

# And If the Opponents of Gender Ideology Are Right? Gender Politics, Europeanization, and the Democratic Deficit

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This article explores the dynamics of antigender mobilization in Poland and shows how gender equality projects are interconnected with the rise of opponents of “gender ideology.” It highlights material and discursive links between the local implementation of gender mainstreaming and the antigenderist backlash. The article points out that particular gender equality policies in non-Western settings result from Europeanization and thus are marked by a significant democratic deficit — that is, they are promoted without engaging a wider audience and elude parliamentary control. The study shows that if gender equality projects, such as gender mainstreaming, are fostered by external international commitments and obscure bureaucratic measures, they may unintentionally provide the impetus for antigender mobilization. Indeed, gender wars are fueled not only by controversies over gender and LGBT equality but also by growing concerns about citizens’ control over the state and its policies. The article is data based, and by employing framing analysis, it provides an explanation of the recent political success of antigenderist campaigns, which take place in a world of reconfigured states and diminishing democracies.

**Keywords:** Gender ideology, gender mainstreaming, Europeanization, democratic deficit, antigender movements

This article was prepared within the framework of research project no. 2016/21/N/HS6/02877 financed by the National Science Centre in Poland.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/19 \$30.00 for The Women, Gender, and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X19000576

Antigender mobilization has been observed in Europe since at least 2010, and it has become a stable component of the European political landscape. These relatively new political movements, though differing in their specific manifestations at the level of particular nation-states, share common salient characteristics. They fiercely oppose same-sex marriage and LGBT rights, argue against gender studies and gender equality education, and reject feminist demands on the state, especially with regard to women's reproductive rights and combating gender-based violence (Grzebalska and Soos 2016; Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2015; Kováts 2016; Köttig, Bitzan, and Pető 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Pető 2017; Verloo 2018). Political scientists' and feminist scholars' interpretations of the rise of "gender ideology" opposition can be divided into at least two nonconflicting viewpoints.

The first view underlines the reactionary or "oppositional" nature of the antigender movements (Verloo 2018). What we observe is a conservative backlash — a counterforce to successful feminism and "feminist products," such as gender equality policies and institutions successfully established within the state (Roggeband 2018) — that produces a new conceptualization of "gender ideology" and of a sister term, "genderism," as "an explicit mean to criticize feminist and LGBTQ+ ideas and policies" (Corredor 2019, 613).

The other view emphasizes the proactiveness of the antigender campaigns, which create influential narratives used by right-wing forces to unify different social groups that are discontented with the economic effects of neoliberal globalization. Antigender discourses serve as a "symbolic glue" representing a "new language" used to form identity and reconfigure European politics (Kováts and Põim 2015). The movements are a symptom of a wider social and economic crisis, and their antigender outlook is, for the most part, just a handy cover.

The idea for this article comes from my impression that readings of antigenderist arguments tacitly assume that gender antagonists make very little sense. Either they do not grasp the general concept of gender, or they lie about it deliberately. It appears that the "unreasonable" nature of antigender discourse is taken for granted. Indeed, significant blocks of antigender discourse are undoubtedly prejudiced and manipulative. However, not all elements of antigender discourses can be so easily dismissed.

In this article, I argue that opponents of gender ideology relate strongly to the vision of nation-states slipping away from citizens' control, and they are quite right in using the manner of introducing local gender equality

policies as an example of this process. They depict modern democracies as becoming more and more undemocratic, and they extensively employ the image of political structures in which decisions that have a direct impact on people's everyday lives are made elsewhere, without citizens being informed about or consulted in the process. As antigender rhetoric refers to the growing powers of unelected bodies in modern policy formation, I understand gender wars within the wider context of diminishing democracies and declining trust in state institutions. This interpretation allows us to acknowledge parts of antigender discourse as relevant and compatible with facts and is coherent with critical reflections on the contemporary reconfigurations of European states and their powers (Banaszak, Beckwith, and Rucht 2003; Bauman and Bordoni 2014; King and Le Galès 2017).

My aims in this article are twofold: First, I use the case of Poland to show how particular gender equality policies, with the typical example of gender mainstreaming (GM), have resulted directly from Europeanization — that is, the impact of the European Union (EU) on domestic policy. Second, I show how Europeanization has displayed elitist and technocratic tendencies, and it has been marked by a significant democratic deficit, meaning that gender equality policies have been implemented without engaging a wider audience or public debate. Gender wars are fueled not only by controversies over gender and LGBT equality but also by growing concerns regarding citizens' control over state policies. In other words, if gender equality measures are promoted because of international commitments and are left mainly in the hands of bureaucrats, they unintentionally provide impetus for antigender mobilization.

