of ethnic homogenisation and were quickly included in many forms of resistance to nationalism and war. Undoubtedly, women constituted the foundation of anti-war activism during the 1990s. These activists made up the most active segment of the anti-war movement, whether as part of various women's groups, peace initiatives, or organisations that emerged in response to the intensifying conflict. Many of these activities were carried out in close coordination. For instance, in March 1991, autonomous women's groups from Belgrade and Ljubljana issued the appeal ‚Women for Peace’ against militaristic policies in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, in July 1991, feminists were among the founders of the first

anti-war organisations, the Centre for Anti-War Action in Belgrade and the Anti-War Campaign in Zagreb. As the conflict escalated, women's groups with diverse thematic orientations primarily allocated their energy and resources to anti-war actions and activities and providing assistance to refugees, predominantly women and children. In the case of Serbia, part of the activities was also focused on providing support to those who wanted to avoid mobilisation. The scale and brutality of wartime violence against women in the Yugoslav wars, particularly the systematic sexual violence that included rape camps, created space for the politicisation of violence against women. With the support of international feminist organisations, by the end of 1993, three organisations based on feminist principles were established: the Centre for Women War Victims in Zagreb, Medica in Zenica, and the Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence in Belgrade. All three organisations operate independently of one another but maintain regular contact and exchange experiences, initially mainly at gatherings in third countries. Alongside their fieldwork, Yugoslav feminists actively participated in the work of international institutions. Their collaboration proved particularly significant during the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, which resulted in the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, as well as during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. During the Beijing Conference, daily sessions titled ‚Sisters of Former Yugoslavia, Unite’ were held at 3 p.m., bringing together women from various groups. These gatherings frequently included representatives from Medica – Zenica, Bosfam – Tuzla, Infoteka, the Centre for Women War Victims and BaBe – Zagreb, the Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence and the Belgrade Women's Lobby – Belgrade, the Women's Health Centre – Pristina, the Union of Women of Macedonia – Skopje, as well as groups from Pula, Ljubljana, and Celje. The *Beijing Declaration* and *Platform for Action* of 1995 served as a precursor to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, which identified women and armed conflict as one of the 12 critical areas for advancing women's human rights. Furthermore, sexual slavery and wartime rape were recognised as crimes against humanity in 2008, largely due to the joint efforts of feminist groups from the (post-)Yugoslav region.

The works of high-risk activism by sociologist Doug McAdam can facilitate a more profound comprehension of the reasons why feminist activists in Serbia, as well as the rest of Yugoslavia, were the primary organisers of active resistance to nationalism and war. This author posits that activist engagement is influenced by various factors, including prior

experience in activism, which is indicative of access to and membership in activist networks (structural location), commitment to the ideology of the movement (attitudinal affinity) and the ability to overcome personal and professional barriers that hinder participation (biographical availability) are crucial. The phenomenon under scrutiny is the result of a combination of structural and individual motivational factors. The focal microstructural element, as posited by the author, pertains to the structural location, signifying the extent of support garnered from existing activist networks and the depth of connections with like-minded individuals. An illuminating example of this dynamic can be observed in the context of feminist anti-war activism during the 1990s. It is imperative to recognise the role of vibrant social movements and established activist networks, including student, feminist, and ecological groups, that had been developing in Yugoslavia since the 1960s, in order to comprehend the context of the Yugoslav wars. Notably, the student protests of 1968 played a pivotal role in fostering civil engagement and galvanizing political participation within the nation. Furthermore, the advent of second-wave feminism during the 1970s, exemplified by the conference “Drug-ca Žena. A Woman’s Question. A New Approach?” in 1978 and the more intensive development of feminist groups during the eighties. At the beginning of the 1990s, a network of women’s groups had already been established, specialising in various types of activities, including education and feminist education, the provision of SOS telephones, the protection of women and girls, and the prevention of domestic violence. During the 1990s, this activist involvement in the Yugoslav territory merged into various forms of resistance, first against the preparation of war, and then against its expansion and escalation. Reflecting on the genesis of the initial SOS telephones, Lepa Mladenović offers the following insight: “The first SOS telephone was created in Zagreb in 1988, the second in Ljubljana in 1989 and in Belgrade in 1990. The SOS telephones had identical names, we did the first briefings together, discussed the rules and principles we are in the same workshops, we summered together at the first women’s camps – the exchanges from which we learned from each other initiated the preciousness of feminist politics of solidarity in times of wars and regime policies of nationalistic exclusion of others.”

Shaped by the legacy of radical feminism and participatory democracy in the decades preceding the wars of the 1990s, resistance to war was articulated as a conscious political choice and as a radical critique of the patriarchal order. For feminist activists, the patriarchal order was at the very root of militant nationalism. For a considerable number

of individuals, opposition to war and nationalism constituted a rational extension of their feminist involvement. Conversely, for others, the fervor of the conflict acted as a catalyst, propelling them to intensify their involvement in resisting the forces driving the war. Feminists addressed issues of war, violence, and the militarisation of society, problematising the rise of consent for warfare imposed by the war regimes and directly confronting it. Feminist activists challenged nationalist narratives that portrayed the ‘people’ as a homogeneous victim, demanding justice for those targeted by nationalism. In contrast to the prevalent glorification of war and the heroisation of violence in the media and by political officials, these activists underscored the profound and far-reaching consequences of war and violence, not only on those who directly experienced it but also on the broader fabric of society. Feminist activism, defined by its steadfast commitment to principles of equality, solidarity, autonomy, and respect for diversity, emerged as a significant alternative to the dominant sentiments of hatred, violence, and intolerance that shaped public discourse in Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

In addition to the prehistory of activist engagement and access to networks, as well as a strong identification with feminist values, the factor that has shaped the action of feminist activism since the seventies in Yugoslavia is its middle-class basis. This phenomenon is exemplified by the case of civil resistance to war regimes, predominantly involving highly educated women from urban centres. It can be attributed, at least in part, to the role that social, cultural, and economic resources play in effective activist organising. These resources, which include at least minimal financial stability, time, social ties, and education, have been shown to be significant factors in the ability of activists to organise themselves for the purpose of effecting social change. A substantial proportion of feminist activists reported that education imparted not only the intellectual tools necessary for critical reflection on social issues, but also the self-assurance and the capacity to act in challenging and hazardous circumstances. Furthermore, the possession of greater autonomy and flexibility in the management of time and personal and professional obligations facilitates enhanced involvement in organised forms of resistance. The middle-class basis is a characteristic shared by the entirety of feminist activism in the Yugoslav region.

The dissolution of the war regime of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 signalled the advent of a period marked, to a certain extent, by endeavours to institute democratic institutions and procedures.

