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### **Gendered threats to social protection in an anti-liberal state**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

After 1990, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries started on a rapid path of democratization. Multi-party elections took place in these formerly state socialist states and in the following two decades governments of different political persuasion followed each other in a fairly peaceful order. The situation was different on the war-ridden Balkan peninsula and in many of the post-Soviet republics. But in most CEE countries, civil liberties were codified in new constitutions, political information, previously strictly censored, became widely accessible, social movements and civil organizations sprung up. Eight of the post-socialist countries joined the European Union in 2004, another two in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. As soon as the transition was considered “completed,” research, policy making as well as funding interest waned in the region: the end of history loomed large.

There is, unfortunately, reason to pay attention to this part of the world again: several countries in CEE are in the process of destroying democratic institutions and the rule of law, eliminating civil liberties, restricting academic freedom, the freedom of the press, of the judiciary – in sum, building an anti-liberal, authoritarian state. In the past ten years, Hungary and Poland have joined Russia and Turkey on the path of becoming what political scientists euphemistically call “hybrid” regimes, i.e. regimes where seemingly democratic elections bring authoritarian leaders into power who then proceed to rewrite the constitution to tilt further elections their way and retain power. Authoritarian, anti-liberal rulers have appropriated national resources through corruption to build a loyal oligarchy and proceeded to replace the “rule of law” with “rule by law”. A great deal has been written about these changes, for example, the [report prepared by Judith Sargentini](#) for the European Parliament.

Democratic backsliding affects social protection systems and does so in a gendered way. It is somewhat too early to analyze these changes in depth because the regimes have been in power for less than a decade and the legislative changes were introduced gradually, some fairly recently, so their effects are not necessarily quantifiable yet. Nevertheless, the rest of this report is meant to express a set of serious concerns, it is a call for help in a sense. I will describe the most disconcerting changes in the policy intentions, actual policies and in their discursive presentations that are likely to impact men and women differently. I use the example of Hungary because it is considered the forerunner among CEE countries in building an anti-liberal state. Other countries, such as Poland, Romania and Turkey or Russia follow similar routes. Comparison with authoritarian capitalist countries in Asia and Latin America would be extremely fruitful but is beyond the scope of this note.

### **1) The use of gender in populist discourse: anti-genderism as state ideology**

In August 2018 the Hungarian government proposed to ban Gender Studies as an academic discipline arguing that there is no such thing as “gender”, people are born either male or female and no discussion is needed on the topic. They were not alone in blaming “gender theory” for all social ills, a backlash against feminism had been observed all over the European continent.

By constructing international feminism as an all-encompassing source of danger and threat, anti-liberal governments seek to indicate their opposition to traditionally liberal values, including tolerance of the life choices of others, especially those related to family status, sexuality or self-expression. Gender and feminism have become code words for

“liberalism” which is understood to stand in opposition to the nation, to Christian values and to patriotic pride. As such they are being increasingly persecuted.

Hungarians have long been known to hold rather conservative views on gender roles. A significant portion of the population, more than in most other EU countries, believe that women’s primary calling in life should be to raise children, that women cannot be happy without having a family and that men’s breadwinning role must never be threatened. Such conservatism has been reflected in the low proportion of women in high level political bodies or in public discourse on women and men. But the emerging anti-genderism goes well beyond these long standing trends in gender role attitudes and their political uses. Anti-genderism is not merely conservative but anti-feminist in a way that radically and violently dismisses, threatens and ridicules any views different from the centrally endorsed one. *Anti-genderism has been elevated to the level of national policy making and national ideology in anti-liberal states.* This has serious implications for the government’s approach to policy making, to the redefinition of proper citizenship and thus social protection and access to public services.

## **2) Creating rather than alleviating inequalities through social protection**

The recent transformation in Hungary’s extremely generous family policies will suffice to explain this process. There are two main kinds of provisions to help families raise children in Hungary: a flat fee which is a universal benefit and the recently introduced earned income tax credit which is only available to those whose income reaches lower middle class levels. There is no negative tax, so this means that poorer families, those with a less stable formal attachment to the labor market are receiving significantly less state support for raising children, exacerbating their disadvantage. Similarly, single women, especially those whose partner is unavailable, are often unable to claim the whole or parts of the benefit. This is why the poverty rate of single parent households is still double that of the rate of other households with children (KSH, 2016) and since most single parents are women, this contributes to women’s poverty risks, which is higher than that of men.

The allocation of public services is also uneven with respect to family support. One obvious example is access to nursery schools. These are typically free to attend and are often the precondition for women’s engagement in the labor market. Nursery school places are scarce everywhere but there simply are no nurseries built in more remote rural areas, and thus families cannot benefit there, increasing women’s burden and making it harder for them to gain stable labor market positions (Darvas and Szikra 2016). The number of nursery places is increasing in more advanced areas of the country, which is excellent news to middle class urban women but pits their interests sharply against those in less fortunate circumstances.

It is important to point out that families belonging to the Roma minority are particularly disadvantaged in several countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Governments appropriate funding received from EU sources but do little to help reduce such inequalities. In Hungary, for example, over 75% of those who belong to the Roma minority are considered poor compared to a poverty rate of about 14% for the whole population in 2016 (KSH 2016). Residential and school segregation is high and increasing, even endorsed by the government. Given the fact that the Roma on average have a higher number of children than the general population, Roma women face additional burdens within and outside the household. Their specific plight is rarely acknowledged. In fact, given the openly racist

orientation of anti-liberal states, these inequalities are increasingly considered “natural” even desirable and this is communicated freely in public discourse, gaining the status of official, state sponsored pronouncements.

