

Radical right challenges for women's rights  
and counteraction ratification of the Istanbul Convention  
in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine



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The purpose of the research was to study the situation regarding right radical challenges for women's rights and counteraction ratification Istanbul Convention in EaP countries in order to develop the strategy for addressing religious and radical rights anti-gender initiatives focused against women's rights and ratification Istanbul Convention in EaP countries - in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Focused further on developing a joint outreach plan for the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Eastern Partnership National Civil Society Platforms to promote the implementation / ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Eastern Partnership region.

## General overview of the situation in the region

The women's rights and feminist movement in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has grown significantly in the last 10 years. Feminist organizations and initiatives are increasing in strength and influence; street marches are abundant; and, women's rights are being institutionalized. On the other hand, the anti-gender movement has also intensified, increasing its influence at all levels of society. Their members participate in government advisory bodies, constantly initiate anti-gender draft laws and events, and attack feminist and LGBTI events and activists. They are connected to, and funded by, transnational anti-gender groups.

The anti-gender situation has worsened surrounding ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Several of our countries signed the document, but only Georgia has ratified it. Because the Istanbul Convention defines the concept of "gender," radical right-wing and clerical groups have argued that the IC would promote "new" gender roles and same-sex relationships<sup>1</sup> and threaten the "traditional institution of the family."<sup>2</sup> The information space in our countries is filled with media content designed to heighten moral panic about "gender." Various "anti-gender initiatives" organized campaigns to convince legislators not to vote for ratification.<sup>3 4</sup> For example, in August 2019, newly elected MPs from Ukraine's President's party stated they would consult the Ukrainian Council of Churches before deciding whether to ratify the Istanbul Convention. In Moldova, religious clerics signed an appeal to the President and Parliament, thus postponing ratification.

Many "anti-gender" groups seek to replace the protection of women's rights with a narrative of "preserving family values." For example, in Ukraine, 300-plus MPs comprise a new multi-party association, "Values, Dignity and the Family."<sup>5</sup> Radical legal and religious proposals to restrict abortion<sup>6</sup> or ban "LGBTI propaganda" prevail,<sup>7</sup> and efforts to create state bodies on family protection, organize "family forums," and include "family values" in education abound. State support to far-right groups, political parties and youth initiatives is rising.<sup>8</sup> E.g., government funds are provided to military camps that promote militarization and patriarchal gender roles and that

<sup>1</sup><https://spzh.news/en/news/40019-no-to-gender-council-of-churches-speaks-out-against-ratification-of-istanbul-convention>

<sup>2</sup><https://spzh.news/en/news/40019-no-to-gender-council-of-churches-speaks-out-against-ratification-of-istanbul-convention>

<sup>3</sup><https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/09/26/when-european-values-do-not-count-anti-gender-ideology-and-the-failure-to-comprehensively-address-gbv-in-ukraine/>

<sup>4</sup><http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/554-uccro-appeal-to-parliament-against-istanbul-convention>

<sup>5</sup><https://rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/187743.html>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.kyivpost.com/multimedia/photo/protest-held-kyiv-law-limiting-right-abortion>

<sup>7</sup><http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1539828666>

<sup>8</sup><https://hromadske.radio/news/2018/06/13/derzhava-finansuye-radykalnyh-nacionalistiv-yak-s14-otrymala-mayzhe-pivmilyona-detali-utochneno>

teach boys how to handle weapons.<sup>9</sup> In Moldova, the church has the highest rate of trust but furthers anti-LGBTI rhetoric and stereotypes, while politicians have unified to promote ‘traditional’ values.<sup>10</sup>

This “anti-gender” trend is shrinking space for women’s and LGBTI movements. This includes increasing resistance to laws on hate speech, human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and domestic violence, while increasing support for laws that hinder NGO activities and expose HRDs to sanctions (e.g. “foreign agents” laws). Feminist and LGBTI activists, including our NGO members, are the targets of street violence and confrontations from ultra-right groups.<sup>11</sup>

## **Specifics in participating countries**

### **Armenia**

Since around mid-2000s, a phenomenon called anti-genderism, “anti-genderismus”, as it is coined by Villa (2017:99), emerged in Europe and the neighboring countries. Although Villa’s focus is mainly on Germany, her interpretation of anti-genderism can be spread in other contexts as well. “Anti-genderism is a bridging signifier for a variety of anti-statal, anti-EU, mainly ethno-nationalist racist and/or xenophobic, aggressively heteronormative and overall anti-pluralistic constellations...”, she writes (Ibid). In the literature on anti-genderism, “gender” and “genderism”, are terms to describe mostly negativity and danger of gender policies, reproductive rights, and feminism (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017a; Graff and Korolczuk, 2017b).

