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# Reconfiguring State–Movement Relations in the Context of De-democratization<sup>1</sup>

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De-democratization and hostility to gender equality alter relations between states and feminists. State feminism, which focuses on cooperation between feminists and states, needs amendments for applicability in such contexts. We propose the integration of anti-gender actors into the analysis. We also suggest moving away from the assumption that transactional activism targeting states is the most effective strategy for feminists to respond to such hostile contexts and discuss the potential of more diversified forms of engagement. To illustrate our conceptual framework, we look at changing political dynamics in three recent democracies: Croatia, Hungary, and Poland.

## Introduction

Across the globe, feminism faces two connected trends: a backlash against a rights-based and transformative understanding of gender equality (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Kuhar and Patternote 2017) and the rise of anti-democratic and exclusionary forces, resulting in processes of democratic erosion (IDEA Institute 2019). These concomitant developments bring important challenges to the hard-won gains on gender equality and limit the scope for feminist political action.

The role of states and state actors in promoting gender equality is a central topic in the literature on women's movements and politics. States are, on the one hand, viewed as fundamental components of patriarchal structures (Walby 1996), and embodiments of male power (MacKinnon 1983). On the other hand, states are diversified structures and processes (Franzway, Court, and Connell 1989) rather than monolithic entities, and this opens windows of opportunity for feminist engagement with them. The last decades have

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brought increasing recognition that engaging with state actors is important to advance feminist agendas. As [Connell \(1990, 530\)](#) puts it: states have the “power to regulate and . . . power to create”, and as such have “a major stake in gender politics.” Over the past three decades feminist scholarship, grounded on a liberal notion of feminism, has explored the achievement of gender equality through the state, by combined pressure of feminists from outside and inside the state ([Banaszak 2010](#); [Chappell 2002](#); [Htun and Weldon 2018](#); [McBride and Mazur 2010](#)). This scholarship has identified cooperative constellations and the creation of specific state institutions to deal with gender equality. These partnerships and interfaces between states and women’s movements created a certain optimism about the possibilities of “state feminism” and gender policy progress. “State feminism” is a term that emerged to describe alliances between state-based women’s policy agencies, at any level (subnational, national, regional, international), in any branch (elected, administrative, or judicial), and women’s rights activism ([Kantola and Squires 2012](#)). State feminism can be defined as “the actions by women’s policy agencies to include women’s movement demands and actors into the state to produce feminist outcomes in either policy processes or societal impact or both” ([McBride and Mazur 2010, 254](#)). This literature largely developed based on Western postindustrialized states, but in more recent years has been increasingly applied to other contexts including European postcommunist countries. Research identified both limits to the applicability of the framework, but also pointed to several country cases and periods where a state feminist approach contributed to understanding gender policy progress in the region ([Gruziel 2015](#); [Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a](#); [Popa 2015](#); [Spehar 2007](#)).

The interrelations and partnerships between feminist groups<sup>2</sup> and states that developed in many parts of the world are currently challenged by the rise of conservative actors, who mobilize against gender equality and sexual rights ([Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019](#); [Korolczuk and Graff 2018](#); [Kováts and Poim 2015](#); [Kuhar and Patternote 2017](#); [Verloo 2018](#)), often in close connection with right-wing political parties that promote nationalist and patriarchal agendas. From North America and Central Eastern Europe to Latin America and Asia these conservative and right-wing actors made their way into institutional politics, not only attacking transformative notions of gender equality, but promoting an illiberal and anti-democratic state project ([IDEA Institute 2019](#)). Anti-gender campaigns and their successful capture of states have consequences for equality policies and policy processes that were previously in place ([Roggeband and Krizsán 2018b](#); [Sutlović 2019](#); [Szczygielska 2019](#)), promoting instead policies based on essentializing differences between sexes and using familialist notions of women’s interests ([Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019](#)). These developments undermine the optimism concerning cooperation between feminist groups and responsive states and warrant further conceptualization of this relationship in increasingly hostile contexts.

One of the contexts where such developments emerge powerfully is Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Many countries in the region currently face pushback against gender equality and sexual rights, driven by conservative, right-wing civil society organizations, and in some contexts supported by state actors embarking on anti-feminist projects. This has severe consequences for the young and not very consolidated gender equality policies and institutions that developed in the past two decades. Also, it affects feminist organizations in these countries that often prioritized transactional activism over participatory action (Tarrow and Petrova 2007), meaning they focused primarily on interaction and engagement with state institutions, rather than grassroots and autonomous organizing. While maintaining a critical distance, they have been open to working with states, occasionally developing good working relations and insider alliances which have been one of the main explanatory factors to the few prominent gender equality successes seen in countries of the region (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a).

In this article, we return to some of the core assumptions of the scholarship on state feminism, including scholarship on state feminism in the CEE region, and propose their rethinking in light of recent trends of democratic erosion and anti-gender dynamics. In de-democratizing contexts, relations between state (actors) and feminist groups cannot be understood in their complexity without factoring anti-gender actors into the picture as well as the hostility of states and state actors with antifeminist agendas. Building on state feminist literature combined with literature on democratic erosion and the closure of civic space and literature on anti-gender mobilizations, we propose an analysis integrating next to interfaces between states and feminist movements also anti-gender equality actors and voices and their interfaces with state actors. This allows us to examine the place and voice of women's rights actors in policymaking processes in contexts of opposition and also contributes to capturing some of the gender dimensions of democratic erosion. Relying on a thick definition of democracy, with particular emphasis on its participatory and egalitarian dimensions (Coppedge et al. 2015; IDEA Institute 2019), we view participation of women, and civil society organizations representing their rights and interests in policymaking, as a fundamental element of gender democracy and its decay as an element of democratic erosion. We see the powerful pushback against gender equality embedded in processes of democratic erosion particularly in countries such as Hungary or Poland as further evidence for the nonlinearity of democratization processes (Carothers 2002) and the need to question the unidirectionality of gender equality progress in this part of Europe.

