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Winning the Battle for Human Rights in Sexuality and Reproduction

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Winning the Battle for Human Rights in Sexuality and Reproduction

NEIL DATTA

Introduction

On 24 June 2021, the European Parliament (2021) adopted a landmark report on sexual and reproductive health and rights, which many have qualified has 'historic' (Hovhannisyan 2021), after what was perhaps the most contentious debate within the assembly in recent history. The debate was characterised by the report's opponents launching of a vicious social media campaign and deploying of all imaginable and arcane parliamentary tactics to kill the report. Yet, for human rights defenders, the Matić Report, named after the Croatian centre-left MEP who authored the report, Fred Pedrag Matić, heralds the first major sign of progress on human rights in sexuality and reproduction after years of the so-called 'anti-gender' movement having erupted in Europe resulting in defeating a similar report on SRHR in the European Parliament in 2013 (European Parliament 2013).

While sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have always been contested, until recently this contestation was considered a natural reaction to social progress in so-called 'traditional' societies, a peculiarity of the polarised political system in the United States or a local eccentricity contained within a few historically 'conservative' European countries. The emergence of the anti-gender movement in Europe was initially underestimated, many assuming it to be the well-known religious lobby, until it started to mobilise popular support, influence policies, and shape the political landscape. Since then, many human rights actors have been forced to pay greater attention to a new movement targeting a range of seemingly unrelated issues ranging from the well-known targets of abortion and LGBTQI rights to encompass challenging aspirations for gender equality and even gender-based violence, among others. However, precisely how these anti-gender actors are organising, fundraising and attempting to exert influence across national borders or issue areas had not been clear and for long was never the subject of scrutiny. Yet, I argue that it is precisely by understanding the anti-gender movement that the recent victory in the European Parliament was made possible. Recent, in-depth research – especially by the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) – has revealed that the anti-gender actors are very different from the facade they have carefully constructed. As anti-gender actors are most successful when they are able to strike in ambush, understanding how they are organised, inter-connected and financed becomes a preliminary step for human rights defenders to organise to neutralise their impact. To do this, we must deconstruct the mirage they have created around their identities and their objectives.

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Globally inter-connected religious extremists

Far from small, local Christian groups scattered across diverse European countries coming together for a common defence of their faith, anti-gender actors are transnationally connected networks of religious extremists working from a common playbook, entitled "Restoring the Natural Order" (see Datta 2018), often aligned with actors from the Trump-affiliated US Christian Right and Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin. An example is the organisation which planned a webinar to "Defeat the Matić Resolution & Protect unborn children" on 3 June, the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), claiming that "Matic wants to ban conscientious objection" (see eclj.org). Based in Strasbourg – the headquarters of the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights – the ECLJ is in fact the European arm of a giant of the US Christian Right, the American Centre for Law and Justice (ACLJ) whose head was none other than President Trump's legal counsel during his first impeachment proceedings in 2020. The ACLJ has channelled US $ 15.7 million to Europe, mainly to the ECLJ, over the past ten years making the third largest among the ten US Christian Right actors present in Europe. Together US Christian Right actors account for a total of US $ 81.3 million spent in Europe between 2009-2018. The ACLJ in the US is considered an 'anti-Muslim' organisation and in Europe the ECLJ has launched a campaign to undermine the credibility of the European Court of Human Rights using anti-Semitic tropes by referring to judges as 'Soros-backed' (ECLJ 2020).