This article contributes to recent analytical efforts aimed at understanding the dynamics of gender equality policy “backsliding” within the context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which discern “de-democratization of policy making” as one dimension of the process (Krizsan and Roggeband 2018, 94). My arguments do not contradict this conceptual scheme or question its empirical validity. However, they emphasize that de-democratization is linked to gender equality drawbacks in a more complicated way. The power of the antigender movement in Poland was preceded and invigorated by earlier hollowing out of CEE democracies. De-democratization at that stage happened under the disciplining conditions of “catching up with the West” (Grabowska 2012) and “the ideology of normality,” which “was particularly useful in advancing the decade-long process of EU accession, during which many a postcommunist polity busied itself with

passing laws over which it had scarcely paused to deliberate” (Krastev 2010, 117).

On a theoretical level, this article demonstrates the contextual dynamics of social change involving gender equality projects and their opponents, revealing the interplay of social structures (legal and institutional arrangements, bureaucratic procedures) and the actions of numerous social actors, including nongovernment organizations (NGOs), feminists, and civil servants (Verloo 2018; Walby 2007). I explain how changes within the policy domain interact with and affect the domain of civil society, resulting in further changes in both domains, and I place this process within a non-Western-centric geopolitical context.

In terms of social complexity theory, the Polish case provides a vivid illustration of both a positive feedback loop, centered around reinforcing the dynamics of GM taking place at the international, national, and local levels, and their further interaction with a negative feedback loop of local antigender mobilization (Verloo 2018). My analysis exemplifies how gender equality policies may unintentionally produce their own opposition that changes their social environment and how this occurs at both the material and discursive levels of social reality.

This article consists of four parts. It starts with an introduction to the chronology of Poland’s gender wars and presents the case of the “Equality Kindergarten,” which marked the peak of local antigender mobilization. It proceeds by reconstructing the international and institutional background of this particular gender equality project, highlighting direct links between the international strategy of GM, its local practices, and the conservative backlash it incited. I use a “thick description” of actual historical events to firmly support my central thesis and, at the same time, show the significance of an intervening factor — the technocratic method of promoting gender equality. To do so, I employ data from desk research and a variety of sources (media releases, public administration documents, and public information bulletins), as well as qualitative interviews with femocrats, feminist activists, and civil servants (Rawłuszko 2019).

Next, I use another set of qualitative data and present a framing analysis of local antigender discourse to show how the opponents of “gender ideology” interpret the interrelations between gender equality projects, international political structures, and bureaucratic measures. Finally, I discuss the results of qualitative data analysis within the context of Europeanization, as well as wider contemporary reconfigurations of states’ powers.

I want to clarify my positioning. I make my argument as a social researcher, but also as a feminist and a direct participant in and observer of the events analyzed here. Crucially, this article refers to the local implementation of gender mainstreaming, in which I was directly involved as a gender expert and which afterward became the subject of my academic study. I critically examine “antigenderist” texts that refer to my involvement as a gender expert within state structures.

## POLISH GENDER WARS

Scholars are unanimous about the chronological beginning of the rise of antigender movements in Poland, which occurred after the controversies provoked in April 2012 by the signing of the Istanbul Convention (IC) on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Duda 2016; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Szwed and Zielińska 2016; Warat 2016). The arguments against the agreement were clearly expressed by conservative politicians and the right-wing media in Poland. They directly opposed IC Article 3, which defines gender as “socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men,” and Article 12–16, outlining the state’s commitment to “promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behavior of women and men” by means of education and other methods.

The second outburst of the Polish antigender campaign took place in 2013–14 and concerned “Equality Kindergarten” — an educational program promoting gender equality among preschool children. It started in the autumn of 2013, when media outlets revealed that several kindergartens were encouraging boys and girls to exercise nonstereotypical occupations by running a special agenda titled “Equality Kindergarten,” inspired by a booklet of the same title written by three feminist activists and educators — Anna Dzierzgowska, Joanna Piotrowska, and Ewa Rutkowska — in 2011.

The reaction was immediate and intense. In December 2013, the Bishops’ Conference of Poland in a pastoral letter warned against the “very destructive character of gender ideology” that endangered “the nature of marriage and the family” by “promoting the idea that gender is socially constructed” (Episkopat Polski 2013). A few days later, a parliamentary group called “Stop Gender Ideology” was set up with the task of defending the rights of “traditional families” and minors.