In the second part of the article, we use cases from CEE to illustrate the dynamic interrelations between feminist movements, state actors, and civil society organizations opposing feminism and gender equality. As we want to assess how the dual dynamics of democratic backsliding and mobilization of anti-gender movements affects state feminism, we focus on three countries in

which attacks against gender equality and women's rights advocates have recently intensified: Croatia, Hungary, and Poland. Populist governments with anti-gender equality agendas took office in Hungary in 2010 and in Poland in 2015. Consequently, official political discourses changed from either supportive or largely silent on gender equality to openly challenging formally adopted gender equality policy positions of the country (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a). In Croatia, a change in governmental position toward gender equality started after 2011. Under consecutive governments the Croatian playing field was altered, to give more space to actors opposing gender equality, including politicians and institutional actors. Opposition to gender was particularly manifested in debates around family policies, sexual education, and violence against women (Kuhar 2015; Sutlović 2019). These countries are similar in having a postcommunist newEuropean Union (EU) member state trajectory, and in facing democratic erosion (IDEA Institute 2019) and yet different in many ways including in the strength and type of anti-gender mobilization they exhibit and the extent to which their states have embarked on these anti-gender agendas, and in the strength and maturity of their feminist movements, and their capacity to accommodate to the changing political context. The three cases demonstrate the diverse applicability of our approach to these somewhat different gender politics.

Our methodology is qualitative. We use process tracing and textual analysis of movement documents, reports, newspaper articles, and social media postings. Data come partly from previous comparative work on these countries (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a, 2018b; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018) complemented by new rounds of data-collection including desk research, interviews with feminist activist and femocrats and document analysis conducted by field researchers in all three countries since September 2017 (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019; Szczygielska 2019; Sutlović 2019).<sup>3</sup> We do not conduct a thorough comparative analysis in this article but use data from the three cases to illustrate the main arguments that we make.

## State Feminist Theory in the Context of Opposition to Gender Equality and Democratic Backsliding

Over the past decades, feminist scholarship has explored how women's movements can engage with diverse state structures and processes in ways that are conducive to more gender equality (Htun and Weldon 2018; McBride and Mazur 2010). While feminist scholars raised concerns about (cooperation with) the state because of its patriarchal, abusive, or capitalist nature (Kantola 2016), liberal feminism remained mostly optimistic about the potential of cooperation and partnerships to advance women's rights and gender equality.

In contrast to the social movement literature that views movements mainly as outsiders and states as opportunity structures, the gender literature devoted a lot of attention to interfaces between women's rights advocates and states and discussed state actors as agents and potential partners to women's groups. Hernes (1987), theorizing Nordic feminism, coined the term state feminism to denote women-friendly welfare states. This meant that "collaboration took place within a legal framework, in which gender equality became a fundamental value in the politics of the welfare state" (Maeland 2015). While initially most attention was given to feminist attempts to gender the welfare state, later approaches focused on the state as an agent promoting women's rights and thus generally responsive toward women's movements.

Representatives of women's rights interests inside the state were seen as one of the main entry points for "bringing women's movement into the state" (McBride and Mazur 2010, 3). Franzway (1986) introduced the term "femocrats" to denote feminists who work within women's rights offices or other state-run women's services. The conceptual difficulty of drawing a line between a feminist movement inside and outside the state was further developed by Banaszak (2010) in her analysis of the U.S. case. She saw this as an empirical rather than a conceptual question and demonstrated how feminist activism worked and pursued reforms from within the state.

Cooperative constellations between women in different spheres of policy-making were identified as conducive to increased substantive representation (Holli 2008) and inclusion of a gender equality perspective (Squires 2007). Concepts such as strategic partnerships (Halsaa 1998) and triangles of empowerment (Nijeholt et al. 1998) were used to capture partnerships between actors who represent women's interests from different positions: policymakers, femocrats, and women's movements. Woodward (2004) emphasized the importance of feminist experts in network governance. One of the most discussed forms of partnership between women's movements and states are women's policy agencies. The potential of women's policy agencies to support and channel feminist activism and to influence policy outcomes, labeled state feminism, was more systematically analyzed in the comparative project Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS; Stetson and Mazur 1995; Outshoorn and Kantola 2007; McBride and Mazur 2010). The RNGS examined whether state feminism in the "Western post-industrialized world" (McBride and Mazur 2010, 4) contributes to improving the democratic representation of women's interests. The project showed diversity in the strength and scope of existent state feminisms, the vulnerability of the quality of state feminisms to government changes, to reconfiguration of states and governance systems, to intersectionality, and even to gender mainstreaming (Outshoorn and Kantola 2007; Outshoorn 2010). State feminist structures also proved vulnerable to working with homogenizing notions of women's movements, open to mainstream, highly institutionalized feminist groups, but less inclusive of loosely formalized groups, intersectional

perspectives, and minority women or conservative women's groups (Outshoorn and Kantola 2007). In addition, research identified challenges inherent to partnership between states and women's movements such as cooptation, movement dependency on state agencies and funding, and vulnerabilities of feminist organizing in the context of neoliberal reconfiguration of states (Alvarez 1999; Banaszak et al. 2003; Elman 2003).