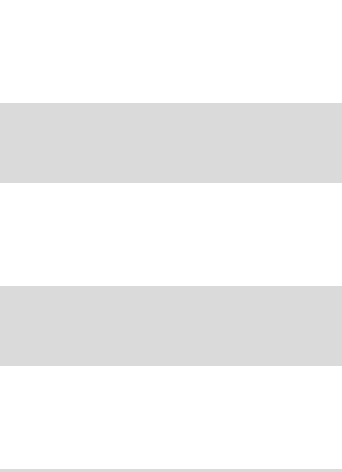
Similar processes were taking place in other former Yugoslav states during the same period, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as countries directly involved in the war. Notably, feminist groups played an instrumental role in shaping the legal framework and institutional mechanisms aimed at enhancing women's status. However, concurrently, there was a notable depoliticisation of the women's movement during this period. Their involvement with the state was primarily focused on the development of formal procedures and institutions of parliamentary democracy, ensuring their establishment and solidification in practice. This approach did not include the intensification of public political participation, the deepening of democracy, or the problematisation of the dominant social paradigm. This period, spanning slightly over a decade, culminated in 2012 with the ascent to power of Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), accompanied by a marked intensification of authoritarianism. The period from 2012 to 2016 witnessed the consolidation of this power into a regime that has been described by some theorists as *competitive authoritarianism* or *spin dictatorship*. This hybrid regime is characterised by the formal existence of democratic institutions that are systematically circumvented or undermined by those in positions of power, thereby limiting the scope for political alternatives. This process draws parallels with the 1990s in these regions, bearing notable similarities with the Milošević regime in terms of its governing mechanisms and characteristics. These include the persistent utilisation of nationalism, the engagement of state resources in efforts to suppress pluralism, the perpetual creation of crises and an atmosphere of state of emergency, the destruction of institutions and party control over state resources and media, pressure on civil society, and the constant growth of poverty and social disparities. However, it is crucial to note the significant differences between the two periods. Primarily, the external legitimisation of the regime by international actors is noteworthy. This legitimisation stems from the regime's promise of stability and, at least in declaratory terms, its aspiration towards membership in the European Union. As Florian Bieber's study shows, this is a characteristic, to a greater or lesser extent, of other Western Balkan countries as well.

In the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, which began nearly 35 years ago, the challenges confronting the feminist movement in Yugoslavia have transcended their local nature. The European Union is confronted with fundamental questions regarding its response to the suffering of civilians in Gaza, the strengthening of nationalism, and the emergence of far-right

political movements within European parliaments. The willingness to overlook the repression of corrupt regimes in exchange for cooperation and resources has also been a subject of debate. These challenges are rooted in the fundamental principles of social and human equality. In Serbia, a nation situated within the capitalist semi-periphery, the legacy of feminist resistance has been integrated into contemporary ecological, civil, and student protests. As in the past, the efficacy of contemporary feminist action is measured by its ability to transcend the confines of gender while maintaining a firm grasp on its fundamental significance. This entails the broader interrogation of social institutions, encompassing questions of justice, and the rejection of relations of domination and exploitation in all their forms and justifications. It is imperative to acknowledge the intricate intertwinement of gender, class, race, nation, and the reluctance to distinguish between injustices. It is only by acknowledging this intricate web of interconnected issues that feminism can genuinely fulfil its role as a transformative political movement, aiming to dismantle the systemic barriers that oppress and exploit individuals based on factors such as gender, class, race, nationality, and other forms of domination and exploitation.

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# Thematic area 2

## **Gender and democratic backsliding**

# Introduction

## Maja Raičević

The fight for women's rights and gender equality in the Western Balkans has been shaped by decades of transformation, resistance, and resilience. Women's rights activists and advocates for gender justice found themselves at a critical juncture where the promises of development and progress are met with persistent challenges, deeply rooted in cultural, societal and political contexts. Significant strides have been made in enacting gender-equality laws, anti-discrimination frameworks, and protections against gender-based violence. However, these reforms often remain on paper due to weak implementation, lack of resources, and insufficient political will. Activists have learned that pushing for laws must be accompanied by robust advocacy for their enforcement and for accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance.

The volatile, conservative and male dominated political environment in the Western Balkans has frequently derailed gender-equality initiatives. Feminist movements have learned to adapt to these challenges by becoming more agile, forging civil society alliances across the region, and advocating for gender-sensitive policies even in times of crisis.

The emphasis on European Union integration of the Western Balkans has led to progress, but donor policies often prioritise institutional change over grassroots empowerment. Sustainability of any reform requires local ownership – building local capacities, fostering women's leadership, and ensuring sustainable, community-driven solutions – these have emerged as crucial lessons for lasting impact. It requires change in donor policies towards more flexible and less demanding funding schemes that will allow long-term core support, that is crucial for sustainability and development of civil society.

Furthermore, development programmes that fail to address the intersecting challenges of ethnicity, economic status, and rural-urban divides have had limited success. Feminist activists have learned to centre intersectionality in their advocacy, recognising that the most vulnerable groups, such as Roma women, women with disabilities, rural women, LBTQI+ and survivors of gender-based violence – must be prioritised in any meaningful push for equality.

The need for solidarity and coalition building is greater than ever. Faced with growing opposition, feminists have learned the value of building alliances with other progressive movements, including LGBTQI+ rights groups, environmental activists, labour unions etc. Solidarity strengthens collective resistance and broadens the base of support. Activists have increasingly recognised the need to engage men as allies in dismantling patriarchal norms and promoting shared responsibility for achieving equality.

In a time when a striking number of populist and extreme-right movements rely on online propaganda, disinformation, digital media manipulation and hate speech to influence public opinion, feminist movements need to counteract misinformation and anti-gender narratives by leveraging effective storytelling, digital media, and grassroots outreach. Transparent communication builds trust and counters regressive ideologies, but requires skills and resources that are often lacking. This also requires strengthening resilience against backlash and creation of safe spaces for women and other vulnerable groups. As activism grows more demanding, ensuring the well-being of feminist advocates has become a priority. This includes fostering mental health, building supportive networks, and creating structures to prevent burnout. Our struggle showed us that temporary victories are not enough. We have shifted focus towards embedding gender equality into institutional practices, ensuring that progress is transformative, less vulnerable to political changes or societal regression.

The following articles reflect on that trajectory of development in the region. The first article *"Is this what we fight for? Development in the Western Balkans"* examines the socio-political landscape of the region. It highlights how decades of post-conflict reconstruction and EU integration efforts have intersected with feminist advocacy. While significant progress has been made in areas like policy and legal reform, the realities of inequality, injustice, corruption, and growing gender-based violence raise pressing questions about the sustainability of these efforts.

The second article *"Holding the Line: How Feminist Struggle Changed"* explores the shifting nature of

feminist activism. The current moment demands a pivot in strategy: from expanding rights to safeguarding against erosion. Across the Western Balkans, feminist movements face new threats, rising nationalism, religious extremism, conservative populism, anti-gender initiatives and shrinking civic spaces that challenge the progress achieved over decades. The article analyses how we can adapt to protect the foundations of equality.

By addressing these interconnected themes, these two articles aim to provide a critical assessment of the feminist movement's journey in the Western Balkans. They reflect on the lessons of the past, interrogate the present, and chart a way forward in the face of growing resistance. The dual tasks of advancing justice and defending progress demand both reflection and action, reminding us that the fight for equality is far from over but remains as vital as ever.

# Is this what we fight for? It always is!

**Svetlana Slapšak**

After the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we (women, others, majority) can no longer afford to ask whether our goals and struggles are coordinated: they have not been coordinated globally, and they have not been even formulated in the Western Balkans, or the whole of the Balkans. Women in the region expected that their rights would be respected, confirmed and stable after the great changes in Europe in the 1990s, especially after the war in Yugoslavia. The country was marked by a specific form of liberalism and distinct from the Soviet bloc. Instead, the changes concerning women's rights and social status – not only in Yugoslavia – fatally regressed, as the politics turned to nationalist and patriarchal conservatism, first and mostly oriented against women. This is a dominant social, cultural and intellectual backlash that occurred together with the so-called "transition" in all countries of the Soviet block, but also in countries generated after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. The backlash hit the legislation, diminishing social security, healthcare of women and children and women's quality of life, reflected in many aspects of everyday life – salaries, presence in media, cultural representation. Intellectuals massively supported the backlash, especially with religious connotations. There was a kind of collective mentality about the new, humiliating position of women, as if women were guilty of everything socialist. Women's rights were systematically diminished, and our Western sisters were coldly watching the process, obviously convinced that the transition to parliamentary

democracy and capitalism would resolve all the problems: they just made everything worse. At least, the responsibility for this failure of feminism is global today, and learning is necessary, as well as redefining global goals. To do this, we must first reflect on our struggles. So let us revise the basics:

The state of women's rights in the Western Balkans varies significantly by country, but several common challenges and progress areas can be observed across the region:

**Legal Framework:** Most Western Balkan countries have established laws to promote gender equality and protect women's rights, including anti-discrimination laws and measures against domestic violence. However, the enforcement of these laws is often inadequate.