Likewise, the “Equality Kindergarten” booklet was publicly criticized by members of the Committee of Pedagogy of the Polish Academy of Sciences, who underlined its “instrumental approach to the children” that was “pushing them into a detrimental stance towards their own sex” (Kawlewska 2014). This negative opinion was repeated in the media, and some publications expressed outcry over the easy rhyme “Gender does not limit you!” in the booklet (Duda 2016). Although the Polish Ministry of National Education found evidence of children contesting traditional gender roles in only 11 nurseries in Poland (Ministry of National Education 2014), this was enough to provoke another outburst of antigender mobilization in Poland.

The Polish antigender discourse, which intensified and developed after the preschool education case, strongly resembles the rhetoric employed in other European campaigns of this type, which supports the hypothesis about the transnational character of the antigender movement (Korolczuk 2015; Kováts and Põim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The similarities concern at least four elements: (1) promoting an essentialist vision of gender roles, (2) protecting children’s welfare, (3) defending parents’ rights to bring up their offspring according to their own values and beliefs, and (4) objecting to equalizing homosexual relations with heterosexual marriage.

Directly inspired by the Catholic Church’s conception of human nature, the antigender activists defend a binary vision of masculinity and femininity, which, they argue, are complementary, intrinsically heterosexual, and embedded in the biological differences between the sexes. The last-named characteristic makes the essentialist vision of male and female identities fixed, constant, and “true,” as it comes straight from what is defined as the one and only “nature.” Therefore, even relatively limited discussions of gender roles and their social construction, whenever conducted with children and young people, are – from the perspective of antigender discourse – seen as a threat, leading to children’s confusion over their gender roles.

Additionally, such “dangerous interventions” deny parents’ fundamental rights to educate their children as they wish. It becomes an alarming sign of the state violating basic citizens’ rights. Finally, opponents of “gender ideology” protest same-sex marriages and civil partnerships. According to their views, the family is based on heterosexual marriage and directly stems from the natural order, while homosexuality is defined as an illness or a “disorder.” The homosexual community is described as perverted

and deviant, endangering social reproduction and, again, children's safety and rights ("to have a mother and a father").

Polish antigender campaigns employ all the aforementioned elements (Duda 2016; Grabowska 2015; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Szwed and Zielińska 2016; Warat 2016). However, after the existence of Equality Kindergartens in Poland was brought to light, a new element appeared in the antigender rhetoric: the notion that there had been a silent coup d'état conducted by feminists and by means of gender mainstreaming.

### **GENDER MAINSTREAMING AS AN UNINTENTIONAL CATALYST FOR ANTIGENDER MOBILIZATION**

To fully understand how GM has become linked with the rise of the Polish antigender opposition, it is first necessary to reconstruct the institutional and legal background of Equality Kindergartens. As they were not a spontaneous initiative of local feminist communities but a planned intervention of a regular NGO with no previous experience in gender equality activism, the context of the arrival of Equality Kindergartens is crucial.

The "Equality Kindergarten" booklet was produced in 2011 by the Foundation for Preschool Education within the framework of a project cofinanced by the European Social Fund (ESF). At that time, the foundation had already been a promoter of several ESF projects aimed at reducing educational inequalities in preschool education, run in several rural communities in southern Poland. The booklet was a part of wider and uncontroversial ESF interventions that had begun at least two years before the antigender crusades started.

When the antigender controversies over the Equality Kindergarten program reached the national media and raised popular concerns over the existence of unusually progressive practices, the foundation suddenly found itself at the center of a fierce debate. A priest coming from Męcinka — a rural community of fewer than 5,000 people, where the foundation runs a nursery — raised concerns about "the promotion of gender ideology" among the local children. These accusations were made publicly during a Sunday mass and reached the accused parties by word of mouth, including the foundation (as the ESF project leader) and the local administration (as its partner).

The line of defense dismissing the priest's arguments directly highlighted that the Equality Kindergarten program was not about "promoting gender ideology" but about "implementing the objectives of

non-discrimination and equality between women and men” that were a “formal requirement for every European Social Fund intervention” (Urząd Gminy Męcinka 2013). The accused parties defended themselves by referring to “dozens of thousands of projects undertaken all over Poland, following the same principle of promoting gender equality” (Fundacja Edukacji Przedszkolnej 2013). Local officials, together with the project administrator, supported their claims by quoting the official guide of the Polish ESF Managing Authority concerning ESF duties on GM. These arguments seemed to be sufficient for the small community of Męcinka, and at this point, the “scandal” was resolved by the explanations provided. However, at the national level and in other regions, the controversy over genderism and its links to the EU fueled the blaze.

