Co-Creating Inclusive Intersectional Democratic Spaces Across Europe (CCINDLE)

D2.5 – Report on anti-gender mobilizations' interventions in knowledge production

[WP2 – Anti-Gender challenges to democracy]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The report offers **an overview of the interventions into knowledge production** that have been identified and examined as part of anti-gender campaigns in seven countries (Belgium, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden) and the EU.
- These interventions have been initiated by anti-gender actors, a group which includes representatives of religious institutions, civil society organizations, political parties as well as academics, public intellectuals, writers, or influencers active mostly in the online sphere. Together they form **an ideological milieu and a global network**, promoting socially conservative/reactionary viewpoints on a variety of topics related to gender, equality, the rights of minoritized and racialized groups, as well as on democracy. These actors align in their opposition to progressive ideas, e.g. feminism, anti-racism, individual and minority rights, pluralism and multiculturalism; and they adhere to socially exclusionary views, focusing on the protection of the 'family' and the 'nation', and on reestablishing or strengthening rigid gender, sexual and racial hierarchies.
- Anti-gender politics in knowledge production include both **repressive initiatives and productive ones.** The former category includes: attacks on gender studies or critical race studies; attempts to close down or cut funding for such programs; attacks on individual scholars working on gender and/or race issues and delegitimization of concepts, such as gender, gender-based violence or systemic racism. Productive initiatives include: publishing books, articles and studies promoting social conservatism and denying the existence of gender and race inequalities; organizing public debates and conferences promoting exclusionary views; building new institutions of higher learning; creating and promoting socially conservative knowledge elites.
- In the EU and in all 7 countries in the CCINDLE project, researchers observed **negative effects of anti-gender initiatives on academic freedom and freedom of expression**. These effects include: undermining the meaning of concepts related to human rights and gender equality; shrinking the space for critical inquiry in both academic and non-academic settings; increasing violence against scholars, activists, and experts; as well as promoting distrust of experts, institutions, and democracy in general. Countries differ mainly in the intensity and specificity of interventions, that is, in **the degree of saturation** of educational institutions and the public sphere with anti-gender discourses and practices.
- There are direct **links between anti-gender politics of knowledge production and democratic decline**: 1) the anti-gender initiatives effectively limit the space for public debate and silence dissenting voices by violent attacks or by administrative decisions. 2) they produce counter-science and pseudo-science as strong forms of misinformation, which results in growing polarization and opens a pathway to violence. 3) strategies aimed at blurring or reversing the meaning of key concepts and terms, such as equality and human rights, lead to epistemic chaos. Such a state of disorder in knowledge and belief systems incites skepticism, mistrust, or even the breakdown of communication between individuals or groups with differing perspectives (polarization). Thus, anti-gender interventions should be seen as part of a broader anti-democratic project of undermining trust in experts, academics, intellectuals, state institutions and educational systems.
- Undermining scientific knowledge selectively as false leads to challenging claims and policy solutions based on them as invalid or illegitimate, **disrupts democratic deliberation** at large.

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1. Introduction

The aim of WP2 is to map out the relationship between the campaigns opposing gender equality, LGBTQ and minority rights, and democratic erosion. A growing literature is analyzing anti-gender politics, its ideological roots of this trend, country-specific manifestations, international connections and the links between anti-gender campaigns and democratic decline (Graff & Korolczuk 2021; Krizsán & Roggeband 2019; Kantola & Lombardo 2021; Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Pető 2020; Verloo 2018). Current scholarship shows that anti-gender politics challenges democratic ideals, norms and institutions while promoting exclusionary visions of societies, rooted in patriarchal, racist and nativist ideologies.

WP2's analysis focuses on anti-gender actors' discourses and practices in specific contexts under study, to deepen our understanding of how this trend contributes to democratic erosion. Specifically, we analyze two dimensions of anti-gender campaigns which allow to examine the ways in which anti-gender campaigns undermine democracy. **These two dimensions are: a) knowledge production, and b) violence, both of which are crucial to democracy.** Democracy as an ideal is based on free, equal, critically informed and violence-free participation in political practices and public debates. This report on the politics of knowledge as part of anti-gender campaigns, shows how anti-gender actors challenge and attack existing knowledge on gender, ethnicity and race; how they undermine legitimacy of existing educational institutions and programs; how they produce their own counter-science and pseudo-science on issues related to gender, reproduction, family and identity; how exclusionary positions on sexuality and race are part of this; and how these actions contribute to epistemic chaos, changing and twisting the meaning of widely used terms, especially those related to human rights, hindering democratic processes severely as a result.