**Violence Against Women:** Gender-based violence remains a critical issue. Many women face domestic violence, and cultural stigma can prevent victims from seeking help. While there are legal protections in place, implementing them effectively remains a challenge.

**Political Representation:** Women's representation in politics has improved, with many countries adopting quotas to increase women's participation in decision-making processes. However, women's representation still lags behind men's, particularly at higher levels of government.

**Economic Participation:** Women in the Western Balkans face barriers to economic participation, including wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited access to resources and opportunities. Efforts to promote gender equality in the labor market are ongoing.

**Health Rights:** Access to healthcare, including reproductive health services, can be limited, particularly in rural areas. Women's health issues are sometimes neglected by health policies. Abortion is exposed to extreme repression by the new health systems and religious authorities.

**Cultural Attitudes and Stereotypes:** Traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes continue to shape expectations and limit opportunities for women, affecting their social and economic status. Hate-speech is mostly oriented against women, even if it has other political targets.

**Civil Society Organizations:** Many NGOs and civil society groups are actively working to promote women's rights, provide support services, and advocate for policy changes to improve gender equality.

Overall, while there have been positive developments in legislation and awareness, significant challenges remain in practice. Continued advocacy, improved law enforcement, and support for women's participation in all areas of life are crucial for advancing women's rights in the Western Balkans.

The development of women's rights in Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia has progressed at different rates and faces various challenges. They can be formulated as the general revision of state-regulation concerning women and in most of the cases a complete restoration of women's rights from the socialist period, and in a more subtle and dissipated way, a cultural renaissance of position of women in

all areas of culture, public discourse, media and art representation, including the grassroot actions of re-empowerment of women.

While significant strides have been made in these countries regarding women's rights and gender equality, persistent challenges such as domestic violence, economic disparity, low political representation, and deep-seated cultural attitudes require ongoing attention and action. Collaboration between governments, civil society, and international organizations is crucial to advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality throughout the region.

With small differences between the countries, one common element remains the same: violence against women and femicide, even in most developed Slovenia. Addressing this should be an obvious goal for the whole region and engage a huge number of institutions, state and/or private and NGOs in a regional action.

As a conclusion, in February 2026, the European Commission announced that the European Social Fund can be used by member states to fund safe abortions and improve access, following the *My Voice, My Choice* campaign, which collected over one million signatures across the EU. While not new legislation, this step provides crucial support for marginalized and vulnerable women, including those in remote areas or without financial means. The campaign was launched by the small NGO Institute March 8<sup>th</sup> in Ljubljana, successfully mobilizing citizens and civil society across Europe. The same NGO started the initiative for a referendum on protection of water in Slovenia couple of years ago. Their fight resulted in a referendum, in which the will of the majority prevailed. Water is now protected by the Slovenian constitution.

Choosing a goal for women's fight is easy. We can fight and pin the goal on the way. The real question is what can we do besides fighting!

# Holding the line: how feminist struggle changed – why/how are we now defending what we have?

**Aleksandra Petrić**

Vibrant civil society engagement represents the core value of democratic and pluralistic societies in which women and men citizens actively participate in advocacy for equality, freedoms, human rights, and social justice. One cannot observe democratic and societal changes in the Western Balkans without looking at the contribution of women human rights defenders and feminist voices that were and still are always on the frontlines of defending democracy and fundamental human rights. Over the past thirty years, we have been witnessing the rise of feminist movements in the conflict-affected and post-conflict societies in the region. Even during the conflicts, women's groups and feminist activists were among the key leaders and contributors to anti-war activities, demanding peace, justice, and helping women affected by war and conflict.

The invaluable contribution of feminist activists through peacebuilding and reconciliation is reflected through their work towards re-establishing broken networks and building new ones. Through connecting with each other, women were setting the much needed first response healing oasis through opening the safe spaces to help women affected by war related sexual violence, protesting against the war(s), sharing advocacy strategies, and demanding for women to be included in peace negotiations. During the conflicts, women-led groups emerged throughout the region – Centre for Women War Victims ROSA from Zagreb (Croatia), Women in Black and Autonomous Women's Centre from Belgrade (Serbia), Medica from Zenica and Vive Žene from Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) were among the first. They set up a

path for many more that were formed by the feminist activists across the region to fight for fundamental rights of women, including their lives free from all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination, and raising their voices against political, social, and economic exclusion of women.

These were not easy tasks, as the societies that emerged from conflicts in the region together with ethno-nationalisms also embraced patriarchy as the guiding principle of our quasi-democracies. Political elites and male dominated culture expected women to stay home, provide care for families, and thus contribute to rebuilding societies through their unpaid work, never to question their roles and never to demand their space(s). Women were absent from peace talks and were not expected to be politically active in building democratic institutions. The role and participation of women in political decision making was not perceived as a political priority. Leaders of key political parties that engaged in building new democratic institutions across the region did not see it as a problem that more than a half of the population is excluded, and were reluctant to give up their political power and control. Public narrative was full of statements that 'sex of a person is not relevant, it is up to capacities and qualities' or 'women alone should fight for their place and rights' and many more towards the same end. Capacities and qualities of men are never questioned, even when they fail to show tangible results through their roles as presidents, ministers, mayors, parliamentarians – they are given many second chances. Contrary to that, women who are

elected in parliamentary bodies or appointed as ministers and other top positions rarely succeed in securing a second term, regardless of their efforts and results, as they are simply 'not good enough.' This vicious circle of new democracies continued, and became socially acceptable, so even upon introducing election quotas, women's representation in politics and decision making continues to be low. Another issue is that, due to dominant male leadership within political parties, women are subjected to strong party discipline, and have little support in addressing issues affecting women. Important strategies of women activists in advocating for gender equality were to seek alliances with women journalists, politicians, women in academia, but also women from grassroots communities who were turning to women's rights groups for help – because there was no one else to turn to, and the public institutions and all others were silent and looking the other way. These alliances led to increased public visibility and discussion about the position and rights of women and gender inequalities within society, and opened spaces for changing legislation and policies. Although feminism as an approach in advocating for gender equality in the Western Balkan countries remains widely unpopular to be associated with, outside activists' circles, many women across different sectors actually accepted its principles and engaged in advocacy for improving the rights and position of women.

Different forms of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse of women were widespread and not criminalised. Social care and employment programmes were blind to women and their needs. For women in the Western Balkans, new democracies were not granting freedom from violence at home, in the streets, at their workplaces, and elsewhere. As a response to lack of protection, support, and systemic mechanisms to prevent and combat violence against women, feminist-led women's groups engaged in establishing direct support and assistance to women in need through survivor-oriented legal and psychosocial support, opening SOS helplines, safe houses/shelters, and other supporting mechanisms. The key objective was to ensure that women who experienced violence and whose rights were not protected were heard and believed, to provide them with safety and support that met their needs.

It is due to the endless dedication, bravery, motivation to end the invisibility of violence against women, but also solidarity and advocacy commitments of women activists who are reclaiming democratic spaces that these support services became recognised and supported as necessary and effective forms of supporting women violence survivors.