As the existence of Equality Kindergartens hit the news, the link between GM, money from the EU, and “genderism” became clear for many concerned citizens and their self-appointed political representatives. The local governments of several Polish towns made symbolic gestures against “gender ideology” by issuing characteristic resolutions. One of these documents admitted a “strong objection to promoting gender ideology, especially among children and the youth” and protested “making EU funding conditional on promoting gender ideology” as well as “attempts to impose EU regulations on Member States’ internal policies” (Rada Powiatu w Jaworze 2015).

Feminist responses to the antigenderism attacks also referred directly to the EU, the legal framework of EU funds, and GM. In January 2014, on the same day that the Stop Gender Ideology parliamentary committee was established, Wanda Nowicka, the vice president of the Polish Parliament and a prominent feminist, together with recognized feminist activist Joanna Piotrowska, announced at a press conference that they had submitted a formal notice to the Supreme Audit Office requesting control over Catholic organizations using EU funds. As they explained, “European funds should be spent accordingly and must, without exception, apply the gender mainstreaming approach” (Kośmiński 2014). Similar stands were taken by human rights NGOs, which requested control over local authorities that took a stand against “gender ideology” yet, at the same time, used EU funds. As they argued, “compliance with the horizontal principle of gender equality (gender mainstreaming) within EU funds stems from the Treaties and Council of the European Union law regulating their implementation in every EU Member State. It is a legal duty, binding for all institutions, including local



governments, which use EU money” (PTPA and Fundacja Feminoteka 2014).

The Equality Kindergarten case marked the peak of Polish antigender mobilization and made gender mainstreaming as well as the European Union directly enter the discursive battlefield over gender. At the very same moment, GM started to be understood, on both sides of the conflict, as a tool for introducing potentially meaningful changes, and it suddenly received a high public profile. This was not just an empty rhetorical gesture but rather a clear observation of what was happening in the material world. The fact was that young children were being taught by regular teachers about gender stereotypes, a subject that appalled the Polish Catholic Church and several prominent members of the national parliament, as a result of gender mainstreaming and little-known EU regulations concerning the ESF.

## FROM BEIJING VIA BRUSSELS TO MĘCINKA

GM as a distinct approach to advancing gender equality, involving promoting a gender perspective in all public policies and programs, emerged fully during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing. The following year, the European Commission adopted “the principle of mainstreaming,” defined as “mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality” (Commission of the European Communities 1996). In 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam confirmed the endorsement of GM, stating that “in all its activities the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women” (Article 3).

From the perspective of the events that took place in the small Polish community of Męcinka almost two decades later, it is crucial to underline that in the late 1990s, the European Commission decided to grant GM an especially strong position within the EU Structural Funds (Pollack and Burton 2000). In comparison to other policy areas, the regulations on spending EU money introduced ambitious and relatively strong provisions on gender equality. The most explicit piece of EU legislation referring to GM came into force in 2006 and concerned the implementation of the ESF in all EU member states between 2007 and 2013 (European Union 2006).

Poland joined the EU on May 1, 2004, and immediately became eligible for ESF money on the same basis as all other member states. As

the EU distributes its funds in seven-year rounds, in mid-2004, Poland started to benefit from the 2000–2006 programming period for the last two years of 2004–2006, and in 2007 entered — for the first time — the full ESF round of 2007–2013. In between those two ESF cycles, the legal requirements referring to GM evolved at the EU level, and this was followed by a local gender mainstreaming reform undertaken within the Polish ESF administration (Rawłuszko 2019).

Starting in 2007, local bureaucrats managing EU funds in Poland, supported by several local feminists, implemented new measures aimed at strengthening the gender equality dimension within the ESF system. This involved the introduction of a sanction for noncompliance with gender equality requirements, which, in turn, put unprecedented pressure on ESF applicants to include gender-sensitive activities in their project proposals. This was also the origin of the Equality Kindergartens. One of the feminists and coauthors of the booklet noted that she had been asked to write the publication because the leader of the project “knew he had to do something, as gender mainstreaming was a must in an ESF project” (Rawłuszko 2016). In other words, the case of the Equality Kindergartens, which popped up in rural Polish communities 18 years after GM was adopted in Beijing and nine years after Poland entered the EU structures, may seem accidental, but they were in fact products of a specific institutional context. The Equality Kindergarten program had its roots in international gender equality standards, in past processes of Europeanization, and in bureaucratic reforms undertaken in cooperation with gender equality experts from the local feminist movement.