To zoom in on the issues related to **knowledge production in the context of anti-gender campaigns** in the country reports we focused on:

- efforts to curtail academic freedom and specifically gender studies, critical race theory, climate change, as well other relevant disciplines,
- efforts to undermine gender knowledge and expertise in the post truth context, including selective closure of access to decision-making spaces for critical/feminist knowledge and creating alternative knowledge, knowledge platforms and institutions, which put forward socially conservative, patriarchal values and norms,
- activities undertaken by anti-gender actors at universities, in think tanks, including attacking feminist scholars, challenging the validity of / banning gender studies / critical race theory, withdrawing financial support, changing regulations concerning professional advancement, changing curricula, producing knowledge and expertise.

2. Methodological considerations – scope

This report is based on the **following sources**, collected by the country teams, including the EU (names of authors are included in contributors list):

- WP2 state of the art reports (with 2 rounds of additional updates),
- WP3 interviews with feminist social movements actors (currently under analysis),
- WP4 interviews with feminist institutional actors (currently under analysis),
- Additional analysis of materials selected by country researchers (including the EU context), such as manifestoes, media coverage, or interviews of particular importance for a country (internal reports).

A series of state-of-the-arts CCINDLE reports (see our D2.3 – Series of state of the art reports -- version 3) were prepared for each country under study to cover the most relevant articles, books, reports,

research materials with theoretical/conceptual ambitions that were available in local language and in English about specific countries/EU. In cases where there was very little academic research on the topic, the aim was to include also reports produced by civil society groups, or texts summarizing key debates in mainstream media or social media platforms. The timeframe was 2010-2024, as existing research shows that the first instances of anti-gender campaigns emerged around 2010-2012 (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017).

In total, 218 texts were analysed, mostly articles in peer reviewed journals and chapters in edited volumes. Most texts included in CCINDLE reports were published between 2020 and 2023, and in most countries at least 5 new texts appeared during 2024, attesting to the still growing scholarly interest and suggesting that these campaigns are very much present in the European context. Moreover, most of the texts were published in English (168), which calls for a further analysis of how knowledge on anti-gender campaigns circulates in national and transnational contexts. This also points to a need to increase availability of knowledge produced in academia to wider audiences on the national level. In the first round of state of the art reports, each country included an introductory part summarizing who are the main anti-gender actors in their respective contexts and what are the key campaigns and trends in the country, based on literature review and researchers' expert knowledge. In most cases, this part remained the same as no new actors or significant events emerged in the second round. A third round of updates will be delivered by the end of 2024. We have used these reports to tease out anti-gender interventions in knowledge production.

The limitations of our approach are that existing literature and the elements of the politics of knowledge mentioned in interviews focus mostly on education systems and on academic research institutions, as well as on knowledge production by civil society and state related actors. Very rarely did our literature review catch systemic analyses of shifts in the media landscape, actions and discourses linked to public knowledge institutions such as museums, art galleries and the publishing industry, or state institutions tasked with producing and disseminating data on various social issues. In view of the high probability that dynamics can be expected to be quite similar in these areas, this points to a need for further research. The limitations of the overview are also reflecting disciplinary boundaries: while we focus on sociology, political science and gender studies, there may be some analysis focusing on contemporary media or arts, which touch upon this subject but do not employ the notion of anti-gender politics. Thus, the current analysis should be seen as an initial step in the analysis of the complex ways in which knowledge and expertise is and can be produced, legitimized, disseminated and used by political actors. It should also be seen as pushing further the efforts to make sense of anti-gender interventions in the field of knowledge production, which scholars have begun to analyze in various country contexts and internationally (e.g. Ergas et al 2022, Korolczuk 2020, Martinsson & Mulinari 2022, Paternotte 2019, Paternotte & Verloo 2021, Pető 2023, Zimniak-Hałajko 2021, Várszegi 2023, Verloo 2018).

As this report is an **explorative analysis,** we are interested foremost here in *what* is happening, rather than what is happening *where*. We have analysed the patterns we find in the CCINDLE reports of the country/EU teams using two dimensions: one is whether interventions that are part of anti-gender campaigns are **repressive or productive**. By repressive initiatives, we mean actions that challenge, disrupt, and delegitimize critical knowledge and feminist expertise both in academia and in the broader society, including the political sphere. This is the *anti p*art of anti-gender politics, which focuses on opposing feminist interpretations of social order, rejects the validity of existing data and knowledge regarding existing discrimination and inequality, and focuses on limiting social impact of critical knowledge. Productive initiatives in turn are oriented towards replacing feminist knowledge and expertise with ultraconservative ones. Thus, these efforts focus on producing, promoting and levering knowledge and expertise that advance the exclusionary ideological project, rooted in patriarchal, racist

and nativist ideologies. Using these two distinct categories allows us to show that anti-gender politics is not just a form of backlash against the advances of feminism and gender equality policies, but also an ideological and political project in its own right.