As a part of the feminist struggle and advocacy of women activists, countries in the Western Balkans recognised domestic violence, marital rape and other forms of sexual violence as criminal offences, and introduced laws and public policies to protect gender equality and prohibit discrimination based on gender and sex. Institutional mechanisms for gender equality were established within legislative and executive governance with the aim of ensuring laws and policies recognise needs and rights of both women and men, and that affirmative measures are introduced in those areas where one of the sexes is less represented or discriminated against. Women, peace, and security action plans were adopted at different levels of governance – to emphasise a few positive changes and signs of democratic progress aimed at providing protection of women's human rights in our societies in transition towards democracy. Although most of these laws and policies remain gender-blind to this day, and in many countries blurred within declarative and gender insensitive language that is actually (and intentionally) hiding real causes and consequences of patriarchal culture that preserves male dominated power positions, their existence represents a powerful tool for gender equality – protection of fundamental rights and freedoms for women too. Their full implementation in practice remains an advocacy priority for women's civil society groups and feminist networks. Women's activists have requested and are contributing to consultations, coordination bodies, and working groups with public institutions to improve the implementation of legislation that protects women from violence and discrimination, because they are aware that being part of these mechanisms would enable them to exert influence on improving systemic response and holding institutions accountable for ensuring women's access to their rights and freedoms.

Women human rights defenders in the Western Balkans have also learned how to use international standards and commitments of their countries to change and reform advocacy approaches, and call for accountability of governments that are failing to protect women from violence and discrimination. Building upon their extensive experience working with women in the grassroots communities, they started to monitor state responses, collect data, and prepare alternative reports to international monitoring bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) once the countries signed and ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

Recommendations of these bodies, and their role in bringing internationally protected human rights and freedoms toward advancing women's rights and gender equality in the Western Balkan region remain powerful feminist advocacy tools.

What women fought for and against during the war and post-conflict period in the Western Balkan countries appears to be of much relevance to our current context and environments. Some actors changed, in terms of individual members of political elites that waged the conflict(s), but geopolitical turmoil and shifting interest spheres continued to shape realities of women, and have a negative impact on the level of protected rights and freedoms. The same issues that feminist activists and women human rights defenders raised in the past are visible in the present context. Ethnic nationalisms that are often masked within populist narratives are used to manipulate public opinion with the same passion as they did when they were starting the bloody horrors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in the region.

Despite commitments of the Western Balkan countries to accede to the European Union, and implement reforms laid down in EU enlargement policy, including political and economic criteria, and align with the EU *acquis*, over the past years we are experiencing a serious rise in anti-democratic actions that are shrinking spaces for advancing gender equality and women's human rights. Threats, intimidation, hate speech, and smear campaigns against women human rights defenders, female journalists, lawyers and politicians have become intensified and frequent, often conducted by political officials, representatives of conservative and traditionalist groups, but also anonymous individuals through social media posts and comments on online articles. As public figures, both men and women in politics face abuse online, but much of the abuse targeting women is based on gender. Digital rights violations are increasing, due to misinformation, targeting vulnerable groups, such as girls, women and LGBTQI+ groups

Attacks against women activists include misogynistic and sexist statements, but also spreading false information, mocking the activists as 'self-proclaimed feminists' who abuse funds received from abroad to spread gender ideologies and spend public resources without really helping anyone. Efficient and concrete national protection systems are either non-existent or incapable of providing adequate protection. Public condemnations of such attacks by the institutional mechanisms for gender equality are rather the

exceptions, especially if these involve high-ranking officials. Such public reaction that normalises hostile environment towards not only women human rights defenders but women in general is undermining both democracy and its values, as well as the accomplished rights and freedoms for women, and provides space and legitimacy for violence and discrimination. It requires from women activists to be visible and present, use their resilience, rethink solidarity and 'pick their battles' to resist regression of protected rights and freedoms.

The actions of governments and political elites aimed at introducing repressive legislation towards restricting work of civil society organisations and controlling freedom of speech and expression in the Western Balkans are also signs of failing democracies.

At the end of November 2024 in Serbia, Members of Parliament (MPs) from the party of Socialist Movement submitted the draft law on a special register of agents of foreign influence. Similar law was proposed, adopted as a draft, and then withdrawn from the parliamentary procedure by the Government of Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2024, only to be revised and returned in the procedure in due course. At the beginning of October 2024, the ruling Coalition for the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG), consisting of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political parties proposed that a law on agents of foreign influence be adopted in Montenegro. These legislative initiatives can severely limit activities of civil society organisations by targeting those that receive foreign funding, and undermine their contribution to democratic reforms and advancing human rights. Under these acts, public advocacy activities of CSOs that include interaction with governmental institutions for the purpose of proposing laws, public policies, and other regulations aimed at the protection of human rights and freedoms could be labelled as a political activity and thus prohibited. Beside financial control that is already in place and enforced by taxation authorities and laws, all countries in the Western Balkan region have a regulatory framework for establishing and work of nonprofit organisations that enables the governments to supervise their work. It remains unclear why further restrictions are needed besides attempts to silence public criticism and restrict the environment for development of civil society that has been widely accepted as one of the core values of democratic societies. For women human rights defenders, fighting these restrictions means preventing further limiting of public space for continuous efforts to bring women closer to

protection from all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination at home and in public life, both through laws and their implementation in practice, including for many socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups of women.

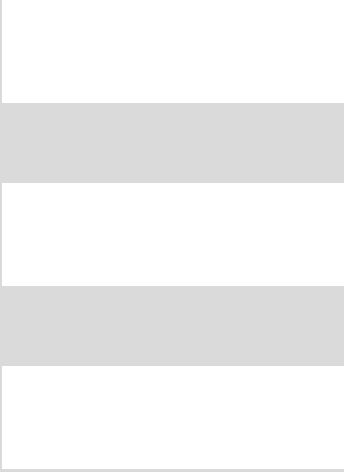
Criminalising defamation or threatening with it can lead not only to restricting freedom of speech, but defamation lawsuits can also be directed at silencing activism of women. An example is the recent case of Besima Borić, member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) from Sarajevo who was accused of defamation after she publicly indicated that it was unacceptable for her party to nominate a person who is accused of domestic violence (on 08 March!), for the position of minister in the Sarajevo Canton. The day after his candidacy, a group of women activists and women and men citizens protested in front of SDP premises in Sarajevo against nominating domestic abusers to public positions. Although Besima Borić won the legal case against a person that was, in the meantime,

appointed as the minister, this case demonstrated how strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are used to silence women. The most important thing was that Besima's feminist struggle gained support from the regional Feminist Antifascist Network (FAMa), as well as hundreds of organisations and women and men human rights defenders across the Western Balkan region. At every court session, Besima Borić was supported by fellow women activists, friends, and women and men citizens who were standing in front of the Sarajevo Municipal Court. Until the final verdict.

Solidarity and support brought women together to oppose the war narratives and demand their role in peace through their participation in building democracies in the Western Balkans. It remains the main power of feminist struggle against narratives and actions aimed at restricting their rights to democratic participation and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

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# Thematic area 3

## **Anti-gender movements**

# Introduction

## Slobodanka Dekić

Anti-gender policies and movements are a topic that, it seems, should have long ago received much more space in feminist theories and politics. At this moment when they are greatly shaping official policies on gender equality, women's and LGBTQI+ rights, it is not easy to devise responses to the challenges they pose. However, surrender is not an option. The texts that are in front of you represent part of that resistance.