Overall, however, the optimism about the potential of cooperation and partnerships of women's rights activism with state actors for advancing gender equality prevails in research on state feminism.

The concept of state feminism was developed based on cases from Western postindustrial democracies and was initially not seen as an easy fit for newly democratizing states, such as those in postcommunist Europe (Stetson and Mazur 1995). The specific trajectory of these countries determined the ambivalent relations developed between feminist movements and states during the postcommunist period. Skepticism toward states was highly justified by the history of authoritarian governments intervening in the life of individual citizens. However, as democratization and Europeanization processes moved ahead in CEE, region-specific state feminism research also emerged, and found that, despite reasons for caution, feminist organizing that evolved following 1989 (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a) was very much reliant on partnering with the state and building capacity from within (Ivancheva 2015). After the Beijing Conference in 1995, CEE countries followed the global trend and adopted various state feminist structures (Krizsán 2012). Many of these institutions were extremely volatile, dependent on government ideology, and poorly resourced (Bego 2015; Krizsán and Zentai 2012). However, research also identified remarkably efficient constellations of state feminism in several countries of the CEE region in various periods. Continuity between feminist movements and states was conceptualized and defined as fundamental for policy progress in the more successful gender policy contexts of Croatia and Slovenia starting as long ago as the early 2000s (Spehar 2007). Partnering between states and feminist movements was found critical for promoting gender equality policies in Poland (2009–2015; Gruziel 2015) and in Romania (Popa 2015). More successful state feminist structures in the region have cooperated primarily with select groups of mainstream feminist NGOs.

### Recontextualizing State Feminism

In the current context of democratic erosion and increased opposition to gender equality, a particularly important aspect of democratic backsliding is the closure of civic space by hostile right-wing populist governments that put restrictions on civil society organizations and in particular those defending human rights (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Rutzen 2015; Poppe and Wolff 2017). As the emerging literature on this closure indicates, such restrictions include legislation to control the activities and to ban or restrict foreign

funding of civil society organizations (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Poppe and Wolff 2017; Rutzen 2015). State hostility often also entails repressive or even violent actions ranging from disproportionate auditing as a means of control to policing and physical attacks of activists (Baker et al. 2017; Human Rights First 2017; Gerő and Kerényi 2017). Rather than a partnering state, what emerges is a hostile state with an agenda to silence critical civil society organizations, including women's rights groups, effectively curtailing the space for strategic empowerment and cooperation. Moreover, civil society actors are also defunded and physically persecuted, thus challenging the idea of state feminism or triangles of empowerment in its foundations.

Yet, this literature conceives of civil society as a monolithic entity and focuses mainly on human rights organizations, including women's rights organizations. Actors opposing these organizations, such as anti-gender movements, are ignored and considered part of civil society. We propose that the rise of anti-gender movements reconfigures civic space in a more drastic way, requiring us to assess how state actors deal with feminist activism and their opponents, and if and how states intervene in this dynamics.

Since the late 2000s a strengthening of opposition to gender equality has been widely noted (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Correa, Paternotte, and Kuhar, 2018; Graff, Kapur, and Walters, 2019; and others). Opposition to feminist and sexual politics brings together a broad, diverse, and loosely connected set of actors. They include religious and nonreligious actors, conservative family protection groups, men's rights groups, conservative think tanks, but also conservative women's groups, mobilizing at national and transnational level, in democratic and de-democratizing contexts. Graff, Kapur, and Walters (2019) speak about a "labyrinth of networks, including social media and more militant, aggressive, and misogynistic populist movements, to develop and pursue their brand of gender politics" (547). These networks mobilize to block transformative gender equality agendas, gender, and sexuality-related rights, and instead promote traditional family values and gender relations based on essentialized perceptions of women through their reproductive roles (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019). Anti-gender campaigns developed extremely effective strategies advancing their own agendas. Using and appropriating human rights language, they have become successful lobbyists, promoting "alternative" or counter norms (Vinjamuri 2017), and active litigators (Yamin, Datta, and Andión 2018). Depending on the label authors use, these actors are understood to be a reaction or countermovement against feminist (perceived) gains and policy progress (Chappell 2006; Corredor 2019), or a cultural response to the "neoliberal consensus" (Kováts 2018). Graff, Kapur, and Walters (2019, 541) see this opposition not only as a cultural response, but also as a political strategy that may serve wider populist political agendas. In several countries such conservative and populist right-wing groups supporting anti-gender rhetoric captured state power and gained influence in institutional politics through electoral alliances, ministerial appointments, or



basic service delivery. Increasingly anti-gender groups have entered institutional politics either because of openly anti-gender equality government ideologies, or because of governments' populist use of social tensions and connected civil society to legitimize state power. Anti-gender ideologies became particularly visibly entangled with right-wing populist governments in CEE countries, such as Hungary, Poland, or Croatia (2015–2016).

While their effectiveness at infiltrating state structures varies across countries, anti-gender actors actively compete for standing on gender and sexuality matters in the civic space. This competition is highly unequal. First, anti-gender movements often receive the support of powerful vested interest groups and actors, such as churches (Fetner 2008). Recent reports reveal that anti-gender actors in Europe generate huge amounts of funding and that religious extremists are increasingly tapping into public money to support anti-equality initiatives.<sup>4</sup> Support from religious leaders and other—often transnationally backed—interest groups provide opponents of gender equality with resources, repertoires of action and discourses, and important network ties. Second, the decreasing civic space of human rights organizations makes it increasingly difficult for feminist organizations to resist attacks to gender equality. Third, to the extent that anti-gender sentiments are also taken up by governments or state actors, civil society organizations opposing gender equality are likely to be used and actively supported by governments to advance their own agendas. These civil society organizations help build robust social foundations for backsliding regimes.