In recent years, with the rise of anti-genderism in regions other than Europe, like the Central Asia and the Caucasus, a debate has started on the establishment of anti-gender mobilization as a movement with no borders. The constant “triggering of events” (Scott, 1990) happening in different parts of the world shows that anti-genderism is being established as a movement and has both specific and shared nationalist attributes. Some scholars in this field of studies point out that the actual reason for anti-gender mobilization are the geopolitical processes [in different regions], and gender politics is a “scapegoat” for the politics around other issues (Peto, 2015). Apparently under the processes of scapegoating, as the literature on anti-gender movements shows, explicitly populist and right-wing politics are covered. As some of the prominent researchers in this area mention, the use and manipulation of “gender ideology” is not only an end in itself but rather a “glue” for conservatives, intellectuals and activists (Brustier, 2015:34; Peto, 2015: 126-127).

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/07/16/ukrainian-far-right-extremists-receive-state-funds-to-teach-patriotism/>

<sup>10</sup> [http://cdf.md/files/resources/130/Raport\\_Barbatii%20si%20egalitatea%20de%20gen.pdf](http://cdf.md/files/resources/130/Raport_Barbatii%20si%20egalitatea%20de%20gen.pdf)

<sup>11</sup><https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/> see section 6; <https://freedomhouse.org/article/joint-letter-urgent-need-ukrainian-authorities-end-impunity-radical-violence>

Perhaps, the movement follows the same ideology around the globe but, as its naming and specific local purposes it serves show, depending on context there can be differences to be articulated within this anti-gender discourse. A significant number of scholars have analyzed and tackled the rise of and the problematics raised by these so-called anti-gender movements in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Armenia, and so on. The authors discuss and analyze the features, the actors and developments of anti-gender mobilizations and counter-mobilizations (or self-defense) in these three countries. Some of them give an analysis of anti-gender movements in Europe with an emphasis on the mobilization against “gender” and “gender equality” (Kovacs, 2017). Others, such as Graff (2014) and Nikoghosyan (2015) have rather short reflections on their and their other feminist colleagues’ experiences of anti-gender backlash in Poland and Armenia. Some other scholars, particularly in Armenia (Harutyunyan, 2016), analyze the “Gender Hysteria” back in 2013 and try to find the traces of gender discourse in Armenia.

Anti-gender movements have become a serious both professional and personal challenge for those who were and are still working in the fields of gender equality, women’s rights, LGBTQI+ rights, in gender studies discipline, or those who were or are out of the expectations of traditional (or conservative) norms (Kovacs, 2017:175; Harutyunyan, 2016:17; Nikoghosyan, 2015:25; Graff, 2014:431). The research of the roots of anti-gender discourse and “gender ideology” in Western and Central European countries is found in papers related to Vatican (Paternotte, 2015 cited in Kovacs, 2017:178). These relations bring the discourse back to 1995 UN Beijing Conference on Women<sup>12</sup> (which was afterwards named as dedicated to gender mainstreaming) following which “the Holy See included in its documents terms like ‘gender feminists’ and ‘gender agenda’” (Ibid). It is also interesting that other sources refer to it as well. For instance, it is also discussed that the term “gender ideology” was widely circulated among Catholic religious circles after the publication of Dale O’Leary’s “The Gender Agenda” (Kane, 2018). The connection of this discourse with the Roman Catholic Church explains or spreads some light, at least, on its appearance in Poland and Hungary, where “gender ideology” was expected to be “worse than Communism and Nazism put together” (Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, cited in Graff, 2014:432).

The idea of danger in gender-related issues has similarities in the Armenian and Georgian contexts. Aghdgomelashvili (2015:11) states that in Georgia, for example, the church published a sort of a statement in which they condemned the “abnormal sexual relations” as a mortal sin which is going to put the nation in danger (Ibid). Moreover, several anti-gay rallies have been organized in Tbilisi and Batumi cities which were headed by priests (2015:12). And these events have happened in case that Georgia decriminalized homosexuality in 2000, and in 2014, “despite opposition from the Orthodox Church, parliament passed an anti-discrimination law prohibiting discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity” (Ibid).

As both research and practice show church in this anti-gender movement has a crucial role. Particularly, it is functioning both as a main actor in the movement and as a so-called “right hand”

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<sup>12</sup> Beijing and its Follow-up, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/>

for states (especially with radical right-wing politics) to perpetuate the anti-gender agenda and cover up “a deeper and profound change in the European political and value system” (Peto, 2015:127).

The opposition to “gender” and “gender ideology” in the discourse of nation and saving its future from it is especially interesting to discuss in the split of what anti-gender movement is fighting against. In Kovacs’ article “gender ideology” is analyzed as constructed as an “enemy in Europe” which is reflected in predominantly European regional or geographical context (2017:176). Nevertheless, if Kovacs and Graff describe and weave nationalism with Church and Catholicism, in Armenian context presented by Nikoghosyan and Harutyunyan, although church plays an important role in anti-gender public mobilization (as discussed above), it is not as much active as “newly established ultra-nationalist groups” (Nikoghosyan, 2015:25). These kinds of attacks on women’s and LGBTQI+ organizations and activists reflect the growth of “neo-nationalist extremism in Armenia” (Ibid). In addition, anti-gender movement, while fighting against “gender ideology”, at the same time establishes its own nationalist ideology.