One of the key issues in devising resistance to anti-gender policies is understanding their actors. Elona Dhembo's text deals with the structure of anti-gender organisations or movements in the Western Balkans. Dhembo points out that their mobilisation tactics are based on presenting gender and gender equality as issues imposed by the West, with the aim of destroying traditional and family values. The key actors of anti-gender policies are official religious institutions (primarily of Christian origin) and their „satellites“ or non-governmental organisations. As Dhembo emphasizes, these are mainly „pseudo-NGOs“, initiatives that are ad hoc organised, funded with Russian funds, and excellently connected with anti-gender actors at the global level.

Sara Milenkovska deals in her text with another key issue: how to oppose these policies? What strategies can progressive forces use to respond to these challenges? Pointing out the importance of emotions of fear, anxiety, and alienation that anti-gender policies use to mobilise support, Milenkovska rightly concludes that these policies use a lack of social solidarity, offering a „strong family“ and traditional values as a substitute. Therefore, it is extremely important to think about solidarity, which can't be an end in itself, but a process that must be constantly worked on, both within the women's movement and in the wider community.

Of course, contemplating resistance policies is never simple, and there are many open questions that require answers. It seems that the key shortcoming of previous efforts is a lack of self-criticism among the actors behind progressive policies. We are too immersed in a black and white perspective of „us“ (modern and endangered) and „them“ (traditional

and aggressive). The problem is that this perspective reduces visibility and the nuances that are key to understanding anti-gender policies and their global success (Kovats, 2019).

It is clear that anti-gender policies insist on the idea of „imposing“ gender policies from the West (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). But have we done enough to break this perspective, and really prove that similar initiatives existed before 1989 and the beginning of the transition of the Western Balkans to neoliberal hegemony? I don't think we have. So, it's important to work on that. If one of the key mobilisation points of anti-gender movements is resistance to the European Union and Brussels policies, are we doing enough to critically understand and represent them, especially at a time when both the European Union and EU integrations are significantly compromised among the citizens of the Western Balkans?

It seems not. Moreover, we easily fall into the trap of „orientalism“ when talking about the (Western) Balkans, as „fertile ground“ for anti-gender policies. The Balkans are no more fertile or resistant soil than Poland, Italy or the USA. Finally, we must not forget that in no country of the Western Balkans is a political option in power that openly propagates anti-gender policies, like Trump in the USA or „Law and Justice“ (PiS) in Poland.

The truth is that many anti-gender organisations have a „ghosting“ effect and operate in an extremely non-transparent way (Datta, 2018). However, we must not lose sight of the fact that transparency is not always a virtue of progressive actors. Also, donations from Russia are sometimes no less problematic than donations from USAID, especially at this moment. With regards to the countries of the Western Balkans, we still do not have a clear picture when it comes to anti-gender actors. Do we only monitor organisations focused on criticising women's and LGBTQI+ rights, or do we also deal with those that „prevent“ the entry of migrants or protect the environment (which is often linked to the preservation of the health of the nation and family)? Are the actors of anti-gender policies local women's associations, which deal with the protection

of traditional family values? Are anti-gender ideas part of some LGBTQI+ or women organisations (Wielowiejski, 2020)?

It is important to reconsider one of the key critiques that anti-gender policies operate by degrading human rights and equality. It is an open question what has really been achieved by advocating human rights, given that most laws and conventions represent a dead letter on paper. However, it is more important to understand that anti-gender policies do not shy away from human rights but interpret them from a very conservative perspective (Keys, 2014). In this sense, great importance is given to the right to freedom of speech, children's rights, but also the issue of discrimination (Vučković et al., 2020; Dekić, 2024).

Finally, the most important question is why citizens of the Western Balkans (it seems) have more trust in anti-gender actors and policies, than in progressive forces? Explanations that refer to emotions and backwardness should be put aside – they are not sufficient, nor meaningful. Let's formulate the same question in the following way: why do the citizens of the Western Balkans not believe in the rule of law, the benefits of a free market, and the values of liberal democracy? What alternative ideas and policies can we offer that are not short-term solutions of the right, which sound reasonable, but with disastrous effects. We need to devise policies that offer people in these areas hope for a society in which there are no insurmountable hierarchies, and where they won't be treated as cheap labour colonies, always on the rampart of traditional values.

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# Roots, methods, structure of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans

**Elona Dhëmbo**

Anti-gender movements have emerged as a significant challenge to liberal democratic principles across Europe. These movements oppose gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and other progressive policies, framing them as threats to traditional values, national identity, and cultural heritage. Rooted in transnational networks, these movements often draw support from populist politics, religious institutions, and far-right ideologies.

The Western Balkans, a region marked by political instability and socio-economic fragility, has proven to be a fertile ground for the growth of these movements. The interplay between local factors and global anti-gender narratives has amplified their impact, seriously threatening progress made in terms of human rights and democratic governance.

## **Roots of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans**

The Western Balkans – comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – have faced persistent political instability. Political instability and political crises tend to divert attention and resources from addressing gender equality, compounding the challenges faced by women and LGBTQI+ communities.

Fragile governments, strained inter-state relations, and weak rule of law have created an enabling environment for anti-gender movements. According to the Nations in Transit 2024 report, many developments in the Western Balkans have raised concerns for the health of democracy in the region and sustainable development. In 2024, all countries

in the region remained hybrid democracies, with only Kosovo shifting towards a democratising hybrid. Serbia, on the contrary, moved towards a more autocratic democracy, while the other five Western Balkan countries seem to perpetuate their cyclic hybrid versions with little to no improvement.

Economic downturns and rising inequality exacerbate feelings of insecurity and disillusionment, making populist and traditionalist narratives appealing. Anti-gender movements exploit these vulnerabilities by framing gender equality as a foreign imposition undermining societal stability. The region has been fertile ground in this respect too. It was only in 2023 that the inflation rates in the six Western Balkan countries significantly declined. In the previous years, the Western Balkan economies suffered substantially, particularly because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Religious institutions and conservative cultural norms play a central role in shaping public opinion. Religious and cultural conservatism has contributed to fuelling more anti-gender discourses and attitudes in the Western Balkans. In several countries of the region, religious leaders have actively opposed progressive gender policies, reinforcing patriarchal values and traditional family structures. In Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, representatives from the Serbian Orthodox Church have become key actors in legislative processes, from consultations to draft laws. In many cases, religious groups' unfavourable views on gender equality significantly influence society and establish them as actors who promote misogyny and advocate for the preservation and reaffirmation of the subordinate role of women in society. Similarly, an evangelical pastor in Albania, known for his

anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric, has leveraged public events, such as a convention attended by international politicians and court proceedings to oppose same-sex partnerships and spread disinformation about LGBTQI+ rights, framing his actions as a defence of traditional family values.

Transnational influences have played their role too. The Western Balkans are not immune to the influence of global anti-gender networks. Quite on the contrary, financial and ideological support from external actors (including Russia) has encouraged local movements, particularly leveraging religious and ethnic fault lines to undermine EU accession efforts and democratic reforms. For example, civil society in North Macedonia has observed and reported Russian influences in the country, especially in relation to the financing of anti-gender movements.

### **Methods, strategies, and structures of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans**

Anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans seem to employ a range of methods and strategies to advance their agenda and solidify their influence. They include strategic framing, grassroots mobilisation, media engagement, political alliances, and legal interventions, all of which are reinforced by robust organisational structures.

Strategic framing is central to the approach of the anti-gender movement, as they craft narratives that resonate with local sensibilities and anxieties. These narratives often emphasise the defence of traditional values, presenting gender equality initiatives as threats to family structures, cultural heritage, and national identity. Another recurring theme is victimhood, where anti-gender advocates position themselves as protectors of the majority against an elite promoting harmful ideologies. For instance, Albania's Coalition for Family and Life, led by an Evangelical pastor, organised a convention in 2023 opposing changes to the Family Code, framing it as a defence of "God, family, and nation."