The growing presence and power of anti-gender actors supported by manipulative states typical for regimes characterized by democratic erosion undermine state feminism as represented by women's policy agencies, femocrats, or triangles of empowerment. They even raise the possibility of state anti-feminism (Dupuis-Deri 2016). Such contexts indicate the need for the revision of the state feminist conceptual framework to take into consideration voices opposed to gender equality and state responsiveness to them. In light of these changes in gender politics, ideas of partnership and cooperation need to be revised and alternative feminist strategies considered for achieving gender policy progress or even blocking backsliding of previous achievements.

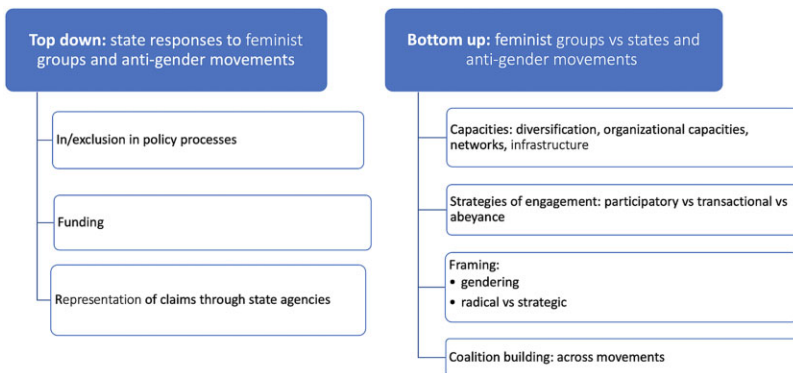
## Analyzing the Reconfigured Relations between Feminist Movements and State Actors

We propose to analyze the reconfigured relationships between feminist movements and state actors, by also taking into account oppositional actors and their particular place and role in this. Our framework of analysis serves primarily to assess the dynamics in contexts where feminist movements and anti-gender actors struggle for access to state institutions and policymaking or contexts of autocratizing states where anti-gender actors capture state politics.

We propose that such a framework may also widen our understanding of state–feminist movement constellations in responsive contexts as well, not just hostile ones. The framework has two dimensions. The first dimension serves to assess responses of state actors both toward feminist movements and toward civil society organizations opposing gender equality. The second dimension focuses on how feminist groups respond to the (reconfigured) state and civic space (see [figure 1](#)).

The first dimension assesses how both feminist groups and their opponents fare in state processes, platforms, and resource allocation that allow and facilitate civil society access to policymaking. Three relevant indicators emerge from the literature for operationalizing such a comparison: inclusion in policymaking through consultation, cogovernance, or other mechanisms; allocation of state resources for civil society organizations; and institutionalization of claims through state agencies (women’s policy agencies or other).

Inclusive policy processes are critical elements of democracy and participation, they are instrumental for promoting rights but are also seen as policy and movement outcomes in themselves (Ferree and Gamson 2003; [Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a](#); [McBride and Mazur 2010](#)). Next, distribution of resources is the most straightforward way to maintain and encourage, or to dismantle, partnerships with various movement actors. Cutting or redirecting resources particularly affects feminist organizations that depend on state resources. Access to consultation and funding can become tools for control in hands of authoritarian governments who tend to use various methods to suppress civil society organizations they perceive as threatening ([Baker et al. 2017](#)). Finally, women’s policy agencies are critical structures giving representation and voice to gender equality claims within the government ([McBride and Mazur 2010](#); [Stetson and Mazur 1995](#); [Squires 2007](#)). Analyzing how these agencies are dismantled, reframed, or replaced to serve different objectives



**Figure 1** Framework for analyzing dynamics between feminist groups and states.

often contrary to gender equality is fundamental to capturing the place of movement priorities within state structures.

Looking from the *perspective of feminist groups*, our analysis aims to capture not only how they respond to reconfigured states, but also to anti-gender equality movements. In the context of hostility to gender equality objectives, women's movements not only have to engage with state actors, but also with civil society actors that challenge their objectives and compete for standing and voice on the very same issues. Anti-gender movements often receive the support of powerful vested-interest groups such as churches but may also be favored by popular prejudices prevalent in the society enhancing their political power. Depending on the relationship between states and anti-gender groups, relationships between feminist movements and anti-gender movements can be either direct or mediated through the state, resulting in very different political dynamics. When women's movements are facing an oppositional alliance between state and civil society actors, their opportunities to resist this power block are limited.

We use three indicators to operationalize movement responses: changing movement capacity, new forms of strategic engagement with state actors, and coalition building.

First, movement capacity relates to material, human, and organizational resources, including leadership and networks. The capacity to mobilize different resources is fundamental for movements and their political influence (Amenta et al. 2010, 296). Second, strategic engagement refers to the ways movements address states. Traditionally they often use less disruptive, persuasive strategies to achieve their aims, including participation in consultation processes or lobbying policymakers, rather than disruptive strategies (Htun and Weldon 2012). Yet, in contexts of state hostility and closure such strategies are obstructed. Movements may turn to instead to confrontational and extrainstitutional repertoires, including petitioning policymakers, street protests, public events targeting public opinion (McAdam and Su, 2002), litigation or turning to international human rights fora, requiring different movement capacities and infrastructure (Andrews 2001). Third, we look at strategies of coalition building either among women's rights organizations or with other allies. Threats to gained rights, or wider discontent with political trends, may generate coalition work that is not necessarily in place in times of partnership with states to respond to such threats (Almeida 2010). Coalitions could bridge otherwise competing feminist and other women's groups, or range across diverse rights groups and prodemocracy groups, trade unions, or others. Strong opposition to gender equality from state actors may also attract new allies, and more propensity to support gender equality in the context of a wider struggle for democracy and rights (O'Dwyer 2012). But strategic action in times of hostility may also exacerbate

competition or generate debate and tension within movements on how to strategize (Fetner 2008).