### **3) Pronatalism and threats to reproductive freedom**

One of the most important ways in which anti-liberal statesmen express their nationalist, racist and xenophobic sentiments is through an obsession with demography and the birth rate. Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban offered to “make a pact with women” to encourage them to have more children. He proclaimed his intentions in the very first speech he gave after his election victory in 2018, reinforcing the importance of the message.

This type of pronatalism is problematic from the point of view of gender equality and the provision of social services for a number of reasons. First, in anti-liberal discourse it is always women who are addressed, never men, which reinforces women’s primary role in society as mothers and housewives. Men’s responsibilities in this realm and within the household are often ignored. Second, pronatalism gives preference to young, potentially fertile, middle class, heterosexual, white families to the exclusion of all others. This is a minority group of all households in modern societies, yet the majority of resources are directed towards their well-being. Resources are scarce and resources within the social protection system are especially and increasingly so. Hence pronatalist preferences likely take provisions away from the most vulnerable groups such as the elderly, lone mothers or women looking after disabled children.

Pronatalist discourse often challenges reproductive freedom as well. Abortion rights are limited in Poland and the new constitution of Hungary provides grounds for restrictions in access to abortions. Anti-liberal pronatalist measures are often used to justify the institutionalization of further limitation.

### **4) Carefare to solve the “crisis of care”**

A further concern is what I call “carefare”, emerging in several CEE countries. “Carefare” is a set of policies designed to shift previously inactive members of the population providing carework into paid employment status. At first sight, such professionalization may have advantages. When women raise their own children in the status of professional mothers, when foster carers and those looking after disabled children have paid jobs as carers, these jobs may have more stability and respectability and come with some degree of social protection. All these are advantages compared to their previous extra-labor market status.

The problem is that these state created jobs are extremely precarious: they depend on the whims of a state which is known to change regulations yearly, they are underpaid to the point of exploitation and self-exploitation, provide an income well below the minimum wage, and are exempt from numerous protection mechanisms available- at least in principle- in the Labor Code, including sick leave, and representation. Carefare is similar to workfare in this regard and workfare programs have multiplied in Hungary in the past decade resulting in the largest workfare program on the continent. Carefare is gendered, and the low wages are justified by assumed gender differences in skills, inclinations and life goals. This legitimates the extremely low salary, the dependence on the state so created and the surveillance- direct and indirect- this entails.

Nancy Fraser and others have called attention to the “crisis of care” in neoliberal economies: the logic of care seems contradictory to the logic of neoliberal profit making resulting in vastly and globally exploitative solutions to child and elderly care (Fraser 2016, Hochschild 1997, Brown 2015). Carefare is the solution to the crisis of care offered by anti-liberal states. Instead of relying on cheap migrant labor (which in anti-liberal states is not acceptable as a solution), women do their own family’s carework in exchange for state provisions branded as “salary” and “paid work”. The system has advantages: it allows a more personalized provision of care and contributes to the families’ income to avoid abject poverty. But at the same time, it reinforces women’s primary role as mothers and carers and – given the extremely low salary- publicly devalues women’s work, care work. Simultaneously, it creates perhaps less visible yet tangible dependencies on the state and its ideological and financial choices.

### **5) “Creative” de-centralization**

Finally, the fifth disconcerting trend is the vast increase in the proportion of social services offered by non-state actors, especially religious organizations to replace state or civil organization- managed agencies. In response to global neoliberal calls for hybridization anti-liberal states have recruited a long standing political ally: the established large Churches in the country. Critiques have noted the marketization of social services in neoliberal states. In Hungary and other anti-liberal states instead of marketization, we observe state funded church-dependence. To demonstrate the process: in 2013 the Hungarian government introduced a new law which provides church related social protection organizations a 70% higher per capita state subsidy than that received by other types of organizations. For example, all schools receive funding from the state, a specific sum for each child enrolled. Church-run schools receive 1.7 times more per child than non-church (state or civil organization) managed entities. In certain segments of the social protection field this has already resulted in the elimination of all but church-related (and state managed) organizations from the circle of providers.

Church-related organizations have specific agendas, which are expressed in the curricula, the ways in which provisions are offered, the selection of personnel, or the symbolism used in the process. These are typically rather conservative agenda, which limit individual choice, emphasize the “natural” role of men and women, and allow little variation within. The main churches are ardent political supporters of Orban’s anti-liberal regime, going so far as offering election propaganda during religious services in several cases.

Following the term “creative compliance” (Batory 2016), which describes the ways in which the Hungarian (as well as other CEE countries) circumvent true adherence to EU regulations, I use the term “create decentralization” to describe this process, because state services are indeed decentralized as required by the neoliberal logic of EU agencies, but political power and influence are increasingly concentrated, the political rule of the anti-liberal government is strengthened.

In sum, anti-liberal states are grave dangers to the achievements of gender equality in the developed world. They promote an overall conservative agenda for women’s role in society but also create inequalities among women to pit them against each other and make joint action difficult. Abortion rights are being threatened, other issues on the international feminist agenda (for example, domestic violence) are ignored, and women’s domestic role is emphasized at the cost of other options they may choose. Difference with respect to sexual

orientation, gender categories, or gender role choices are not only not tolerated but are persecuted on the level of official state ideology.

It is time to turn attention back to Central and Eastern Europe and help mobilize any and all available resources to stop, limit, eliminate this trend, which is spreading well beyond the region.

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