The second dimension concerns the form that these interventions take, the type of resources they employ and the level at which they operate (e.g. individuals vs groups). Thus, we differentiated between initiatives that are primarily **discursive, institutional, focused on silencing or amplifying individual voices** of knowledge producers and experts; and employing **financial and/or organizational mechanisms.** While these categories partly overlap in practice (e.g., anti-gender campaigns may use discursive and institutional mechanisms to silence certain scholars or amplify the voice of others), the division helps us to propose an initial typology of interventions, some of which are present in all the contexts we studied, and some of which are only visible in countries where anti-gender actors have significant political power (e.g., the closure of gender studies in Hungary). Our explorative analysis will then be used to reflect on and discuss the implications these interventions have and can have for the quality of democracy.

3. Types of interventions in knowledge production and dissemination

The table below summarizes the patterns in our findings using two dimensions: one is whether interventions that are part of anti-gender campaigns are repressive or productive, and a second whether the interventions are discursive, institutional, material or targeting individuals. Moreover, we have included different forms of interventions in the field of knowledge production. They have been grouped into 5 categories: **discursive**, **institutional, silencing or amplifying individual voices** of knowledge producers; and concerning **financial** and **organizational mechanisms**. Discursive interventions are focused on challenging or promoting specific truths, terms, theoretical propositions and interpretations of reality through a variety of means and actors, both individuals and groups. Institutional interventions include initiatives which are either aimed at undermining legitimacy and authority of existing institutions or at creating and legitimizing new, alternative institutions. Next, we included efforts to silence the voices of certain feminist and critical actors through acts of violence against them, as repressive, and efforts to empower and legitimize new experts on gender, equality and minority issues on the productive dimension. Financial interventions focus on cutting funding for specific educational programs and areas of research or on channelling money into projects, which represent anti-gender ideological project. Organizational in turn, focuses on activities which use resources of existing institutions or establish new ones to put forward the anti-gender project.

Table 1. Repressive and productive anti-gender interventions in knowledge production and dissemination.

Types of interventions	Repressive	Productive
discursive	associating the term "gender" with perversion, immorality, danger to children and family, and in some contexts stressing that it is a foreign or alien concept introducing and promoting terms such as "gender ideology" to challenge scientific validity of gender studies	publishing books, opinion pieces, articles in academic and popular press on a variety of issues including gender identity, trans rights, LGBTQ, immigration, race, etc. organizing conferences, public debates and panels, which often include political figures along experts and representatives of religious institutions

	challenging feminist/critical knowledge by using terms such as "cultural Marxism", "wokism", "cancel culture," which aim to portray feminism and anti-racism as ideological projects of cultural colonization, a danger to freedom of speech and academic freedom normalizing hate speech targeting specific ideas, institutions, groups or individuals who are portrayed as a threat, thus needed to be silenced and/or eliminated simplifying, or denying social complexity, and presenting epistemic binaries as the only valid standpoint	presenting a distorted version of existing research/data, through cherry picking, misrepresenting the conclusions or providing untested explanatory models, e.g. linking trans identity with autism or trauma creating media scandals by presenting a distorted version of existing research and education in gender studies, by focusing only on potentially controversial topics such as studies on BDSM, migration and queer studies (Hungary) selective use of existing knowledge on gender and sexuality, e.g. quoting opinion pieces or inconclusive research articles published in academic press selective use of real-life examples and anecdotes to legitimize exclusionary positions, e.g. focus on detransitioned youth in the debates on trans in Sweden and Italy promoting research/theories even if they have been disproved, e.g. the notion of the Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria in the case of trans rights producing new "theories" explaining current social changes such as "replacement theory" re-signifying gender as a biological entity and promoting essentialism as the only "scientific truth" re-signifying and strengthening alternative (femo/homo/ cisnationalist) understandings of gender equality and feminism re-signifying human rights language to depict privileged majority as a group that encounters discrimination