One of the trends that is mediating in the literature on anti-gender movements (in some explicitly, in some not), is the work in coalitions. Nikoghosyan (2015) mentions the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women in Armenia<sup>13</sup> which was established long before the anti-gender attacks have begun. She also points out that especially after the “orchestrated backlash” against gender some of the active women’s organizations and activists started working on amelioration of their strategies and collaborated more (26). “The experience of being targeted led to greater in-group cohesion, communication, and more trust among the groups” (Ibid). Even though in other works coalitions and work in coalitions are not mentioned, there are other authors, such as Andrea Krizsan and Conny Roggeband, who in their book “The Gender Politics of Domestic Violence” (2017) discuss the coalition building practices within the feminist movement in Central and Eastern European region.

Another significant difference that is worth mentioning regarding nationalism, is that these anti-gender movements put a specific emphasis on colonial/neo-colonial power of West (specifically Europe) which is according to them imposing some “European values” and politics on other countries (Kovacs, 2017:176; Harutyunyan, 2016:29). In case of Armenia with its fluid status and undecidedness about European Union Association and membership to Eurasian Economic Union in 2013, it is, more or less, “reasonable” that these groups fear the expected changes in their political systems which can occasionally bring changes in attitudes as well. In her article Kovacs mentions the omnipresence of “the discourse of foreign forces (like EU, UN, WHO)” (2017:176) but there is no elaboration on where this issue leads to. One of the major anti-gender arguments at the beginning of the movement in Armenia was that European Union, United Nations, World Bank, and other foreign and international organizations, including Embassies of US, UK, and Germany were supporting the NGOs and activists, described as “pro-gender” in the beginning of

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<sup>13</sup> Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women in Armenia: <http://coalitionagainstviolence.org/en/home/>

this analysis, in order to radically transform Armenian traditions and destroy the nation (Harutyunyan, 2016:17). Therefore, these NGOs and their members were presented as enemies and/or foreign agents, “grant-eaters”, as they were named by the members of anti-gender movement, that sold their souls and country for money (Sarafyan, 2015).

We know what is happening around the world and it is evident that the human rights, especially women’s rights and gender equality are under attacks of different anti-gender groups. Anti-gender, anti-feminism, and anti-human rights groups have been active recently worldwide by their claims that ‘gender’ and everything related to it are something ‘inhuman’, ‘non-Christian’, something that destroys the humanity, etc. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming has been equated to a ‘hidden agenda’ of promoting the ‘rights of minorities’, and therefore, it means the agenda of gender mainstreaming is the conversion of people to homosexuals. These ideas, largely circulated within the rhetoric of far-right political systems and parties around the world, and especially in Europe, Latin America, etc., are also used for political purposes to promote this or that political agenda in different countries. The fight is not only against the word ‘gender’ but also feminism and all the progressive ideas that different kinds of feminism(s) are promoting in their agendas. So-called ‘fear of feminism’ (Gould, 1990) combined the right-wing politics and agendas and public presentation and misstatement of feminism as against the ‘family values’ (Ibid).

As we can see from a short analysis, anti-genderism and anti-feminism are multi-level and multi-dimensional expression of hatred against feminism and gender equality, the concept of ‘gender’ in general which is being transferred to human-to-human interactions level and becomes a threat for societies especially in terms that anti-genders are also physically attacking feminists, feminist scholars (take J. Butler, for example), human rights activists, and women human rights defenders (take, L. Aharonian, for example). They also target the organizations working with the offices of Open Society Institutes in different countries (as ‘Soros-backed’ organizations and perverts, masons). These groups are negatively targeting the very basic human rights and especially the ones related to human’s sexuality, gender identity and reproductive rights. With the fact that many religious organizations, and especially most part of the Christian Church is supporting these ideological directions it is not a surprise that abortion rights are again being stood at the crossroad of human rights and right-wing discussions. At this point, Argentina, Brazil, Poland and other countries are under the threat of the discussions on abortions and the things are not going into progressive vein at all. As J.M. Wesley (2013) mentions, the ‘war on women’ is more than an emotionally charged phrase to mobilize progressive groups fighting for social equity and economic justice for women. For the past decade, basically, anti-gender forces, especially, have been putting their efforts in undermine the many gains women have had through feminist movements around the world, from equal pay worldwide campaigns to sexual violence and abortion.

## Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is a country with the global human rights paradigm and shrinking space for civil society. In 2014 there occurred the unprecedented crackdown on NGOs that mostly damaged the legal environment, organizational capacities, infrastructure, financial viability, advocacy, service provision and public image of

*The right to assembly* is severely restricted in the country, and rallies and demonstrations must be coordinated with governmental authorities, additionally, the location of assembly must be agreed in advance with the Executive Authorities. By using this restrictions government put serious pressure on human rights activists.

*Defamation* is subject to criminal liability in Azerbaijan. Although the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly recommended the country to abolish it, the law is still in force. Azerbaijan ranks last places for the many international indicators of *freedom of speech and media freedom*. As a consequence of such an environment, self-censorship is widespread among Azerbaijani journalists.

*LGBTQI people* in Azerbaijan face legal and social challenges not experienced by non-LGBTQI residents. Same-sex sexual activity has been legal in Azerbaijan since 1 September 2000.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is not banned in the country and same-sex marriage is outlawed. In 2020, ILGA-Europe again declared Azerbaijan the worst country in all of Europe for LGBT rights, with the country receiving a final score of just 2%.<sup>15</sup>

Gender movement in Azerbaijan is taking its fragile steps through small marginalized groups. With the 2014 crackdown on CSO sector and funding community the operation environment for CSOs significantly worsened, limiting the scope of any action, including gender-oriented ones.

In March 2019 and 2020 feminist initiative group, constituting around 50 activists, demarched on International Women's Day and in October 2019 with a more radical standpoint, calling the government for immediate signature and ratification of Istanbul Convention as a key step to address GBV and DV. However, the group, mostly consisting of public activists and DV survivors, faced with the cruelty of police which dispersed the group in the streets of Baku. The protesters were detained for several hours, some faced police intimidation and violence. There was no official reaction from the government to the incidents.

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<sup>14</sup> *LGBT Rights in Azerbaijan | Equaldex*". [www.equaldex.com](http://www.equaldex.com).

<sup>15</sup> *Rainbow Europe 2020 | ILGA-Europe*". [www.ilga-europe.org](http://www.ilga-europe.org).

Yet these limitations are regarded as the opposition of the government to prevent any mass protest, rather than anti-gender action per se.

As a matter of fact, there is no serious political and ideological segregation in the Azerbaijan society when it comes to gender; there are no radical anti-gender groups in Azerbaijan at the visible level, either. Although generally anti-gender mood exists in the society it can hardly be called 'movement' per se for the reason of the lack of movement capacity in general, that is reasoned with the lack of political literacy and civic consciousness, and years of intimidated civic rights.

Yet, the anti-gender mood in the society is there, considering that Azerbaijani society is quite conservative with majority of Muslim population.

## Belarus

When Alexander Lukashenko criticized the bill on addressing domestic violence drafted by the Ministry of Interior (Mol) in 2018, the influence of anti-gender forces grew stronger. The bill was based on the norms and regulations of Istanbul Convention. Since then, the Istanbul Convention has never been mentioned in the public discussions involving representative of the Ministry of Interior. The bill was rejected due to among other things the activity of the conservative forces who similarly to the President saw the bill as a threat to traditional family values. The Coordination Council of the Public Pro-Family Forces (essentially a union of pro-life organizations) was successfully spamming various ministries and bodies with appeals and requests to review the Mol bill on opposing domestic violence. In other words, the agenda of opposing and addressing violence against women at the national level is seen both by the President and the conservative members of the lower chamber of Parliament as something which is foreign to Belarus and is imported from the West. Ideologically speaking, it is the interests of the nation-state in connection to the traditional imagery of women-family-child-nation and protection of the meaning of what it means to be a Belarusian which are at stake.

Violence, which is a comprehensive problem requiring participation of different stakeholders, opens up a space for revealing the most acute challenges related to the state participation in finding solutions to public issues and to the interaction of the activists and state bodies in Belarus. Women's non-systemic resistance and commitment to mobilize around the issue of violence against women plays a huge role in this context. Our research revealed that violence against women is currently is not seen as the issue which would allow to bring together organizations from the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum and women of various social background with varied political attitudes and national identities. Women's/ feminist initiatives do not have a strong enough, sustainable influence, and when activists join new mechanisms they are unable to pursue their agenda due to the strong priorities put forward by those they join forces with. All of this takes place in the context where there is a lack of mechanisms to resolve arguments and lack of opportunities to discuss values (i.e. the value of gender equality) which would be crucial for overcoming political crisis of 2020 and achieving social consensus.

When the MoI bill was rejected, a *You go, girl!* feminist group was created; the activists of the group later became members both of the Belarusian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum, and the Coordination Council led by the ex-presidential candidate Svetlana Tihanovskaya. However this also failed to promote women's agenda and to bring ratification of the Istanbul Convention back to the public discourse.

## Georgia

The rise of the SOGI concept in the international human rights system and the social constructionist definition of gender in the Istanbul Convention were among the defining moments in developing the 'gender ideology' discourse and anti-gender movements in the 2010s.<sup>16</sup> The term gender has been seriously contested and challenged in international human rights fora.