The reconstruction of Polish chronologies concerning local gender mainstreaming developments and antigender mobilization around the Equality Kindergartens shows the material interconnections between these two processes. However, the coevolution of both the gender equality project and its opposition is also mirrored in the discourse employed by the opponents of “gender ideology.”

## GENDER EQUALITY POLITICS AS A CONSPIRACY AND COUP

I now present a qualitative analysis of antigender rhetoric, focusing on the manner in which the examined discourse frames the way “genderism” is introduced and promoted. I will try to answer the question of how “genderism” operates and interacts with the state according to the

narrative of its adversaries, thus complementing research on the content of “gender ideology.” This last subject has already been thoroughly examined in the case of Poland (Duda 2016; Grabowska 2015; Korolczuk 2014; Szwed and Zielińska 2016; Warat 2016). Because of my narrow analytical purposes, and having at my disposal a broader corpus of antigenderist texts, I chose to carry out an analysis of several articles written by one author, Grzegorz Strzemecki (2014), who has developed the most comprehensive and detailed thesis about “gender being the official Polish state ideology” and has consequently supported his reasoning with numerous references to the process of GM implementation. I systematically examined a purposefully selected sample consisting of an edited collection of Strzemecki’s 12 articles, originally published between September 2013 and October 2014 in the biggest right-wing and conservative Polish media source. Strzemecki is a well-positioned journalist of the local right-wing and Catholic media scene (Niezależna.pl, Radio Maryja, Polonia Christiana, Gość Niedzielny, Fronda), as well as pro-government public television. The choice of his publications was deliberate and defined by the analytical objectives, so the examination is definitely more illustrative than representative. However, similar lines of argument depicting the “colonization” of Poland by means of gender ideology are present in the antigender discourse (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), which suggests its wider relevance.

In my study, I use framing analysis, which substantially contributes to our understanding of social movements’ dynamics, especially in explaining how certain ways of organizing meanings mobilize people and guide collective actions (Benford and Snow 2000). I assume that antigender activists produce certain frames about their opponents, selecting, arranging, and emphasizing particular elements of social reality that “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52). When examining “antigender” discourse on “genderism,” I reconstruct a frame package — a structured combination of certain lexical choices (including metaphors, historical examples, catchphrases, depictions), lines of reasoning, and casual connections, which together indicate how we should think about the ways in which the promoters of “gender ideology” act (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Van Gorp 2005, 2010).

Qualitative data analysis reveals two visible micro-frames depicting the way in which the promoters of “gender ideology” act. The first framing presents “genderists” as manipulative leaders of a national conspiracy.

“Genderists” do things “secretly” and “quietly” (Strzemecki 2014, 24, 94) in a way that can easily go “unnoticed” (17). They act “through the back doors” (71, 75), “without people’s approval” (94), and they keep the truth hidden in a “conspiracy of silence” (80). They are also presented as serial liars. They are said to “repeat the same lies thousands of times” (11), and it is a manner of behavior “typical of all known genderists” (9). Hiding the truth is “the main means by which the genderists achieve their goals” (74), and their tactics include “lying through their teeth” (45) and using “camouflage” (138) or a “smokescreen” (8). What genderists do on regular basis is described as “manipulation,” “disinformation,” and “deception” (9, 135, 174).

The untruth inherent in “gender ideology” is quite simple. It is presented as exclusively concerning equality between men and women, defined as two separate genders, but actually it refers to equal rights for everyone regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In other words, genderists pretend that their fight is about “regular” women and men, whereas they also campaign for gays, lesbians, transgender people, and all categories of queer people. According to antigender discourse, the phrase “gender equality policies” is merely a “commonly used, sneaky trick” (Strzemecki 2014, 108) used to deceive citizens. “The most commonly used ploy is to talk to the public about gender studies but omit this dominant strand altogether. This is why claiming that these studies only concern the equal rights of men and women is a half-truth, a lie, which is repeated thousands of times and is almost omnipresent” (114–55).

The second micro-frame presented within the antigender discourse makes a strong link between the existing conspiracy and the infiltration of the state. Genderists are an influential group that has already snuck into political elites and governmental structures, starting a comprehensive transformation of Polish society against the will of the people. These events took place under the government led by Civic Platform, a liberal centrist party that was defeated in the 2015 parliamentary elections and lost power to the populist and nationalist right.