		re-signifying 'education' as a project which should be guided by religious and/or socially conservative norms and values creating dystopian visions of horrible effects of social justice implemented in some societies to mobilize people for their cause challenging and distorting not only the meaning of established terms (e.g. minority rights, human rights) but also their normative foundations
silencing or amplifying individual voices of knowledge producers	targeting individual scholars with threats and intimidation, doxing and unfunded critique vilifying scholars, activists, public intellectuals as enemies of the nation, traitors or foreign agents as in Hungary challenging and/or attacking experts who work in public bodies or commissions, as well as those who publicly speak on specific issues, especially trans rights challenging validity of existing data/research on issues such as trans rights, gender-based violence or migration	promoting new public intellectuals / authorities in gender, race and ethnicity, e.g. Ivar Arpi in Sweden promoting / proposing / hiring new experts to be included in state consultative or advisory bodies, e.g. people who are anti-trans rights to be recognized as experts on trans issues in Belgium
institutional	targeting academic institutions generating knowledge, through various tactics including harassment (e.g. accusations of tax evasion) on to liquidating Gender Studies in Hungary blocking the process of gathering or releasing publicly available data by institutions such as Statistical Office or Demographic Institute in Hungary, or changing the main topics analyzed by state agencies gathering and producing data as in the case of Swedish gender Equality Agency, which was asked to focus	strengthening the standing and political influence of existing educational institutions, which produce and disseminate anti-feminist knowledge establishing new courses/ departments/fields to replace gender studies or critical studies, e.g. family sociology programs at universities in Hungary to replace gender studies changing the curriculum of educational institutions, such as kindergartens or schools, by

	on honor violence in migrant communities blocking transfer of feminist/critical knowledge across various education levels (through censorship, delegitimization or specific institutions or bodies, administrative decisions) closing the public space for public debate to specific actors and discourses, e.g. not inviting feminist experts to participate in public debates, social consultations or banning LGBTQ organizations from cooperating with schools (Hungary, Poland) changing the curriculum of educational institutions, such as kindergartens or schools, by removing education oriented towards sex education, removing gender stereotypes, anti-discriminatory education and prejudice for educational process as in Hungary or Poland destabilize/reverse the process of institutionalization of feminism within state	strengthening the focus on family, nation, patriotism as in Hungary tightening / centralizing state's control over textbooks, publications and educational materials introduce parental control legal measures to reduce access to particular content of education introducing stricter regulations aimed at controlling higher education, e.g. requiring universities to obtain state approval for new courses in Hungary establishing new institutions which are tasked with producing and disseminating anti-feminist knowledge anti-feminist knowledge is being legitimized as a source of data for policy solutions
financial	withdrawing financial resources for gender studies departments or courses concerning gender, anti-discrimination, or sex education withdrawing financial resources for universities, educational institutions, civil society organizations that are seen as promoting progressive agendas	channeling financial resources towards educational (public or private) institutions established by anti-gender organizations to promote socially conservative views, such as Collegium Intermarium in Poland channeling state subsidies for existing private educational institutions that cooperate with anti-gender actors, such as Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Hungary or the Higher School of Social and Media Culture in Toruń founded by Tadeusz Rydzyk

organizational/ infrastructural	closing down educational institutions, such as CEU in Budapest	establishing new educational institutions, often private, tasked with producing conservative/anti-feminist knowledge and expertise, e.g. Collegium Intermarium in Poland giving access to material infrastructure (e.g. space in state buildings for public meetings of anti-gender actors) private companies/actors (social media platforms or media) providing space/support for dissemination of anti-gender narratives

4.

5. Patterns in reactive and proactive interventions observed in Table 1

We observe discursive interventions in the politics of knowledge as ***repressive*** when they are attacking research, studies or actors linked to the wider intersectional feminist project. This takes various forms. One is introducing and disseminating core discursive concepts which enable depicting gender and feminist or other social justice actors in negative ways (e.g. as foreign agents promoting gender ideology). This can be done just by associating gender studies or feminism with existing mainstream labels commonly seen as negative such as perversion, danger or immorality, or by choosing labels that are mainly negative in a particular context (aka 'ideology' in the context of science). More comprehensive new concepts are also created and propagated that offer specific packages of discursive elements with the same effect, such as cultural Marxism, woke and cancel culture. These terms are often employed when anti-gender propaganda or lobbying efforts are being called out or when progressive actors attempt to challenge political influence of ultraconservative groups, e.g. when several MEPs asked EP president Roberta Metsola to revoke the accreditation of radical ultraconservative anti-abortion lobbyists. Such new concepts depict gender studies and feminism as part of larger, negatively presented groups of activities and actors, e.g. 'global liberal elite', which allegedly aims to control populations across the world. Finally, bridging the distinction between the politics of knowledge and violence, the last prominent element of repressive interventions is to normalise hate speech towards anyone, or anything seen as related to gender studies or feminism. Such repressive interventions are done by a variety of actors, including civil society, academics, representatives of religious groups and politicians. Importantly, these attacks come not only from outside of academia but also from within educational institutions: socially exclusionary views are sometimes promoted by scholars and public intellectuals, as in the case of actors who oppose the equality of trans persons.