Grassroots mobilisation plays a pivotal role in their strategy. Protests, petitions, and community events are regularly organised to galvanise public support. Media engagement serves as another powerful strategy, with traditional and social media platforms used to spread disinformation and fear-based narratives. In North Macedonia, for instance, anti-gender groups successfully influenced public opinion against comprehensive sexuality education, shaping legislative discussions and policy outcomes.

There, women's civil society organisations (WCSOs) have raised concerns about the media's portrayal of gender-based violence (GBV), arguing that biased reporting fosters misogyny and perpetuates the mistreatment of women. One notable example is Bishop Jakov Stobiski, representing the Orthodox Church, who utilised media platforms to oppose the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality and the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education – two longstanding advocacy efforts of WCSOs. Religious organisations across the Western Balkans enjoy significant media representation and are often perceived as integral to decision-making processes. Similarly, figures such as Serbia's Patriarch Porfirije leverage extensive media coverage to challenge gender-sensitive reforms, further marginalising voices that champion equality and human rights.

Political alliances further amplify the reach and impact of anti-gender movements. Collaborations with populist and nationalist parties integrate anti-gender rhetoric into broader political agendas. In Serbia, conservative parties have sought to undermine gender-sensitive legislation, embedding anti-gender narratives within mainstream discourse. Finally, legal and policy interventions are strategically used to hinder progressive reforms. Anti-gender movements frequently challenge existing laws and advocate for regressive changes. For example, right-wing parties in Serbia attempted to revoke provisions mandating gender-sensitive language introduced by the 2021 Law on Gender Equality.

The organisational structures of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans are multifaceted, reflecting their complex methods and strategies. Their structures include religious institutions, pseudo-NGOs, and transnational networks. Religious bodies, particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church, play a central role, shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. Pseudo-NGOs act as platforms for anti-gender rhetoric, often masquerading as grassroots initiatives to gain public trust and legitimacy. Transnational networks, including Russian entities, provide financial and strategic support, exploiting the region's vulnerabilities and leveraging its religious and ethnic fault lines. Consequently, key actors in these movements include prominent religious leaders who vocally oppose progressive reforms. Conservative and far-right political parties actively integrate anti-gender agendas into their platforms, influencing legislative processes. Media outlets, often biased in their coverage, further reinforce anti-gender narratives, sidelining advocates for gender equality.

## Impacts on gender equality and democracy

Anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans, as elsewhere, pose significant threats to the advancement of human rights and democratic principles. By systematically undermining the foundational tenets of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, these movements erode progress achieved in fostering inclusivity and social justice. Their influence, compounded by political and economic instability, exacerbates the erosion of democratic norms, further destabilising governance structures. Vulnerable groups, particularly women and LGBTQI+ communities, bear the burden of this backlash,

facing heightened discrimination, social exclusion, and, in many cases, direct acts of violence, which have been reported to be on the rise throughout the region (be it against women, LGBTQI+ individuals, or human rights defenders).

The rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans reflects broader crises within liberal democracies. Addressing these movements requires a holistic approach that combines local, regional, and global efforts. By strengthening democratic institutions and empowering civil society, the region can resist regressive forces and uphold human rights and gender equality.

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# Defending equality in the Western Balkans: how to build pluralistic society from patriarchy

**Sara Milenkovska**

It would be reductive to attempt to summarise the current state of feminist movements and organisations in the Western Balkans from a single perspective, especially when trying to understand the potential for resistance. However, one thing remains certain amid the ongoing global uncertainty: even as spaces for action and advocacy shrink in the Balkans, the enduring strength of solidarity and hope ensures that these spaces will persist and prevail.

In this article, I will explore the potential of reclaiming those spaces concerning how feminist organisations and human rights defenders have moved from fighting for equality to defending equality. In a reality where institutions consistently fail to address systemic issues related to gender equality – such as economic disparity and gender-based violence – feminist and women's rights organisations have become the central pillars of resistance. Yet, with the simultaneous rise of anti-gender and anti-rights movements, the urgency of the situation, long highlighted by activists, is more pressing than ever.

What is needed now are strategies for resistance that go beyond rhetoric, focusing on concrete measures and adopting a transnational approach. However, it is crucial to recognise that anti-gender movements are not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation of long-standing political efforts to undermine gender equality. This enduring opposition has culminated in institutional backsliding, reinforcing patriarchal structures and threatening hard-won progress.

To counter these forces, we must acknowledge the interconnected nature of these struggles and respond with equally sustained and intersectional resistance.

The current democratic backsliding has had profound implications for gender equality, women's rights, and the broader civic space, effectively silencing critical and dissenting voices. The challenges in the Western Balkans exemplify broader trends undermining gender equality and women's rights, including the rise of ethnonationalism, the spread of gendered disinformation, and pervasive political instability. The Western Balkans are currently categorised as hybrid or transitional regimes, characterised by fragile democratic institutions, restricted political rights, and constrained civil liberties. Over the past decade, the region has witnessed a significant democratic regression, with countries such as Serbia and Montenegro transitioning from semi-consolidated democracies in 2018 to exhibiting more authoritarian tendencies by 2023. The erosion of democratic aspirations has not only curtailed opportunities for advocacy and human rights work but has also disproportionately affected women and marginalised groups, who are often at the forefront of these struggles. For the case in North Macedonia, activists are no longer talking about the lost potential transformation of the Law on equal opportunities for Men and Women to the Law on Gender Equality, but rather keeping the laws from changing which include the word gender, gender equality<sup>7</sup>, gender identity, which shows the censorship – and erosion of legal protection.

Additionally, the erosion of civic space is exacerbated by the weaponisation of disinformation. Anti-gender movements leverage disinformation campaigns to distort public perceptions, claiming that gender equality policies impose harmful ideologies or

7 In the draft laws on primary and secondary education, the protected grounds from discrimination – “gender,” “gender identity,” and “sexual orientation” – have been removed, contrary to the legal hierarchy.

erode cultural values. Anti-gender mobilisations in Southeast Europe disproportionately target women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and ethnic minorities – groups that already encounter systemic barriers to meaningful participation in political, social, and economic life. Feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations, in particular, face not only stigmatisation but also frequent physical and digital threats, including harassment and surveillance. These attacks not only jeopardise their safety but also weaken their capacity to advocate effectively, further entrenching exclusion and discouraging civic participation among marginalised communities. The important thing to note is that these well-pre-calculated attacks against gender equality must be understood as part of a broader attempt to roll back rights and dismantle democratic safeguards. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) identifies equality and non-discrimination as core principles of democracy. However, anti-gender campaigns exploit societal divisions to erode these principles, challenging the very foundations of an inclusive and participatory democracy. Despite international commitments to gender equality and democratic governance, domestic practices frequently contradict these promises, further exacerbating the region's democratic decline. This dissonance underscores the urgent need for a reinvigorated focus on safeguarding civic spaces and advancing the rights of women and marginalised communities in the face of growing authoritarianism.

### **How do we fight for equality, while we fight for survival?**

In the early years of what is now understood as the anti-gender movement, particularly in 2021 in North Macedonia, activists came together to strategise on two fronts: first, to strengthen existing feminist and women's organisations, and second, to develop resilient approaches to resist these regressive forces. While the challenges seemed insurmountable, there was also a shared sense of hope and solidarity. We acknowledged that while we might not yet know the precise strategies for resistance, the collective effort would guide us forward.

That same year, I began my studies in London, temporarily stepping away from the pressing realities of my home country. However, the knowledge that I would return to a political and social landscape

increasingly shaped by anti-gender movements weighed heavily on me. My experiences – both as part of various movements and through witnessing the profound power of collective action – inspired me to focus my academic thesis on *collective care* as a transformative tool for reimagining feminist futures.