The promoters of gender ideology, including gender studies professors and researchers, gender equality trainers, government commissioners for gender equality (Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz and Małgorzata Fuszara), anonymous civil servants, as well as unknown members of parliament, advance their dogma “by bypassing the national law and failing to ask for popular consent” (Strzemecki 2014, 68). At the same time, “no one wants to admit that this plan is being implemented and all

of its promoters pretend that it does not exist at all" (198). The claim about the government "implementing genderism as a binding ideology" is described as "clear and evident" (223). The texts restate the phrase from the title of the book "gender is the state ideology of the Republic of Poland" and repeat several times: "the government supports these changes" (148), "there was a drive for gender ideology from governmental institutions" (35), and "the Polish government and the President ... cannot wait to make Poland undergo this [gender] therapy" (34).

At the same time, genderists are presented as acting ostensibly against the citizens. The implementation of "gender ideology" went "unnoticed by all citizens" (Strzemecki 2014, 17), genderists aim to "deceive and mislead society" (62), and they try to "shove gender ideology down citizens' throats" by force (29) and "impose it on society" (195) so that "liberal democracy ... loses its character" (193). The characteristic phrases are repeated dozens of times, often in very similar lexical formulations, and the picture is clear and pervasive. Crucially, the text presents "evidence" of both the conspiracy and the transformation of the state. The proof can be found in EFS educational materials on gender equality produced a few years earlier by the public administration body that manages EU funds.

Strzemecki's book reveals the existence of training notes, a handbook (which I coauthored), and gender equality workshops sponsored by the ESF bureaucracy. It shows that publications on gender featuring the logo of the EU and the ESF (Strzemecki 2014, 38) were published by the Ministry of Regional Development and that "the government is training its staff in queer theory/ideology" (107). Finally, the fact that ESF bureaucrats underwent gender training is presented as equivalent to implementing "genderism" within the state structure. The reasoning concludes with the following clear statement:

For several years now, genderism has been the state ideology of the Republic of Poland. As such, it has become part of the law and our state institutions. It is being drip-fed into the heads of thousands of bureaucrats during compulsory training sessions. (46)

This quotation is significant, as it places the beginning of the changes in the past. The antigender narrative highlights that some important events have already happened and are now gradually progressing. Its construction of a chronology is both critical and powerful, and by reference to the ESF documents and trainings, it is "evidence based." Bureaucratic measures produced within local GM reform are presented as a milestone. Page by

page, Strzemecki consistently highlights this timeframe, even in subsequent statements:

Meanwhile, the state legislative and institutional machine has been working on the practical implementation of this [gender] ideology for five years now. The decision to start this process must have been taken more than five years ago. (23)

Five years ago now, without popular awareness or consent, the government adopted genderism as the state ideology. (25)

Giving an actual date when “gender ideology” was introduced to Poland strengthens the narrative of conspiracy. Revealing the fact that the term “gender” has already appeared in public administration constitutes a convincing and potentially disturbing whole, a picture of a coup that has already succeeded.

Furthermore, the case of the Equality Kindergartens shows that “genderists” did not stop at approaching and training public administration staff but also wanted to “indoctrinate” children, “raise new types of generations,” and “re-organize key social institutions” (Strzemecki 2014, 29). The texts analyzed here describe Equality Kindergartens to present them as evidence of “genderism being tested straight away on people” (34). Finally, the definition of GM directly quoted from the ESF educational materials supports the argument that “genderists” aim to completely transform society. The concept of GM presented in the ESF materials is paraphrased as a condition in which “no single project, no single act, activity or policy, in any domain or any aspect . . . is free from genderism” (49). GM is interpreted as “a program of a new totalitarianism,” as “in any area of life there cannot be any place for any activity that could have any other character but genderist” (50).

Summing up, “the government of the Republic of Poland and the EU openly announce the development of a totalitarian state” (Strzemecki 2014, 45). The idea of enormous danger is intensified as an analogy between “gender ideology” and communism/Nazism is made, and the names of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Mao Tse-tung, Kim Il-sung, Pol Pot, and Castro are repeated several times within the texts analyzed here. The key messages are apparent: (1) genderists act secretly, use totalitarian methods, and aim to completely transform society; (2) they act against citizens and without their consent; and (3) they strongly resemble communists, as they have already been successful at implementing their plans and should urgently be treated as public enemies (49, 53, 175, 207–10).

## EUROPEANIZATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The antigenderists' framing structures reality in a way that presents genderists as malevolent, threatening, and effective. The configuration of framing and reasoning devices as presented in this article is a compelling combination. Indeed, this discourse on "gender ideology" has been extensively employed by Polish right-wing forces and contributed to their victory in the 2015 parliamentary election. This marked the start of a massive conservative backlash against women's rights (Juhász et al. 2018).