The ***productive* format** of such interventions consists of direct substitute knowledge 'products', such as books and other texts that offer newly made, distorted, and misleading versions of existing research, which can be termed *anti-gender knowledge* (Korolczuk 2020). Linked to that, new channels are created and used to disseminate this alternative knowledge. Here too, we see that some of these interventions are rather fragmented, while others are more comprehensive and well-coordinated. The content of the newly presented knowledge often includes arguments concerning the idea of gender binary and 'biological sex' as scientific facts, and homo-, cis-and femonationalist interpretations of

gender equality or feminism, presenting gay rights and gender equality as Western achievements that either need to be denounced as foreign or need to be protected against racialized migrants, depending on the context. Theories that depict white people as in danger of discrimination and replacement also underpin much of anti-gender pseudo-knowledge. In all these, we observe a denying of social complexity and a presentation of epistemic binaries that benefit already privileged groups of citizens, and very durable systems of hegemonies and supremacies in a polity. Lastly, as part of a larger vision, feminism and other social justice movements are depicted in distorted and dystopian ways. Here too, we observe that a wide variety of actors are actively participating in such interventions.

In the above description of the findings of our CCINDLE team, we observe **a pattern of differences of intensity between different contexts**, not of differences in kind. Thus, we propose to use the term **degree of saturation**, understood as the degree or extent to which anti-gender discourses and politics are present or absorbed in a given context, compared to the maximum possible saturation (visible in contexts such as Hungary), where the anti-gender project is promoted and implemented not only by forces positioned outside of state structures, but also by the state, which has centralized power over knowledge production and dissemination. In other words, the listed interventions can be put on a saturation continuum, from less intense, to more or most intense, ultimately heading towards complete disappearance of feminist and social justice discourses from public spheres, and substituting them with exclusionary discourses, resulting in an epistemic chaos, when it is no longer clear what i.e. discrimination or human rights mean, or in an epistemic hegemony of patriarchal and racist actors (Pomerantsev 2017, Zuboff 2021). Such a pattern of **high saturation density** is also visible when we look at the interventions that target individual actors. Here, the intensity of *repressive* interventions becomes visible because the targets of anti-gender campaigns can be just one type of feminist actors, or target a wide range of them (scholars, activists, public intellectuals, experts). The intensity also manifests itself as intensity of actions that ranges from just challenging data or research to (epistemically violent) vilification and attacks, to depicting and targeting them as enemy of the nation. The intensity of *productive* interventions also ranges from just promoting new public intellectuals to directly substituting experts in state policies.

As Table 1 also shows, ***repressive* institutional interventions** aim to harass knowledge institutions in various ways, from bureaucratic harassment such as accusing them of tax evasion, to managerial exclusion such as blocking transfer of knowledge across education levels, to deliberative exclusion such as closing space for debate or blocking access to data, or to erasure measures such as ending institutionalized feminism or gender studies in policymaking, research or education. At highest saturation density, ***productive* interventions** include establishing new knowledge institutions (universities, think tanks) that are tasked with producing and disseminating anti-feminist knowledge that is then legitimized for use in policy proposals. At the other end, there are interventions that enhance the status or reputation of those telling pseudoscientific or counter-scientific stories, in line with values of socially conservative exclusionary actors. In between are strategies of control and blocking access to the media and policy-making spaces for actors and institutions not aligning themselves with those. Primarily in these interventions, the anti-gender actors are linked to a domestic illiberal state (e.g. Hungary), or to external actors pushing autocratic attempts (e.g. at the EU level).

When looking at specifically **financial resource-based interventions**, it seems that those start at a quite high level of saturation already. These actions include for example reactively withdrawing financial resources for targeted courses on gender studies, anti-discrimination or sex education, or for whole educational institutions that are seen as promoting a progressive social justice agenda. In the highest density of withdrawing resources such repressive interventions are an existential threat, and the institutions are in danger of vanishing. **Productive** interventions actively shift and allocate resources

to substitute institutions or courses, either existing or new. In the most saturated cases, when whole new thinktanks or universities are being funded, substantial resources are in play.