## State–Movement Interactions in the Context of Anti-gender Mobilization and Democratic Erosion

In this section, we examine interactions between state actors and women's rights advocates in three CEE countries where democracy is eroding and where strong anti-gender movements are active. We first look at developments in Hungary and Poland, which witnessed fast erosion of democracy and state capture by anti-gender actors and then turn to a more moderate case, Croatia, where changes were more incremental and impacted women's rights groups less radically. We look at how state actors respond to women's rights groups and oppositional actors, and then move on to understand women's rights groups' responses in the context of reconfigured states and increasing anti-gender equality mobilization.

### State Responses to Women's Rights Organizations and Anti-gender Movements

Changed relations between the states and women's rights groups are manifest in all three countries on all three dimensions identified in our conceptual framework: inclusion in policymaking; state funding for women's rights organizations; and representation of women's rights claims through state agencies. We look at these separately.

### In/Exclusion in Policy Processes

Consultation mechanisms between state actors and feminist groups were not consolidated in Hungary prior to 2010, though showed improvement between 2009 and 2010. Yet, after 2010 the situation rapidly deteriorated when the Fidesz government dismantled most of the gender equality structures in place under the previous government (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019). After 2010, the Council for Gender Equality was no longer convened, ending formalized interaction between the government and feminist organizations. The Working Group and Roundtable on Human Rights established in 2012 included a thematic women's rights meeting twice a year in which, alongside feminist groups, a series of other groups were also included, such as disability groups, minority rights groups, LGBT groups, conservative women's groups, family protection groups, but also the Hungarian Baptist church and a conservative government-sponsored think tank (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019). The standing of feminist groups was diluted in relevant policy processes and their voice was replaced by conservative and religious organizations. In 2013, the

Association of Hungarian Women, a conservative coalition, gained representation in the European Institute for Gender Equality, replacing previous feminist representation. Starting from 2013, the position of feminist groups further deteriorated as the government became more repressive toward feminist organizations using methods ranging from regulatory tools, such as excessive auditing and surveillance, to blacklisting and vilification by government-owned media. These actions targeted a wider range of rights NGOs in Hungary, but blacklists included all prominent feminist and LGBT groups (Gerő and Kerényi 2017).

Poland improved the inclusion of women's rights advocates in policy processes in the period between 2009 and 2015, by creating different issue-specific consultative fora and developing good cooperation with the Women's Congress (Gruziel 2015; Krizsán and Pap 2016). In 2015, the PiS government brought abrupt changes: dismantling existing gender equality institutions and institutional arrangements and cutting the principal channels of state access available to feminist organizations. The government, including officials such as the Plenipotentiary for Civil Society and Equal Treatment, stated its intention to develop a cadre of "conservative" NGOs. In Poland too, women's organizations and LGBT groups faced physical attacks (Human Rights First 2017) such as police searches, raiding of offices, holding computers, or even arrests of activists. Police raids in October 2017, one day after anti-government marches staged by women's organizations to protest the country's restrictive abortion law, suggest the use of raids as intimidation tools (Szczygielska 2019). In 2017, the government also began a financial review of targeted "liberal" NGOs, which resulted in ordering several feminist organizations to return grant money, while withholding funding from others (Human Rights First 2017, 5). In the meantime, the Polish government included organizations with anti-gender agendas in high-level government and judiciary positions and gave them a prominent standing in policy consultation processes (Szczygielska 2019).

Since 2003, Croatia has had well-functioning cogovernance structures for women's rights issues, including feminist groups and state actors (Spehar 2007, Krizsán, and Roggeband 2018a). Gender equality institutional structures remained remarkably stable over time and are still intact in Croatia. Yet after 2011 opposition to gender equality gradually strengthened and conservative actors were increasingly channeled into consultation processes alongside feminist organizations (Sutlović 2019). Groups opposing gender equality (Vigilare, In the Name of the Family—U ime Obitelji, The Truth about the Istanbul Convention—Istina o istanbulskej) could increasingly introduce their demands and viewpoints on the traditional family, sexual, and reproductive rights and against the concept of gender to the policy process (Sutlović 2019). Yet, feminist organizations were not left out and in some issues they still remained an

important voice. The government appears to have assumed the position of a “neutral arbiter” that does not choose sides, but this position is also highly ambivalent as conservative actors are appointed in relevant positions (Sutlović 2019).

### State Funding

An analysis of changing funding patterns further corroborates this trend. We see three models of curtailing funding to feminist organizations which link to previously existent funding patterns.