Sophisticated astroturfing operations

Far from representing 'active citizens', engaged Christians or parents' groups, anti-gender actors and the on-line petitions they generate are in fact sophisticated, modern astroturfing outfits, i.e., fake grassroots organisations which mask their sponsors. They are connected to shady and undemocratic actors as well geopolitical rivals to the European project. The prime example is the Madrid-based Citizen GO which launched a series of petitions targeting both the Matić report, the MEP Fred Matić himself as well as other organisations advancing SRHR in Europe. Presenting itself as a community of 'active citizens' exclusively funded by small, online donations an analysis of the Board of Citizen GO reveals the reality behind the social mobilisation outfit.[1] Indeed, Citizen GO's Board boasts a who's who of louche connections, including a failed US Christian Right actor known for his homophobic campaigns; a former Italian politician convicted of corruption by the Italian courts; and a Russian national who serves as the liaison between a Russian oligarch banned in the EU for his connections to Ukrainian terrorist groups and European far right political parties. These connections between Citizen GO and US Christian Right actors, Russian oligarchs and far right political parties are not coincidental as several investigations over the past years have revealed multiple financial connections (such as funding

trips of Citizen GO's founder to Moscow; see Feder/Armitage 2014) and likely provided the initial capital to set up Citizen GO. This initial investment has allowed Citizen GO's founder to generate over US $ 32.8 million since 2009 and to operate in 12 languages with the ability to wield influence in 50 countries. Overall, Russian funding to anti-gender causes in Europe exceeded US $ 188.2 million, which all originates from organisations (foundations, think tanks, media) associated with two far-right and anti-EU Russian oligarchs (Pérez Colomé 2017).

Fringe religious views

Instead of representing the interests of mainstream people of faith, many of the anti-gender actors which led the mobilisation against the Matić Report are in fact from fringe religious movements which find their origins in the most extremist currents of their respective religious traditions and often in conflict with mainstream religious establishments. An example is the Warsaw-based Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (Ordo Iuris) which established an international coalition entitled "Stop the Matic Report" (Agence Europe 2021). However, Ordo Iuris is better known for having been behind a range of high-profile initiatives in Poland which have significantly undermined human rights, such as the infamous "LGBT-Free Zones", the various initiatives to restrict or ban abortion, the criminalisation of sexuality education and even to withdraw from the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on gender-based violence (Datta 2021a). While presenting itself as a legal think tank, Ordo Iuris is in reality the visible face of an old, extremist religious network rooted in Catholic fascism called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) (see Datta 2020). As early as the 1980s and as recently as 2017, Catholic Church officials have denounced and investigated the 'cult-like' nature of the TFP network which was closely associated with the dictatorships of Latin America of the 1970s and 1980s and is today accompanying the slide towards authoritarianism we are witnessing in Poland. The TFP network, which like a chameleon operates under a plethora of different guises, is among the largest anti-gender networks in Europe today having generated over US $ 113.4 million over the 2009-2018 period and, from Poland, established satellites across Eastern Europe and beyond (VSQUARE 2020).

Politically engaged against democracy

Far from being apolitical, anti-gender actors have become increasingly politically engaged, specifically with the emergent alt- and far-right political parties across Europe, in some cases blurring the distinction between civil society actor and political party. The anti-gender political activism takes several forms, in some countries, alt- and far right parties have taken on the leadership in campaigning against SRHR and other progressive values such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany or Chega in Portugal. In others, anti-gender NGO leaders form an

important block of far-right parties elected representatives, such as with Vox in Spain (Religión Digital 2019). From the Netherlands, religious extremists associated with traditionalist currents of the Dutch Reformed Church have played a key role in forming two new political parties, including the European Parliament funded European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) and the alt-right Forum for Democracy. However, the most advanced example of anti-gender political engagement comes from Poland where the TFP-inspired Ordo Iuris has infiltrated key functions of the Polish state (Kurasinska 2018). When the Polish government nominated the founder of Ordo Iuris to the European Court of Human Rights earlier this year, progressive actors organised to ensure his swift rejection. In sum, it is no surprise that it is exactly the alt- and far political groupings in the European Parliament which engaged in the most protracted opposition to the Matić Report and voted *en bloc* for its rejection claiming that a non-binding report violated national sovereignty (ECPM 2021).