6. Strategies of (de)legitimation in knowledge production and dissemination

We propose to examine the anti-gender interventions in the field of producing and dissemination knowledge through the lens of the process of **legitimation and delegitimation** of specific types of knowledge, institutions and actors (Cullen et al 2019, Pereira 2012, Tilakaratna and Szenes 2024)**. (De)legitimation** refers to the process by which certain forms of knowledge are accepted as valid, credible, and authoritative within a society, or challenged as being invalid, not credible and/or radical. This process involves social processes that confer legitimacy upon specific knowledge claims, making them socially accepted and authoritative, as well as conferring legitimacy upon specific institutions (such as universities, research organizations, government bodies, media outlets), which are themselves seen as legitimate or not, and which are crucial actors in the process of authorization.

Here too, we propose to divide the (de)legitimation of anti-gender interventions into two distinct categories: **repressive and productive**. However, these two types are interconnected as the delegitimating effect of the first one serves the goal of legitimating the second type of interventions that replace existing types of knowledge and institutions based on scientific inquiry, rigorous research and critical debate, with social conservative ideas and institutions that work in line with positions taken by right-wing political actors, religious fundamentalists and ultra-conservative activists.

Much of the activity of anti-gender actors focuses on critiquing and undermining specific fields of study (e.g., gender/feminist studies, critical race theory), specific types of knowledge and expertise (feminist, critical), and specific actors who produce and disseminate knowledge (activists, gender experts and educators, progressive politicians).

Strategies of delegitimization include:

- Presenting critical epistemic knowledge about gender, sexuality, and race as unfounded, unscientific, and non-objective, dangerous to the cohesion of society, as well as to families and children.
- Asserting that critical epistemic approaches in the social sciences and humanities more broadly are overly political, non-scientific, and radical, that these are ideological positions reflecting a specific agenda of liberal elites rather than science understood as grounded in facts and rigorously tested.
- Claiming that efforts oriented towards eliminating hate speech and misinformation, as well as the efforts to push against anti-gender campaigns are examples of cancel culture, thus that they should be seen as violation of academic freedom and freedom of speech.
- Calling for the depoliticization of science and knowledge production in the name of returning it to its alleged former glory.
- Opposing and devaluing gender/feminist knowledge as a source of data for policy solutions as a form of manipulation and ideological intervention.
- Criticizing academics who promote progressive ideas as 'militant', 'aggressive', and unscientific.

While initiatives that challenge existing knowledge and expertise are visible the most to a wider audience, our analysis shows that there are also many activities that aim to legitimize the ideas, activities and institutions promoted by anti-gender intellectual authorities and activists.

Strategies of legitimization of anti-gender actors and practices include:

- Texts and books promoted by anti-gender actors, which are often written by high-profile individuals (e.g., right-wing politicians) and thus receive considerable media attention, as in the

case of books written by MEP Roberto Vannacci in Italy or Bart De Wever, mayor of Antwerp and leader of the New Flemish Alliance party.

- In their publications, social media communications and various propaganda materials, anti-gender actors often use the academic titles of experts with whom they collaborate, even when they are discussing issues outside their field of expertise, as in the case of medical doctors with no expertise in trans health care who nevertheless become active in debates on this issue.
- Recently, in some countries, such as Sweden or the UK, anti-gender activists have begun to take up/use the arguments of self-proclaimed 'gender critical feminist' activists to prove that their positions are not anti-feminist but represent the "real" feminist agenda.
- Publications include translations of books published in other countries, which is a strategy to legitimize socially conservative views by invoking transnational anti-gender authorities, as in the case of Holy Sea-linked German sociologist Gabriele Kuby, who is widely published and invited to give lectures and interviews in Central and Eastern European countries.
- In some contexts, such as Hungary and Poland, there is a tendency to create national heroes and use historical narratives to justify opposition to gender studies and related issues.

Taken together, these strategies show that while anti-gender actors often claim that their goal is to restore objectivity in academia, ensure high quality scientific research, and promote pluralism in public debate, their activities are focused on **elite replacement and on achieving epistemic hegemony** (Korolczuk 2023). In doing this, they are simultaneously hiding and proudly asserting their values (Paternotte & Verloo, forthcoming). This process is driven by the ideological stance of anti-gender actors, most of whom oppose progressive stances on equality or social justice and critical perspectives on power, and who seem to lean towards positions favoring autocratization. Developments in countries where populist or extreme right-wing parties are or have been in power, such as Hungary, show that epistemic hegemony is an inherent element of centralizing autocratic political power.