The anti-gender movements, mobilized under the umbrella of fighting 'gender ideology,' have put the hard-fought against women's rights, especially women's reproductive and sexual rights. The term gender was threatening not only "because of the idea that 'male' and 'female' are socially constructed categories," but also "because it opened the door to different and fluid sexuality identities which are not constrained by biological identification".<sup>17</sup>

Allover Central and Eastern Europe "gender backlash" encompasses activities pursued by various local initiatives, which firmly promote tradition over equality. These groups appear to be backed and inspired both by influential US-American "Pro-life" organizations and the Kremlin's "Gay-ropo" propaganda, which aims to discredit the European Union as a place of moral decline.<sup>18</sup> Together with Orthodox and Catholic churches and Nationalistic groups, they play the central role in mobilizing anti-gender movements in the EaP countries. And are very vocal in promoting tradition over gender equality. They contest women's reproductive rights, gender equality, sexuality education, same-sex marriage and the Council of Europe Convention on Violence Against Women (Istanbul Convention). In Russia, the lately passed laws on "foreign agents" (2012), "undesirable organizations"(2015), Anti-homo propaganda Law (2015), law decriminalizing domestic battery (2017), further undermine regional gender equality discourse.

Georgia's country context analysis shows that far-right groups became more powerful in the past decade in Georgia, and their anti-western narratives coincide with the Georgian Orthodox

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<sup>16</sup> Marija Antic, Ivana Radacic - The evolving understanding of gender in international law and 'gender ideology' pushback 25 years since the Beijing conference on women - Women's Studies International Forum 83 (2020).

<sup>17</sup> Buss, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Boll Stiftung; Democracy; Vol 38 - Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise?

Church's discourse. This phenomenon's causes and roots are linked to the world's authoritarian spin and anti-liberal social agenda.<sup>19</sup>

Though Georgia has adopted the most comprehensive legislation in EaP Region on GE, VAW and non-discrimination,<sup>20</sup> anti-gender rallies and attacks on women's sexual and reproductive rights have an early and a long history.<sup>21</sup>

I anticipate 2010 as opening the ascended confrontation against gender equality led by the Georgian Orthodox church. When Georgian Parliament adopted "Gender Equality Law", the Patriarch condemned the notion of Gender Equality. In his Easter Epistle the Patriarch preached that a woman should bathe a man's feet and be obedient.

In parallel to attacks on WHR massive anti-gay rallies were organized through the decade by the Orthodox church, and other rightwing groups to purify the cities from «sinners»<sup>22</sup>.

Besides clerical attacks, in Georgia, the Soviet myth that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon still is very much alive. It makes it easy to link homosexuality to Western, liberal values and political groups promoting such values.

On May 17, 2013 thousands of far-right extremists physically attacked IDAHOBIT demonstrators and disrupted a peaceful demonstration.<sup>23</sup>

The following year, the Georgian Orthodox Church declared May 17 Family Holiness Day. With this direct manifestation, the Georgian Orthodox Church put "family values", which is of the highest importance for Georgian society, into a confrontation with LGBTQI+ rights. To silence activists, Georgian priests led thousands of Orthodox Christians in Tbilisi's central streets on the Family Holiness Day.

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<sup>19</sup> EU. (2017). Shrinking space for civil society: the EU response.

<sup>20</sup> Georgia decriminalized homosexuality in 2000, followed by legal reform in several areas, including employment and healthcare. In 2012, crimes committed on the grounds of a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity are added to the list of aggravating criminal code circumstances. In 2014, Parliament passed an anti-discrimination law prohibiting discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). SOGI issues are also part of Georgia's Human Rights Strategy. In 2017 - Ratification of Istanbul Convention- the harmonization process - I stage: 11 legal amendments; II stage: 25 laws amended.

<sup>21</sup> E. Aghdgomelashvili - Heinrich Boll Stiftung; Democracy; Vol 38

<sup>22</sup> In Batumi 2010; In Tbilisi 2012 counter-demonstration of Orthodox Parents' Union on International Day Against Homophobia; LGBTQI+ demonstrations, IDAHOBIT, and Pride events face violence so that throughout years organizers cancel the events. In 2019, Tbilisi Pride had to change the plan of their action because the State openly declared that the police could not ensure Pride participants' safety. 2019 - Despite the efforts of radical groups, the premiere of the film "And Then We Danced" (director Levan Akin) took place at the Gallery in Tbilisi. An hour before the show, clerics arrived at the location and performed religious rituals.

<sup>23</sup> On the 17 May 2013, 30,000 the Orthodox Church counter-demonstrators attacked one hundred LGBT activists. The crowds smashed windows of buses, threw stones, and tried to pull activists from the vehicles. The government performed passive response to the brutality, as for the Orthodox Patriarchy, they «congratulated the Georgian people on their victory» obviously further encouraged perpetrators.