The fact that the opponents of "gender ideology" have turned out to be so successful can be explained — at least partially — by the tools provided by framing analysis and by reference to the local political context. As Benford and Snow (2000) indicate, the effectiveness of the framings is closely connected to their degree of resonance, which relies on, among other things, their empirical credibility and narrative and cultural fidelity. Empirical credibility concerns "the apparent fit between the framings and events in the world," that is, whether the framings refer to social realities in a way that allows people to believe them as "real" (Benford and Snow 2000, 620). Narrative fidelity is defined as "cultural resonance" with already existing "narrations," "myths," "ideologies" and "assumptions" (622). Both concepts are used to explain frames' potential salience and the degree of their impact on social mobilization. Both, as I argue, are strongly present in the Polish narratives against gender.

In Central and Eastern Europe, gender equality measures should be examined within a wider context of Europeanization. Historically, the requirements of EU accession provided a direct incentive to define new institutional antidiscrimination measures in the region after the democratic transitions. Pressure from the EU undoubtedly contributed to the introduction of new gender equality legislation. Obviously, as local women's rights organizations played an active political role in the process, it was far from a closed, top-down imposition (Regulska and Grabowska 2008). Nevertheless, within the framework of the EU's eastern enlargement, the introduction of gender equality policies was mainly determined by the domestic policy environment and, for the most part, by the position of governments and political elites. In the end, the impact of Europeanization stopped at the level of very basic antidiscrimination provisions (Avdeyeva 2010; Buzogány 2012; Chiva 2009; Fuszara et al. 2008; Popa and Krizsan 2016; Regulska and Grabowska 2008; Zielińska 2015), and the European transfer of gender mainstreaming turned out to be "a failure" (Bretherton 2001, 75), as the

strategy was given low priority by both the EU and CEE political elites. Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that the strategy became part of Polish administrative practices as a result of Europeanization and, a few years after Poland's accession to the EU, it received greater importance within the local structures that manage EU funds.

In a general sense, Europeanization refers to the EU's impact on the domestic policies of member states. The concept not only embraces the formal transposition of EU law onto national legal frameworks but also describes the EU's wider influence on policies, politics, and the polity itself (Börzel and Risse 2003, 60). Obviously, Europeanization has never been a single, unidirectional moment of "downloading," but rather is a dynamic two-way process of constructing and negotiating what temporarily becomes domestic law, norm, or practice (Radaelli 2003).

However, social and political scholars underline that in the case of the CEE countries, which, after the fall of communism, operated within the "return to Europe" or "catching up with the West" paradigm and negotiated their EU membership as "outsiders," the Europeanization process involved an unequal structural positioning of the EU in relation to EU candidate countries (Grabbe 2003, 2006; Jasiński 2008; Sadurski 2006; Sedelmeier 2010). Heather Grabbe expressly highlights that the process of Europeanization for the CEE countries was "an asymmetrical relationship," giving the EU "more coercive routes of influence in the applicants' domestic policy-making processes" (2003, 303). The conditionality of EU membership created a situation of uncertainty, in which the EU had "significant leverage in transferring its principles, norms and roles, as well as in shaping institutional and administrative structures" (Grabbe 2006, 205). Moreover, since within the accession process the EU pushed for efficiency and speed in transposing the *acquis*, it favored relatively small groups of technocrats who were able to manage the process as smoothly as possible. As Wojciech Sadurski points out,

Enactment of EU-related laws was often fast-tracked, with little or no serious parliamentary discussions, and with the executive controlling the process throughout. ... it strengthened the executive bodies over their parliamentary equivalents, a secretive procedure over fully transparent ones, and the quick-fix pace of decision-making over comprehensive deliberation. (2006, 7)

The "executive bias" of Europeanization reinforced the democratic deficit and catalyzed controversies concerning the scope of democratic control over the process (Grabbe 2006; Sadurski 2006; Sedelmeier 2010). The



same reservations can reasonably be applied to the further implementation of gender mainstreaming within the ESF system. The Polish case, which chronologically followed EU accession and preceded the local wars on gender ideology, represents an example of an “expert/bureaucratic” approach (Beveridge and Nott 2002). This has been carried out through close cooperation between bureaucrats and feminist experts and without engaging any wider audience, including both potential supporters and opponents of gender equality (Rawłuszko 2019). As the ESF system is a very technocratic policy domain, the institutional changes that led to the appearance of Equality Kindergartens were not publicly debated, as they focused on strictly technical and limited measures. This should come as no surprise. Such an approach to the implementation of GM has been dominant and almost omnipresent in the European context (Daly 2005; Jacquot 2017; Meier 2018; Meier and Celis 2011).