7.

8. Conclusion: Anti-gender interventions in the politics of knowledge

In democratic societies, the freedom to produce and disseminate knowledge is protected within educational institutions (academic freedom) and in society at large (freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of religion, etc.) (Scott 2009, Zimniak-Hałajko 2021). **Academic freedom** is a fundamental principle that ensures that scholars, researchers, educators, and students can engage in intellectual inquiry without fear of censorship, retaliation, or external interference. Educational institutions, such as schools and universities, should be places where critical thinking, debate, and the pursuit of knowledge are possible and encouraged. The protection of academic freedom allows individuals within these institutions to explore controversial, progressive, or challenging ideas that may not conform to mainstream or popular views. In the broader societal context, **freedom of speech** is the cornerstone of public debate and the process of democratic deliberation. It ensures that individuals are free to exchange ideas, engage in debate, and criticize those in power. This freedom is essential for the dissemination of knowledge throughout society, which includes access to information and the ability to oppose state or corporate power.

Anti-gender actors routinely claim that their goal is to ensure maximum academic freedom and freedom of speech, but as detailed analysis of their initiatives shows, their initiatives actually lead to restricting both types of freedoms (see Table 1). Moreover, in anti-gender discourse, academic freedom is often equated with freedom of speech, and the difference between the two is blurred. This blurring in effect prioritizes freedom of speech over academic freedom (Bracke 2024). In university settings, ultraconservative activists demand the right to promote views that have been debunked by researchers, such as the idea that trans identity is a form of social contagion or that the post-abortion syndrome exists. And in cases when they are denied access to educational spaces, they claim that they

have been victims of cancelling and marginalization. Simultaneously, anti-gender actors oppose the inclusion of certain topics, such as gender studies or critical race studies, in educational institutions and – when they are in power – ban such topics from universities altogether, while tightening control over all educational systems, as in the case of Hungary.

It should also be stressed that anti-gender attacks on academic freedom are often combined with neoliberal arguments stressing the need for academic knowledge to be easily applicable in market solutions and for university to be oriented first and foremost towards producing employable citizens. This argumentation takes different forms in different contexts. Whereas in Hungary authorities falsely claimed that Gender Studies should be closed because the alumni remain unemployed, in Sweden anti-gender actors call for "depoliticization" of academia and oppose the idea that academic knowledge should contribute to the fight for social justice beyond academia (Petö 2020, Martinsson & Mulinari 2022).

Crucially, in all 7 countries included in the CCINDLE project and at the EU level, we can observe **negative effects of anti-gender actions on academic freedom as well as on freedom of expression**. These include shrinking the space for critical inquiry in both academic and non-academic settings; increasing violence against scholars, activists, and experts, which also has a chilling effect on the possibility of open debate and ensuring people's access to information; and increasing distrust of experts, knowledge-producing institutions, and the polity in general. Considering the impact of such interventions, and their institutional focus, we argue that this goes beyond impacting on academic freedom and freedom of expression towards a severe negative impact on academia tout court, hampering democratic participation, especially of subaltern and minoritized people.

The main differences between countries concern the intensity and specificity of these interventions - the degree of saturation of educational institutions and the public sphere with anti-gender discourses and practices - rather than the presence or absence of specific strategies. These similarities reflect **the global nature of the anti-gender movement**, which includes many transnational networks, intense sharing of knowledge, know-how and various resources, as well as **a degree of ideological coherence among actors operating in different country contexts**.

9. Discussion: The links between anti-gender interventions in the politics of knowledge, the decline of democracy and the rise of autocracy

Based on the analysis above, given the characteristics, scope and effects of anti-gender interventions in knowledge production, we observe a broad range of political struggles around knowledge-production processes taking place outside and inside academia. What is at stake in these struggles is: 1) the status of (scientific) truth and the sources of its legitimization; 2) the status of marginalized knowledges; and finally, 3) the distinction between scientific and religious truth. Thus, the impact of anti-gender interventions should be seen as broad and consequential for a broad range of disciplines and areas of knowledge production and dissemination, not just for gender studies or critical race studies.