In 2015, an MP of Georgian Dream, Soso Jachviani, submitted two legal bills prepared by Georgian Demographic Society XXI<sup>24</sup>. One demanded the removal of terms "sexual orientation" and "gender" from the Anti-Discrimination Law, another - to make "insult of religious feelings" punishable by the Administrative Code of Georgia.

Intimidation and violent attacks against civil society by religious corporations, and far-rights are among the main challenges that shrink the space for democracy.<sup>25</sup> According to the Feminist Resistance and Resilience report "a result of deliberate efforts to silence dissenting voices — actions that stem from a reasserting hetero-patriarchal governance."<sup>26</sup> These create institutional and existential threats to civic activism in physical and digital spaces.

The LGBTI community and human rights defenders point on Orthodox clergymen's aggressive strategy to purify public space.<sup>27</sup> When more, influential movements like the «Pan Armenian Parents» initiative are blacklisting activists and defaming them online.

The complex social and political tissue of anti-gender movements comprised of international and regional players, troll factories, political parties with a far-right ideology, the state institutions that do not ensure the safety of activists, and far-right public figures jeopardize human rights discourse.

To overcome deeply enrooted patriarchal resistance to gender equality discourse should rely on rational arguments more skilfully embodied in social justice narrative.

## Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova over the past years, a number of important strategic documents have been adopted in the field of promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights:

Gender Equality Legislation:

- LAW No. 5 of 09-02-2006 on ensuring equal opportunities for women and men with amendments (2018),
- Strategy for ensuring equality between women and men in the Republic of Moldova for 2017-2021 and an Action Plan for its implementation (2017)

Legislation to prevent and combat domestic violence:

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<sup>24</sup> Georgian Demographic Society XXI was registered in 2014. The organization serves as a branch of the World Congress of Families (WCF) in Georgia.

<sup>25</sup> "Shrinking Space for Queer and Women Activists" Tbilisi, 2020. The research was conducted within the framework of the Women's Fund in Georgia's project "Grassroots Women Mobilize for Democracy".

<sup>26</sup> Urgent Action Funds Sister Funds. (2017). Feminist Resistance and Resilience. Reflections on Closing Civic Space.

<sup>27</sup> E. Aghdgomelashvili; A. Arganashvili - Heinrich Boll Stiftung; Democracy; Vol 38

- LAW No. 45 of 01-03-2007 on the prevention and suppression of domestic violence with amendments (2020)
- National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for 2018-2023 and Action Plan for 2018-2020 for its implementation.

According to international data (Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum), the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress, which, however, is ambiguous.

At the same time, despite progress in the legislative area, there are problems at the level of their implementation. Statistics confirm that every third woman in rural areas and every fourth woman in the city has experienced some form of domestic violence during her life. About 30 women die each year as a result of partner violence.

During the quarantine and isolation period associated with Covid-19, the situation of women living in violence became even more difficult. During the month during the quarantine, 35% more women applied for help via the hotline for women 0 8008 8008.<sup>28</sup>

As part of the election campaign for the presidency of the country, there was an increase in gender-based violence. As part of the monitoring of the campaign, the Platform for Gender Equality /

The Republic of Moldova has taken the following steps to ratify the Istanbul Convention:

The beginning of the procedure for signing the Convention - Decree of the President of the Republic of Moldova No. 2511-VII of December 15, 2016 approving the signing of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

In order to ensure a systematic approach to the phenomenon of violence against women, including domestic violence, to reduce these phenomena and ensure an effective response of the competent authorities to cases of violence, the National Strategy for the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was approved 2018-2023 and the Action Plan for 2018-2020 for its implementation (GOVERNMENT DECREE No. 281 of 03-04-2018). The overall objectives of the Strategy derive from the general structure of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence based on four pillars: prevention, protection, investigation and prosecution, integrated policy and data collection. A second report on the compliance of national legislation with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention was developed in cooperation with the Center for

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<sup>28</sup> <https://stopviolenta.md/noutati/273-peticia-ratificiruyte-konvenciyu-o-predotvraschenii-i-borbe-s-nasiliem-v-otnoshenii-zhenschin-i-domashnim-nasiliem.html>

Women's Rights and presented to the public on the platform of the Interdepartmental Coordination Council for the Prevention and Fight of Domestic Violence on April 18, 2019.<sup>29</sup>

A report was prepared on a comparative analysis of the national criminal legislation related to sexual crimes, with the relevant standards provided for by the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Suppression of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), the Status of the International Criminal Court (Rome Status of the Court), and other international treaties ...