This feminist intervention was never just about my perspective; it was a synthesis of transnational struggles, ideas, and solidarity against oppressive systems, and what can serve my community as a manual in practising resistance. It drew upon feminist methods such as knowledge-sharing, mentorship, commoning<sup>8</sup>, and mutual aid – all loosely encompassed within the concept of collective care. However, it was only upon my return to the Balkans, where I presented my work at the Queer Studies Conference in Athens 2022, that I realised something crucial. Through candid discussions with fellow activists and feminist organisers, I came to understand that resistance to anti-gender movements – and the broader fight for liberation – is an unfinished and ongoing project.

### **Feminist responses: reflection and resistance**

Reimagining a future free from oppression will never be a final, static achievement; it is a continual process that demands sustained effort. This realisation brought a deeper personal growth and an understanding of the critical need for self-care within the collective care framework. As feminists, we often focus on the collective, and rightly so, but as Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed<sup>9</sup>, and countless other feminist thinkers remind us, self-care is not a luxury. It is a political act, one that sustains both individuals and movements. Collective care practices must serve not only our communities but also ourselves, enabling resilience in the face of relentless challenges.

One of the most vital lessons from my journey has been the importance of sharing feminist organisations' experiences in confronting anti-gender movements. This sharing not only fosters spaces for self-reflection and constructive criticism but also highlights the pressing need for intergenerational collaboration and solidarity. Without such collaboration, the effectiveness of feminist organisations in strategising and sustaining resistance is diminished. Vulnerability, often perceived as

8 “Silvia and George’s concept of commoning emphasizes that commons exist through communing, not as mere products or aims, but as the organization of relations inherent to commoning itself. As they argue, the will and need to common are insufficient for creating a practice of commoning. It requires more than a collection of individual needs and wills; it necessitates a common as well as relations and a practice of commoning – a transindividual process irreducible to the subject, aim, or product.” Barbagallo, C., Beuret, N. and Harvie, D., 2019. *Commoning with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici*. University of Chicago Press.

9 Selfcare as Warfare | [feministkilljoys.com](https://feministkilljoys.com)

a weakness, must instead be embraced as an opportunity to admit that we do not always have the perfect strategies, resources, or answers. This discomfort, paired with the urgency of action, creates a space for critical reflection and growth.

As Judith Butler reminded us, using Bernice Johnson Reagon's words: *"If you're in a coalition and you're comfortable, you know it's not a broad enough coalition"* – which brings me to the point of how processes of collective care can lead to coalition building and community organisation. Anti-gender politics capitalize on people's feelings of fear, anxiety, and disconnection, exploiting the widespread sense of alienation from community and belonging. By offering a false sense of unity through opposition to a perceived „threat," these movements create the illusion that citizens are regaining control. However, this narrative is deeply misleading, as it fosters division and fuels hatred rather than addressing the root causes of societal discontent.

That is why reclaiming spaces, mutual aid, and building transnational solidarity are part of a larger, ongoing process that allows us to critically assess the shortcomings of the feminist movement while forging a path forward. The Balkan feminist movement(s) and organisations, in particular, must balance reflection with action, recognising that progress is not linear but iterative.

Another critical lesson lies in the tension between international support and the potential of transnational feminist solidarity within the Balkans. Resilience and survival are not just ideals; they require resources, time, labour and safety. Yet, the global trend of deprioritising gender equality – whether in EU integration processes, democratisation efforts, or broader international agendas – threatens long-term feminist progress. The reluctance of international organisations to stand firm when attacked for supporting gender equality initiatives further exacerbates the issue. By compromising current gains, these institutions contribute to a landscape where feminist organisations are stigmatised, underfunded, and associated with „controversial" gender-related issues – particularly in countries dominated by neo-conservative forces.

In this context, sustaining feminist movements in the Western Balkans demands not only internal reflection but also a call for international actors to demonstrate unwavering solidarity. The fight for gender equality is not just a domestic struggle; it is a global one, requiring boldness, collaboration and an unyielding commitment to justice.

## How to move beyond

The fight for equality in the Western Balkans is no longer about breaking new ground but defending the progress painstakingly achieved. It requires resilience, resources, and transnational solidarity to counter the rising tide of anti-gender forces. Feminist organisations are not just resisting oppression – they are reimagining futures rooted in care, collaboration, and justice. This vision demands sustained effort and bold action, reminding us that the road to equality is neither linear nor easy, but undeniably necessary.

To sustain feminist movements, both local and global strategies must converge. Internally, movements must critically evaluate their approaches, fostering intergenerational, multisectoral, and intersectional co-creation and collaboration while embracing vulnerability as a strength. Externally, international actors must demonstrate consistent solidarity, recognising that the fight for gender equality is not confined to national borders but is a transnational struggle demanding unwavering commitment through actions, not words.

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# Conclusion: reviving the core of feminism

**Adriana Zaharijević**

The beginning of 2025 marked a major turn in world politics. Trump came into power for the second time, much stronger and with a vision. Doing politics like business, but more 'terrific' (and terrifying), with an ideology laid down in the ominous Project 2025,<sup>10</sup> Trump's administration can be described as turning neoliberalism into techno-feudalism, MAGA broligarchy and state capture, based on deprivation of the rights that feminists were championing for decades and an unimaginably inhuman treatment of immigrants. The world feels Trump's administration's presence on all sides, not least in the removal of aid and cutting down funds even in its remotest parts. The Western Balkans are no exception to this cruel rule.

But the world did not move in particularly favourable directions prior to that either. The figures such as Putin in the northeast, Modi and Erdogan in the southeast, Milei in the southwest, and various ultra-right parties in Europe (those in power, as in Hungary and Italy, or those threatening to ascend to it, as in Germany and France), create a completely new political landscape. The role of women in this new political constellation, especially in Europe – think of Le Pen, Meloni and Weidel – raises many questions. Anti-immigration sentiments, replacement theories, revisionist approach to history and values, and clamping down of social rights, merge with the habitual racism, rampant sexism and raging anti-gender mobilisations. The younger generations that only a few years ago opted politically for global environmentalist policies, have given way to the newer youth afraid of the internal enemies and external invaders.

All of this happens on the background of war: more than three years of Russian war against Ukraine, Israel's devastating raid of Gaza, enhanced, in the meantime, together with the scattered wars on the African continent, in Sudan and Congo, and a short, but menacing conflict between India and Pakistan. The wars began to change the map of the NATO countries, or the prospective maps of the EU countries. The EU accession began to be talked about anew, however inconclusively, this being of particular importance in the Western Balkans. More significantly, and as a response both to Putin's enduring invasion and to Trump's reluctance to continue to employ NATO in Europe's defense, the new militarisation of the continent began. Coupled with the already existing narratives on insecurity that feed on the tendency of social securitisation and fears of immigration, militarization is rarely problematised and almost welcomed.