In Hungary, feminist groups never received substantial funding from government budgets. After 2010, the government increased its control over public and foreign funding available for civil society (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019). The amendment of the Law on Civil Society Organizations limited the number of NGOs with “public interest” status and reorganized the funding mechanism. Boards deciding about tenders came under governmental control. Framing of calls defines clear normative expectations toward organizations applying for funding on women’s issues, effectively excluding many existing feminist organizations (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019). Since 2015, the government also curtailed foreign funding for NGOs which was the main source of funding for feminist groups. The Norwegian Civil Fund was the first to be challenged because of its refusal to channel funds through governmental mediators. NGOs funded by the Norwegian Civil Fund were excessively monitored (Gerő and Kerényi 2017). In June 2017, the government issued an NGO Law requiring NGOs to register with Hungarian courts and disclose the names of their donors. Consequently the Open Society Foundation, a long-time international donor for rights issues in the region, closed its programs in the country, though it continues funding women’s rights groups from abroad.

In Poland, we also find governmental strategies to defund feminist organizations and redirect public funds to alternative, government-friendly women’s organizations (Human Right First 2017, Human Rights Watch 2019). The newly established National Freedom Institute—Center for the Development of Civil Society—which distributes state funding aims to systematically replace human rights-focused groups with new actors loyal to the government (Szczygielska 2019). In 2019, “among the grant recipients [of the National Freedom Institute], not even one organization was engaged in issues such as migration, women’s or LGBTQ rights” (Pekacka 2019). The Ministry of Justice also discontinued funding for organizations providing support for women victims of domestic violence after protests in 2016 (Juhász and Pap 2018). They were now replaced by organizations with profiles closer to government values, including affiliation with the Church and support for families.

In Croatia, changes were less ideologically targeted, though tendencies are remarkably similar. In April 2016, the Government issued a Statute that

reduced by 50 percent the budget of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, which funds projects and programs of NGOs working on promotion and protection of human rights. Feminist organizations and anti-gender organizations are now competing over increasingly scarce resources (Sutlović 2019). In Croatia, where women's rights groups have been the regular recipients of public funding for some time, the strategy was to tender funding for services previously provided by feminist organizations. This requires high investment of resources as well as conforming to complex protocols that often contrast with feminist principles (Minnesota Advocates et al. 2012). Calls also marginalized or excluded feminist groups. In 2019, for example, the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth, and Social Policy for the first time issued a call for proposals for funding counseling centers for victims of violence in the family. The total fund was 3 million HRK (€400,000). The call raised some controversy because it excluded the organizations that run shelters, that is women's rights organizations, though all of these also have counseling centers.

### Representation of Claims through State Agencies

A third dimension of our analysis is sidelining, closure, or reframing of women's rights agencies to now resonate with anti-gender agendas.

In Hungary, the gender equality machinery was dismantled soon after the change in government in 2010. Prior to that, a small and relatively marginal yet operational Department for Gender Equality existed within the Ministry of Social and Labor Affairs. The new government downsized the department and its portfolio and transferred it under the Deputy State Secretary for Family and Population Policy. Gender equality, now coined women's policy issues, was regrouped with child issues under the umbrella of family policy. Along these lines, as of December 2019, the Women's Policy Department belongs under the Deputy State Secretary for Family Policies. In 2012, a Ministerial Commissioner for Women on the Labor market was appointed with the mandate to identify barriers to women's participation in the labor market and initiate programs, but this position had little weight, and during its mandate the question of gender equality has never been raised (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019).

In Poland, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, which acted as the gender equality policy agency, was merged in 2016 with the Plenipotentiary for Civil Society. The new portfolio focuses only on civil society issues (Szelewa 2016). To protest these developments and denounce the lack of any actual influence on decision making, thirteen experts serving as consultants to the office resigned in November 2016. Also, in January 2016, the Parliament drastically reduced the budget of the Polish Ombudsman, which PiS associated with promoting "gender ideology" (Szczygielska 2019).

In Croatia, gender equality institutional structures emerged in the early 2000s, with the Gender Equality Ombudsperson in place since 2003 and the Office for Gender Equality since 2004. On their creation, both offices were led by feminist experts who worked in cooperation with feminist groups. These structures have remained remarkably stable over time, despite the economic crisis, shifts in governments, and the strengthening opposition to gender equality (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018a).

Our data show the utility of integrating relations between states and anti-gender actors into the analysis. Findings along the three dimensions show how governments in the three countries have become more hostile toward gender equality and feminist activism and allowed anti-gender actors a prominent position in policy spaces. This is particularly illustrated by shifts identified in policy inclusion and funding patterns. We find different state approaches toward feminist groups. The government in Hungary was never very receptive to women's rights demands and no strong state feminism emerged here. Yet, the recent years demonstrate outright hostility both in policy inclusion and in funding patterns, and a replacement of gender equality with women's issues in governmental structures. In Poland, state feminist structures were always very volatile, though remarkable improvement could be noted before 2015 (Gruziel 2015). However, after 2015, the illiberal government actively discredited gender equality as a goal. This is done with the help of civil society organizations that have replaced feminist organizations in policy processes, and the exclusion of feminist groups from funding, and the removal of gender equality from governmental structures. This interrelation between hostile states and anti-gender actors in Hungary and Poland turns the struggle between feminist and anti-gender movements into a struggle against the state and creates a huge power disparity between the two blocks. Feminist groups are further disempowered through multiple state strategies such as defunding and exhausting them, but also by persecution.

Croatia has a better-consolidated gender equality institutional infrastructure and gender policies (Spehar 2007, Sutlović 2019), which largely remained in place despite increased hostility. It nevertheless faces a reconfigured policy process in which anti-gender forces are also included as stakeholders on gender equality issues. They now face a falsely democratic arena populated by uncivil civil society (Roggeband and Glasius 2020) in which the state pretends to be neutral rather than a protector of rights, and the struggle for equality has to be fought with the anti-gender movement within and outside state arenas. Overall, the political space that can be claimed by women's rights advocates is narrower compared to the early 2000s.