On the basis of the above two reports, 3 draft laws were prepared and two laws were adopted, which partially ensure the alignment of national legislation with international provisions in this area:

- LAW No. 113 of 09-07-2020 amending certain regulations (which contains new provisions amending three framework laws - Law No. 45/2007 on preventing and combating domestic violence, Law No. 198/2007 on state-guaranteed legal aid , Law No. 8/2008 on probation)<sup>30</sup>
- LAW no. 85/2020, amending certain regulations, which provides for the electronic monitoring of family aggressors and amends Law no. 8/2008 on probation, Code of Criminal Procedure, Code of Civil Procedure, Code of Execution, Law No. 45/2007 on preventing and combating domestic violence).<sup>31</sup>

In order to strengthen the material and procedural rights of victims of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity of the person in accordance with the standards established by the Istanbul Convention and the Lanzarote Convention, with the support of the International Center "La Strada", the Ministry of Justice has prepared a draft Law on amendments to some regulations (ensuring the rights victims of sexual crimes) approved by Government Decree No. 851 of 30.11.2020 and sent to Parliament for adoption.<sup>32</sup>

Government Resolution No. 716 of 27-12-2019 approved the draft law on the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, adopted on 11 May 2011. Subsequently, the draft was sent to Parliament for consideration and adoption. The project is currently being considered and discussed by the Parliamentary Committees.<sup>33</sup>

Various civil society organizations have been active in recent years to promote the Istanbul Convention. Under pressure from civil society and international partners, on February 6, 2017,

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<sup>29</sup> <http://cdf.md/files/resources/141/CDF%20Raport%20compatibilitate.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=122517&lang=ru](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=122517&lang=ru)

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=122005&lang=ru](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=122005&lang=ru)

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=124170&lang=ru](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=124170&lang=ru)

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=119748&lang=ru](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=119748&lang=ru)

the Republic of Moldova signed the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Suppression of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

In the process of developing reports on the comparative analysis of national legislation with relevant international treaties, legislative projects, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection cooperated with non-governmental organizations working in this field. It should be noted in this case the important role of the Coalition “Life without Violence”, the International Center “La Strada”, the Center for Women's Rights, the public associations Promo-Lex and Memoria, the Gender Center, etc. However, a critical emphasis by civil society was placed on advocacy for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

Thus, on November 28, 2019, members of the Platform for Gender Equality and the National Coalition “Life without Domestic Violence” and other organizations (48 organizations and experts) sent an open letter to Ms Zinaida Greceanii, Chairperson of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova and Mr Ion Chic, To the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova with an appeal for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention

<https://egalitadedegen.md/apel-comun-pentru-ratificarea-conventiei-de-la-istanbul/>

On May 31, 2020, a new Petition “Ratify the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence” was sent to the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.

This call was picked up by other organizations and the media - an appeal to all those wishing to sign the convention.

During the March of Solidarity on May 8, 2020 and May 8, 2019, one of the participants' demands was the ratification of the Istanbul Convention

At the same time, the procedure for the adoption of the law on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is taking place in difficult conditions.

### ***Essential elements used by conservative groups***

- Pressure / advocacy to change laws;
- Penetration into public councils and / or structures of Referendums, collection of signatures;
- Introducing yourself as a “new” uncorrupted political force in comparison with “old” politicians;
- Latent influence on politicians through priests;
- Focus on low-income groups of the population;
- Creation of new organizations and groups;
- Rethinking the language and agenda of feminist NGOs and distorting meaning;
- Radical right-wing NGOs receive funding under the guise of democracy .;
- Targeting human rights defenders / women's rights defenders. Attacks on any freedom of speech
- Against abortion campaigns;

- Intimidation of people with gender ideology, manipulating people with stabs at the most basic level;
- Division into races, classes, nationalities;
- Theatrical performances, posters for cultural events Using the difficult economic situation and work with young people;
- "Creating your own media";
- Providing false statistics, fake news / stories. Religious sites discussing equality, abortion and LGBTQI rights are specifically targeted at youth. A very large presence on social networks and work through fake accounts;
- Individual strategies for each case;
- The tendency to bring women to the fore in right-wing, conservative parties or institutions to advance the patriarchal agenda;
- Use of rhetoric: Family is sacred / protection of family values "Abortion is murder", Right to abortion = lower fertility, "It's our tradition - everything else is wrong" Homosexuality is like pedophilia / destruction of values and family Sex education is immoral, etc.

#### ***Conservative and traditional groups and organizations:***

- Socialist Party in the Republic of Moldova - left-leaning, pro-Russian
- press associated and funded by the party and the church
- Representatives of the church (Orthodox (pro-Russian orientation, Protestants supported by the Protestant churches of the United States and less resistance from the Bessarabian metropolitanate);
- parent groups and associations that promote home education, oppose LGBT propaganda, etc.
- groups of women who promote traditional models and roles of family and women, where violence should be tolerated for the good of the family

#### **Ukraine**

Despite the existing legislation and policy documents on gender equality and gender-based violence, Ukraine faces problems with its implementation and has strong anti-gender initiatives that unite religious groups, churches and political parties in lobby against ratification the Istanbul Convention.