In such a climate, social polarisation thrives. We find it everywhere, on all continents and in all countries, from Canada to North Macedonia. The two major wars have a particular role in this. Internally, the EU underwent a new division in the West and the East, mainly due to its different contiguity to Russia. Yet, Europe was united in its support – moral and in armament – for Ukraine, which continued – with much less fervour – following Trump's return to power. In the current geopolitical context, many governments have demonstrated strong support for Israel, with some notable exceptions. At the same time, official positions have not always aligned with the views and moral concerns expressed by segments of their citizens. These conflicts have also coincided

<sup>10</sup> *Project 2025*, the product of Heritage Foundation, a prominent right-wing think tank, is a 900-page policy document with four major goals: to restore the family as the centrepiece of American life; to dismantle the 'administrative state' (deep state); to defend the nation's sovereignty and borders, and secure God-given individual rights to live freely. See Mike Wendling, *Project 2025: The right-wing wish list for Trump's second term*, *BBC* (14 February 2025).

with increasing pressures on public debate, where critical perspectives are sometimes marginalized. In certain contexts, even the use of specific terms, such as “occupation” or “genocide”, has become contentious, contributing to a climate in which open discussion may carry professional or social risks. In such conditions, moral panic thrives, and rejection of ‘wokeism’ becomes more palatable than rejection of war, curbing of freedoms and social justice.

The war in Ukraine signalled the end of the post-national and post-heroic era, as Jürgen Habermas envisioned Europe and the world after the breakup of the bipolar global order. The war against Gazans inaugurated the farewell from international justice as well as from the post-Second World War social contract, however flawed it was. All of a sudden, there is nationalism everywhere – now appearing under different names (ultra-, far-right, ultra-conservatism etc.) – in the most and the least democratic countries of the world. Democracy became a weak currency – and the key political players want to either do away with it, or rename and redefine it: Orban-style illiberal democracy has been transported to all corners of Europe. Anti-gender policies are not only targeting particular individuals whose rights are put into question: they are transforming the social fabric, reversing the achievements and turning us back into ‘the bright past’ when everyone knew what *his* or *her* place in the order of the world had been.

In the West, the rights feminists fought for in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were seen as an augmentation of the existing liberal parliamentary democratic system, presumably the best configuration for the protection of the rights of individuals. The augmentation was understood as widening access to constitutionally guaranteed rights for all, where this access in practice was not enjoyed by everyone in an equal manner. However, in the peripheral countries aspiring to join this system – which refers to the post-socialist Europe in particular – those rights were clearly understood as part and parcel of the implementation of the Western model. It seemed that the recipe was there only to be put into effect. So, in the East, these rights did not come as an addendum, but were presented as something age-old and growing out of the Western model of democracy, supposedly profoundly different from what was known in socialism. Gender equality, for example, began to look entirely new and completely at odds with how it functioned in the previous decades. Such ‘feminism by design’, as Kristen Ghodsee framed it, was troublesome for some post-socialist feminists long before the old ‘Eastern bloc’ began to turn away from the perceived corrupt and decadent Western model of democracy itself. Rejection of ‘the system’ in what used to be Eastern Europe, together with the

distrust towards the EU bureaucracy, gave rise to the populist construction of foreign elites, fortification of nationalist discourses and religious revival, which proved particularly hostile to gender equality: we should think of LGBT-free zones in Poland, constitutional banning of the word gender in Bulgaria, the expulsion of gender studies in Hungary, and the *sexo-Marxist* slur in Romania.

While in the West, anti-gender mobilisations are often portrayed as a rollback instigated by minoritarian regressive forces or as an aberration, in the East it is obvious that the attack on gender equality is an attack on the core of the Western model itself. Yet, with the most recent developments, primarily in the US, it seems that this is far from a peculiarly Eastern issue. The ‘system’ is attacked on all sides and from within.

As mentioned, the wars are the background on which this scene is taking place. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the staunch position against war, constitutive of the feminist theory and practice worldwide, has been gravely compromised. The Western feminists almost entirely withdrew from voicing the anti-militarist values, allowing for war to become an unavoidable option. Those who did not, such as Alice Schwarzer, found themselves in troubling coalitions that are by no means feminist. The Eastern European feminists showed, not rarely, their support for Ukraine, by applauding Ukrainian patriotism and women in arms. This baffling situation which decried pacifism as treason almost immediately, led to the endorsement of war as an acceptable solution – even for feminists. Thus, even those who for decades fought most fiercely against war in principle, became open to militarisation. This position was only exacerbated in relation to Hamas’s attack on Israel and the Israeli retribution, that defied the very meaning of what self-defense might be.

What is to be done seems to be a question to which no comprehensive list of answers may be provided. Nationalism, anti-democratic and anti-gender mobilisations work hand in hand in an ever more volatile world where international justice and transnational politics have lost much of their grounding. All of these are in some relation to the unbridled capitalism, which today appears as imperialist yet again. It is unclear if and to what extent we can make use of the historical examples (what we are living through today is well beyond comparison with the European 1930s, which were often evoked in the previous years to emphasise how grave things really are), and if certain concepts – such as fascism – can be applied to help us make more sense of where we stand. The series of crises which, although of different origin, are in a symbiotic relation, shows that

some known solutions are not close at hand.<sup>11</sup> Neither in the world at large, nor in the Western Balkans. The EU enlargement process, which for a long time seemed to us to be a magical solution to all our ills, today does not sound as plausible as before.

On a global level, feminist movements and their allies need to unconditionally revive the struggle for international justice and anti-militarism, being the one sure voice that was coherently fighting for this cause. What our current situation makes plain again is that the feminist fight cannot be separated from an anti-imperialist struggle which is now clearly not only a struggle for human rights, but for the future of the planet as such.

Perhaps the only asset for us in the Western Balkans is that we know a lot about the troubles besetting the world at this moment. This sad fact can now be **used as a tool in dealing with the dire present**. The Yugoslav wars are still very much felt in the region, even if to different degrees and with varying intensity. Having a pariah role in Europe and the world at the time when the world seemed more cosmopolitan, democratic and committed to equality, made us aware of the need to be very creative in devising our own approaches to forging a more habitable life. The stabilitocracies fostered on our soil, with plenty of help from the EU, were never truly democratic, and we have learned to work in regimes that are democratic in name only. We also know what nationalism is – and what gigantic effects it can have in war and in its aftermath. Ultimately, we never witnessed a period of prosperity for gender equality: we have long fought for basic rights in the climate of hyper-repatriarchalisation and homophobia.

In a moment when EU enlargement seems neither easily reachable nor conducive to the ready-made solutions, it is of ultimate importance to insist that we need and desire emancipation because we need and desire it, not because we want to harmonise legislation or because this is a part of our becoming more European. Anti-democratic, nationalist and anti-gender forces, growing on the post-Yugoslav soil for decades, consistently try to convince us that emancipation is a foreign import, alien to our habits and values. It is critical to own emancipation as something we want as part of our future, regardless of the larger constellation to which we may or may not belong. Also, to see it as part of our various pasts, not least the most recent, anti-militarist one.<sup>12</sup>

We, the feminists in the Western Balkans, therefore have one important advantage: **we cannot be surprised**. While others may be arrested in the moment, stunned by the breakup of the system that to them seemed benevolent and indestructible, we have a ready knowledge of how one functions with very few resources, in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful coalition of those who do not care for values we care for, and creativity in making something out of nothing. The war and nationalism that we experienced in our lifetime taught us that nothing good comes from any of these: the afterlife of wars is *not* a peaceful prosperity, nationalism does not melt away once the open hostilities are over, militarisation does not stop with the cessation of wars, and the fight against equality, integral to nationalism, affects all dimensions of life. In this moment, when so much is at stake, this knowledge may prove useful not only in dealing with it, but also in reviving the very core of feminism.

11 Jerker Edström, Alan Greig, and Chloe Skinner, Patriarchal (Dis)orders: Backlash as Crisis Management, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 49:2 (2024), 277–309.

12 Olenka Gu, „Nobody could prepare you for the war”: Interview with Croatian Feminist Biljana Kašić, Commons (1 February 2024), <https://commons.com.ua/en/intervyu-z-horvatskoyu-feministkoyu-bilyanoyu-kashich>



**For all women's rights,  
in every corner of the world.**