### Coming from the Perspective of Women's Rights Groups

In the three countries, feminist actors currently find themselves facing hostile or neutral states, intensified attacks, and strong competition for access



from anti-gender equality groups. Our analysis shows how this changing context impacts feminist groups' responses. We identify different patterns depending on levels of state hostility, linkages between state and anti-gender movements, and capacities of feminist groups including the level of their NGOization (Jakobson and Saxonberg 2014).

In Hungary, anti-gender equality mobilization did not intensify until 2017 when the Istanbul Convention debates started. Explicitly gendered policy debates were largely absent in Hungary before the illiberal turn. After 2010, incidental references were made to the threat of gender ideology; however, these remained rather marginal and mostly (but not exclusively) linked to far-right media and political actors (Félix 2015). The initially weak anti-gender voices consolidated with the emergence of a number of new state-sponsored think tanks, GONGOs, and transnationally embedded civil society organizations such as the Center for Fundamental Rights, the Center for Human Dignity, or Citizengo. Compared to Croatia and Poland these forces had relatively weak public support but are instruments of an illiberal government agenda that successfully shifted policy debates in a highly gendered direction. Hungarian feminist groups, though weak and with basically no grassroots constituency, responded to the increasing anti-gender rhetoric with unprecedented disruptive protest activity already in the early years of the Orbán government. In 2012, upon the misogynistic reception by the Parliament of a petition for criminalizing domestic violence, street and Facebook-based protests were launched. Not only were these protests more forceful and more gendered than earlier tactics, but they also extended the feminist coalition beyond the usual small circle to include, among others, right-wing women MPs and wives of right-wing government MPs. Unprecedented feminist mobilization efforts also emerged around the Istanbul Convention in November–December 2017. A petition to demand ratification was signed by forty-eight organizations, including, next to feminist groups, a wide variety of other organizations and 5,000 individuals (NANE 2018). However, the sustained hostility and threats of the Fidesz government throughout the years drove several formalized feminist groups out of business by 2016. The current state of the Hungarian women's movement can be characterized as abeyance (Taylor 1989). Feminist capillaries seem to have survived but there is limited engagement with state actors, no successful attempts at grassroots mobilization and only limited outreach to a wider constituency. Tactics used are mainly Budapest-based small-scale marches and workshops. A new generation of mostly nonaffiliated activists bring in new strategies and an intersectional angle. Yet, these remain fragmented and, as with previous activism, far less dense than in the other two contexts (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019). Also, efforts to join wider coalitions to defend democracy and human rights remained limited (Krizsán and Sebestyén 2019).

Poland has long and culturally embedded traditions of hostility to gender equality (Gruziel 2015). Since PiS took office in 2015, the ideology of the anti-

gender mobilization meets the ideological position of the Polish state. Feminist organizations are now facing an extraordinarily powerful enemy, lining up the state, anti-gender civil society, and the church. In the absence of access to policymaking and state funding, feminist groups responded fiercely, developing new strategies and capacities independent of state actors. The capacity and resilience of the movement are well illustrated by resistance to restrictions of abortion policy (in 2016, 2017, 2020). A massive wave of protest, mobilizing at times over 150,000 people in different cities of Poland, repeatedly led the government to back down from various policy proposals that conflicted with women's rights. The collection of over 500,000 signatures for a petition on abortion in 2017 also shows the strength and appeal of the new strategy to mobilize beyond feminist circles. Internet and social media-based tools aid these efforts, attempting to involve women in rural and small-town areas, and facilitating access to younger generations (Szczygielska 2019). In this process, women's rights agendas on abortion or the Istanbul Convention were successfully connected to wider prodemocracy political protests (Szczygielska 2019).

In Croatia, the position of anti-gender groups became more articulated after 2008 when the conservative HDZ government became more supportive toward traditional family values. The 2013 marriage referendum and later the debate on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention brought together a variety of "right-wing civil society" actors that received state support and access to policy processes (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2018). In the context of the state acting as a quasi-neutral arbiter (as discussed above), the struggle for gender equality occurred both within and outside the state arena. Croatian feminism, though riven by tensions, dealt with the changing context as a mature and diversified movement, empowered by new waves of activism (Sutlović 2019). In response to the changing political context, and volatile inclusion in policy processes after 2011, the movement increasingly built on its diversified capacities and engaged in wider coalitions of actors (Sutlović 2019). While their standing was somewhat diluted, feminist groups were still invited to participate in new policy projects (e.g. the ratification of the Istanbul Convention or the new domestic violence law). This inclusion allowed them to put direct pressure on state actors and oppose anti-gender equality groups within these formalized settings. At the same time, struggles intensified on the streets, as well. The Croatian women's movement long had strongholds in cities beyond the capital, which were increasingly mobilized. Grassroots and social network-based mobilization were used, particularly in Night Marches and in abortion protests across the country, but also in protests and organizing in support of the Istanbul Convention (Sutlović 2019). Building on a tradition of prodemocracy coalitions from before 2000 (Irvine and Sutlović 2015), the movement joined wider prights and democracy alliances. They decried austerity measures in cooperation with trade unions and the Workers Front and denounced government corruption. The 'Croatia Can Do Better' protest in 2016

united 250 civil society organizations covering the full human rights spectrum, including feminist groups.