The Matić Report – an historic step forward, but more steps are needed

The Matić Report calling for improved access to contraception and fertility treatments, the decriminalisation of abortion and the provision of comprehensive sexuality education is a historic step forward. Disrobing the anti-gender actors and showing them for who they are helped limit their influence on decision makers and contributed to the adoption of the Matić Report allowing democratic political parties to successfully organise to advance human rights for everyone in the European Union. However, this victory is but the beginning of a process to undo the damage they have inflicted upon sexual and reproductive health and rights over the past decade. The anti-gender movement in Europe has generated over US $ 707 million through a range of non-governmental organisations, foundations, religious organisations, and political parties (Datta 2021b). While the US Christian Right and Russian oligarchs are important sources of funding for anti-gender activism in Europe, the largest share standing at US $ 437.7 million comes specifically from private European foundations, business elites and some of the oldest and wealthiest families in Europe. The next stage in countering the anti-gender threat to European societies must focus on those areas where the political will has not resulted in an improvement in the human rights situation, namely in Hungary and Poland. While the governments of both countries have flouted human rights by enacting a series of policies which erode the rights of women, children and LGBTQI persons in recent years, the successive condemnation of European politicians and institutions have not sufficed to bring about a change of course.

But there are other avenues to explore. Norway has already suspended the funds it provides to both Hungary and Poland over concerns of rule of law, specifically the deteriorating situation with regards to women and sexual minorities (Bayer 2021). The European Union now needs to follow Norway's lead and withhold precious EU

funding which is the main sustenance propping up the authorities in Budapest and Warsaw. The Matić report is a clear signal that after years of undermining human rights and sexuality and reproduction, Europe must now robustly stand up for its values.

Note

1 https://www.citizengo.org/en-row/about-us.

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„Feministinnen sind gefährlicher als Terroristen“[1] – Machterhalt, maskulinistische Restauration und der Kampf um die Istanbul-Konvention in der Türkei

RENATE KREILE

Am 1. Juli 2021 trat die Türkei aus der Istanbul-Konvention (IK) aus. Dieser „internationale Schlüsselvertrag des Europarates zur Bekämpfung von Gewalt gegen Frauen und häuslicher Gewalt“ (Buric 2020) verpflichtet die Beitrittsstaaten völkerrechtlich bindend, Frauen vor sämtlichen Formen von Gewalt, ob außerhäuslich oder häuslich, umfassend zu schützen und die Täter strafrechtlich zu verfolgen. „Sie gewährleistet das Grundrecht von Frauen auf ein Leben ohne Gewalt“ (Europarat 2021).

Die autokratische Aufkündigung dieses Abkommens, welches vom türkischen Parlament 2012 (Yarar 2020, 124) einstimmig ratifiziert wurde, rief internationale Kritik und landesweite Proteste von zahlreichen Frauengruppen hervor.

Die türkische Regierung verteidigte den Austritt mit der Desinformation, das Abkommen sei „von einem Personenkreis gekapert worden, der versuche Homosexualität zu normalisieren – was mit den sozialen und Familienwerten der Türkei unvereinbar“ sei (Human Rights Watch 2021).[2] Präsident Erdoğan selbst verwies auf das fortbestehende nationale „Gesetz zum Schutz der Familie und zur Vorbeugung von Gewalt gegen Frauen“ (Nr. 6284)[3] und betonte unter Berufung auf die eigene ‚authentische‘ Kultur: „Gewalt gegen Frauen ist in unserer Religion verboten“ (duvaR. english 2021). Aus einer derartigen Perspektive wird Gewalt gegen Frauen nicht als Ausdruck struktureller Ungleichheit, sondern als moralisch verwerfliches männliches Fehlverhalten gewertet (vgl. Unal 2021, 74).

Nicht nur in der Türkei, sondern auch bei autoritären rechtspopulistischen Regierungen, Parteien und Bewegungen anderswo, etwa in Polen und Ungarn, erweisen

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