While the activities of anti-gender actors are mostly focused on issues related to gender identity, sexuality and reproduction, they can most productively be analysed as part of a broader political project that works towards autocratization and that is intersectional in nature in the sense that it is not just "anti-gender", or homo/transphobic, but also profoundly nativist and racist and deeply embedded in the capitalist system. Trends towards undermining academia, expert knowledge and scientific research become visible across these social justice intersections, in varying patterns.

In the scholarly literature, these politics of knowledge are often interpreted within scholarship on populist politics (Eslen-Zya & Giorgi 2022, Mede & Schäfer 2021, Ylä-Anttila 2018). Scholars often link the rise of populism to the era of post-truth, where disinformation and misinformation become more

present than ever before. At the core of the populist politics – in this perspective - is the division between the people and the elite, and the latter are often imagined not only as groups who have political and/or economic power, but also individuals and institutions which produce knowledge about the world and provide solutions to societal problems, such as climate change or pandemic. Populist actors routinely challenge knowledge produced by established institutions and experts, promoting the types of knowledge which allegedly represent the experiences of "common people" and reflect what is seen as "common sense". The concept of **epistemic populism** was coined to capture the populist tendency to challenge the established norms of knowledge production and authority, and to reject scientific data. The effects of epistemic populism are crucial for democratic institutions, because such interventions are conducive to promulgation of fake news and disinformation, increase of relativism, and the erosion of trust in expertise. Hande Eslen-Zya and Alberta Giorgi (2022) show that the populist interventions in the field of knowledge can be classified as either anti-science or pseudo-science:

> While anti-science refers to the rejection and devaluation of, and opposition to, the methods of science, pseudo-science denotes the growth of alternative methods for developing knowledge that oppose well-established science. Both the anti-science discourses and the progress of pseudo-science are relevant in the era of populism, as both are used to contest and undermine collective trust in established scientific knowledge and commonly accepted sources of expertise and competence. (2022: 4)

Strategies for producing and promulgating anti-science and counter-sciences in the field of gender equality, sexuality and reproduction are similar to the ones employed in other areas, such as climate change or vaccination. Therefore, anti-gender interventions should be seen as part of a broader project of undermining trust in experts, academics, state institutions and educational system, which are all accused of being biased, elitist and corrupted. When such strategies lead to a level of epistemic chaos in a society, "nothing is true and everything is possible", and as shown by Pomerantsev (2017), creating such chaos is readily employed by autocratic regimes' propaganda machinery to achieve cultural hegemony. Consequently, specific solutions based on data and knowledge produced by "tainted" liberal actors and institutions can be easily dismissed. Actors belonging to newly created and funded epistemic institutions aligned with illiberal governments can then fill this gap with their self-proclaimed objectivity and pseudoscience. As a result, the very process of political deliberation and decision-making is affected. Debates that take place at the intersection of scientific research and political deliberation become easily delegitimized, since the main criteria for deciding whether something is true or not becomes ideological, rather than scientific or even factual.

There is also a clear link between strategies of delegitimization and vilification employed by anti-gender actors and instances of politically motivated violence, including against feminist scholars and members of minoritized social group (see also CCINDLE D2.4. Report o violence and pathways to violence in the context of anti-gender politics 2024). Discursive strategies such as vilifying minorities or victim-perpetrator reversal have been identified by scholars of right-wing extremism as strategies, which facilitate radicalization and lead to politically motivated aggression. The anti-gender political agenda not only contradicts democratic values such as pluralism, equality, and freedom, but in some cases, these campaigns have contributed to violence. Consequently, while the activities of the anti-gender movement have been interpreted as a form of non-violent political extremism, scholars have observed that its discursive strategies and campaigns should be further analysed as a conveyor belt to engagement in violent extremism (Korolczuk 2023).

To conclude therefore, we end by asking whether analyzing the politics of knowledge as part of this larger and growing autocratization project would not yield a better focus for understanding the intersectional nature of the anti-gender campaigns. This could link the analytical conclusions of Eslen-Zya and Giorgi and other researchers working on populist interventions in science, in terms of a rise of anti-science and pseudo-science, to reflections on the consequences of such politics of knowledge,

namely opposing not just feminist and intersectional justice, but also actively contributing to the erosion or destruction of democracy, and the rise of autocracy. Such understanding would reveal that what we study are not just campaigns against feminism and social justice, and strategies of destruction and replacement for actors, discursive and material resources and institutions that push feminism and social justice forward. Ultimately, what we study is a comprehensive and much more dangerous project that simultaneously and explicitly destroys the much-needed democratic means that are needed to fight these attacks, the destruction and replacement.

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