Overall, we find a general move away from transactional activism toward more disruptive forms of activism. Yet, feminist responses in the three countries vary depending on the different configurations of hostility to gender equality or previous patterns of feminist organizing. The traditionally strong and diversified feminist movement in Croatia faces a “neutral” state which now gives equal standing to the anti-gender movement, resulting in a continuing struggle both in state arenas and on the street. The Hungarian and Polish movements are dealing with a reconfigured state whose ideology integrates anti-gender elements. In Poland, this opposition has a long tradition and is much more powerful compared to Hungary. Polish women’s rights groups have developed a strategy of active resistance, using strongly disruptive tactics and broad coalitions (Szczygielska 2019). Hungary’s traditionally weak feminist movement is most vulnerable to state hostility. Here the illiberal state brings under its tutelage the anti-gender movement, while it persecutes feminist activism, forcing the movement into abeyance.

## Conclusions

Our analysis looked at the changing relationship between states and feminist groups in the face of strengthening anti-gender mobilization and a reconfigured civic space in contexts of de-democratization and what this implies for the analytical framework of state feminism.

Our three cases show state behavior that is far from benevolent to gender equality and its advocates. States actively engage in reconfiguring the civic space by changing policy inclusion and funding patterns to the disadvantage of feminist groups and to the advantage of anti-gender groups. These states are either supporting anti-gender groups or claim to be neutral. Our framework provides tools to assess what this means in terms of state relationship vis-à-vis feminist groups: a total replacement by anti-gender actors, or—at best—a competition between feminist groups and anti-gender groups for voice and resources. Two of these states, Hungary and Poland, qualify as anti-feminist regimes (Dupuis-Deri 2016). The neutral state model that emerges from the Croatian case poses fundamental questions about the meanings of democratic, diverse, and inclusive policy processes.

Our cases illustrate the importance of including oppositional actors in understanding relations between women’s rights groups and states. The presence of anti-gender actors drastically alters the political space, as they become competitors to feminist groups, or form powerful alliances with states to oppose gender equality groups and their agendas, so creating a new power dynamics in policy processes.

Coming from the perspective of feminist groups, our analysis demonstrates a move away from exclusive reliance on transactional engagement with states as an optimal strategy to promote gender equality, when feminist groups face contexts of democratic erosion, strong anti-gender mobilizations, and even alliances between states and anti-gender movements. The context of state hostility and reconfigured civic space show the utility of more diversified movement infrastructures meaning diverse capacities (grassroots, less institutionalized) and diverse strategies (disruptive, confrontational rather than institutionalized, negotiated). We see both the devastating effect of the continuity between state and anti-gender civil society agendas (in Hungary) but also how this triggers a revitalized and diversified feminist activism which becomes a key stakeholder in the struggle for democracy (Poland). We also see the importance of previous trajectories of feminist organizing and capacities available to stand up to new types of hostility to gender equality (in Croatia and Poland) and the devastating effect of its absence. A shift toward disruptive and participatory activism matching anti-gender mobilization strategies and putting pressure on hostile states that pursue anti-gender agendas seems to have become the pattern under the new circumstances.

What does our analysis tell us about de-democratization? First of all our analysis shows the need for conceptual frameworks that allow for nonlinear paths of democratic—and by extension gender inclusive—development (Carothers 2002) rather than theorizing for progress only. Our framework looks at cooperation between state actors and women's movements in the context of democratic erosion. We suggest amendments to the state feminism framework which makes it applicable to circumstances of strong anti-gender mobilization and to backsliding states, vulnerable to state capture by anti-gender interests. Our analysis contributes to understanding gendered aspects of democratic erosion in the field of inclusion and participation in policy processes, which can be seen as fundamental dimensions of participatory and egalitarian democracy (Coppedge et al. 2015). We show that exclusion and consequently de-democratization do not necessarily happen through closure of the civic space or the exclusion of civil society altogether, but that closure is selective and takes place with reference to democracy, pluralism, and inclusion. The principles of inclusion and pluralism are invoked to legitimate the selective inclusion of actors and claims that challenge and curtail the rights of disadvantaged groups: women in this particular case. Including oppositional actors in the state feminism analytical framework allows us to better grasp gender progress and regression and thereby the gendered aspects of democracy and de-democratization.

## Notes

1. An adapted version of the argument in this paper was published in Hungarian as part of the publication *Támogatás és támadás. Női civil szervezetek az illiberális demokráciában* (2020) edited by Anna Fejős and Dorottya Szikra, at the Social Science Research Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Available at [https://szociologia.tk.hu/uploads/files/2021/tam\\_tam.pdf](https://szociologia.tk.hu/uploads/files/2021/tam_tam.pdf)
2. Women’s movements are variably related to feminist movements. [Ferree and Mueller \(2004, 7\)](#) define feminism as a broad transformative goal of challenging and changing unequal gender relations. In this article, in line with state feminism literature, when looking at state feminist structures and their partnership with women’s movements we limit our attention to feminist movements “whether or not individuals or groups chose to call themselves feminist,” and mainly, though not exclusively, to liberal, and left-wing feminist groups. It is this part of the women’s movement and their transformative understanding of gender equality that is depicted and antagonized by anti-gender movements as advocates of gender ideology. We do not include in our definition conservative and other women’s groups that have no transformative claims on gender equality and some of which actually share common positions with anti-gender mobilizations particularly in essentializing women and their reproductive roles in society roles ([Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019](#)).
3. For length considerations when discussing empirical data, we refer to work written or commissioned by us, rather than direct references to primary data.
4. See the reports of OpenDemocracy: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/> and the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights: <https://www.epfweb.org/node/551>.

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