Antigender discourse is correct in its depiction of the way in which “gender ideology” progresses by means of GM and how this happens without transparency or public scrutiny. Moreover, it gains empirical credibility by quoting actual documents: antigender discourse refers to official records that exist, civil servants’ trainings that happened, and publications that came out. Antigenderists offer an accurate description of the administrative measures of the ESF system, thus making the offered framing coherent, reliable, and trustworthy.

The elitist nature of Europeanization, in both the privileged position given to a national “executive core” (Grabbe 2006, 207) and the technocratic outlook of GM, which turns into an internal process of bureaucracies and nonelected bodies, resembles centralized state management under socialist regimes. As a result, opponents of gender ideology in Poland are at ease in making a comparison between communism and the introduction of “gender ideology” to Poland. It also leads them to use two strong anticolonial frames interchangeably: an “old” anticommunist master frame (Grabowska 2018) and a “new” anticolonial frame against “Brussels,” that is, the Western liberal world (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). As in the Polish context the notions of a communist conspiracy and a communist state acting against the people relate to aspects of historical legacy, people’s experiences, and dominant narratives about the past, this reference is easily available and “culturally resonant.”

On a broad level, the two framings of antigenderism and anticommunism are consistent in at least two aspects. They refer to the fear of a shrinking national sovereignty and advocate opposition to

unelected elites who operate outside democratic control. Contemporarily, under the conditions of increasing globalization and the reconfiguration of states' authority (King and Le Galès 2017), gender equality politics may serve as convincing proof of people gradually losing control over states in crisis (Bauman and Bordoni 2014).

The Polish case of the Equality Kindergarten program is illustrative of all four shifts of state powers that comprise a "reconfigured state" (Banaszak, Beckwith, and Rucht 2003). First, it shows uploading of state powers to a supranational organization, the EU, which defined the obligations of introducing gender mainstreaming to ESF-funded projects. Second, it involves a lateral loading of power and policy responsibilities; after all, it was the unelected ESF administration that defined the local GM obligations and introduced a sanction for noncompliance, raising the profile of "gender equality" as something surprisingly meaningful. Third, it demonstrates a downloading of power to regional authorities, which managed the appraisal of the ESF projects and transferred ESF money to the Equality Kindergartens.

Last but not least, the case represents the offloading shift, as the nurseries with Equality Kindergarten exercises were managed by an NGO providing educational and care services to local rural communities in western Poland. From this perspective, Equality Kindergartens not only are about questioning gender roles, but also constitute material evidence of citizens losing control over what used to be their state. Gender wars are manifestations of wider tendencies involving people becoming "strangers in their own land" (Hochschild 2016), whose participation in decision-making or public deliberation is unnecessary or even redundant. Obviously, this process is deeply rooted in what Zygmunt Baumann (2014) defines as a state of crisis in modern states and democracies. The fact that gender wars gave prominence to minor and generally inefficient gender equality policies and depicted them as symptoms of almighty "genderist" interventions should be regarded as a symptomatic transfer and redirection of social distrust and anger originally generated by globalized markets and growing social injustice.

## CONCLUSIONS

The technocratic manner of developing particular gender equality policies fuels its own opposition. Promoting "gender equality" in an undemocratic manner that eludes parliamentary control and public debate may bring a

strong counterresponse, grounded in objections to what may be framed as an obscure intervention made by the state without citizens' consent. The Polish case concerning gender mainstreaming policy, contextualized within a wider process of Europeanization, provides the empirical basis for such claims and could inform comparable analysis in other CEE countries that, similarly, underwent both a recent democratic transition and EU accession.

The arguments presented suggest that ideological debates over gender do not explain all the complexities of antigender mobilizations, but they should be complemented by analysis of the democratic underpinning of gender equality policies. Indeed, it is interesting to see that contrary to the analyzed policy of GM, the IC, which originally fueled Polish antigender campaigns, was openly contested and publicly debated for several months, with voices coming from almost every part of the polity. It was eventually ratified by the elected bodies and never withdrawn, even after the parliamentary powers were won by those who fiercely attacked it. Still, however, opposition to the IC is a part of local gender ideology opponents' narratives, which experienced a notable shift: from a sole focus on IC regulations "obliterating gender differences" at the initial stage of the gender wars, to the current emphasis on the role of the IC monitoring body (GREVIO), which is now being presented as "intervening in internal state orders" and "expecting countries to introduce measures deepening gender ideology indoctrination" (Walinowicz 2019). These dynamics imply that antigender campaigns interchangeably or jointly use at least two lines of arguments: they oppose gender and want power in the hands of the people.

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