Feminist organizations and initiatives have been increasing in strength and influence in Ukraine over the last decade. However, in the last years, there has been a huge rise in the profile of the radical right – an umbrella of political movements frequently elevating the message that rights for women and LGBTI persons are simply a falsified “gender ideology” meant to undermine family values. These messages are designed to build popular resistance to laws on hate speech, human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and domestic violence, while encouraging laws,

like “foreign agent” designations and practices that hinder NGO activities and expose Human Rights Defenders. Feminist, Human Rights and LGBTI activists, are often targeted in street violence and confrontations from radical right groups.

Radical rights media messages in Ukraine are being used to heighten moral panic about “gender,” influence legislation. In August 2019, newly elected MPs from Ukraine’s President’s party stated they would consult the Ukrainian Council of Churches before deciding whether to ratify the Istanbul Convention and more than 300 MPs have formed a multi-party association called “Values, Dignity and the Family” which has promoted radical legal and religious proposals to restrict abortion and ban “LGBTI propaganda.” Efforts are underway to create state bodies on family protection, to organize “family forums,” and include radical right “family values” messages in schools. Finally, explicit state support radical right groups, political parties, and youth initiatives is rising. An example is the flow of government funds to military camps that promote militarization and patriarchal gender roles and that teach boys how to handle weapons.

Under the Law of Ukraine “On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men” (2005), gender equality is defined as the “equal legal status of women and men and equal opportunities for its exercise, which allows individuals of both sexes to engage equally in all spheres of social life.” The national policies on the implementation of gender equality in Ukraine do not go beyond the “sex binary”; therefore, it would seem easy to explain to the critics that nothing is threatening their values. But the attitude towards gender theories indicates the existence of much deeper ideological divisions. Representatives of anti-gender circles often strive to maintain the existing traditional division of roles, but to say so directly would be a faux pas, so they turn their criticism to gender theories and call this attitude an “ideology.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> GENDER OR ANTI-GENDER: Who Is Attacking Democracy in Ukraine? Ukrainian Women’s Fund research report. [https://www.uwf.org.ua/files/210\\_210\\_short\\_.pdf](https://www.uwf.org.ua/files/210_210_short_.pdf)

## Methodology

During August-September, 2020 a survey was conducted in the frame of the project “Promotion of women's and feminist initiatives for ratification the Istanbul Convention and counteraction anti-gender initiatives in the region”, supported by The Secretariat of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

A unified semi-standardized questionnaire was discussed and developed previously, to be used in all participated countries with possible adoption for the national context.

The survey was conducted by different tools, that were defined by national coordinators in participating countries taking into consideration country specifics:

- online survey using the google form platform
- focus group discussions with activists of women's non-governmental organizations,
- interviews with gender experts (online and offline).

The total number of respondents 128

Armenia - 25

Azerbaijan - 20

Belarus - 7

Georgia - 28

Moldova – 8 interviews, focus groups 2 – total 24 responders

Ukraine - 24

Majority of respondents represented NGOs members of the the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, as well as other women’s and human rights organization. A few representatives of International organizations, media and activists participated.

## Anti-gender movement

In all participating countries majority of the respondents stated that radical anti-gender movement is very powerful or powerful – from 65% to 80%. That shows that all countries in the region face similar challenges and threats from the radical anti-gender initiatives.

### Who is behind the radical right anti-gender movement?

Churches and religious groups were identified as main actors that stayed behind the radical right anti-gender movement in all participated countries, as well as political parties and authorities.

#### **Armenia**

As for those bodies who stand behind the radical right anti-gender movement in Armenia, the following six groups were defined as more active participants of the anti-gender movement - Church (76% or 19 out of 25 respondents), Social media (68% or 17 out of 25 respondents), Religious groups (64% or 16 out of 25 respondents), Political parties (64% or 16 out of respondents), Political leaders (60% or 15 out of 25 respondents) and Media (60% of respondents).

#### **Georgia**

32% (9 out of 28) -non-formal religious groups; 28,5% (8 out of 28) - the Orthodox Church as the leading supporter; 18% (5 out of 28) - Authorities; 10,7% (3 out of 28) - Political parties; 3.6% (1 out of 28) – NGOs; 3.6% (1 out of 28) - Media; 3.6% (1 out of 28) - International influences.

According to data, the central support anti-gender movements receive comes from religious groups, the Orthodox Church and the Authorities (total 78,5%); supporters are identified in political parties (10,7%).

#### **Moldova**

Most of the respondents indicated - religious groups- 30%, churches- 90%, political leaders – 30%, and political parties – 60%, also marked as involved ones– NGOs – 20%, International influences – 20% and authorities – 10%.

#### **Ukraine**

Majority of our survey respondents mentioned religious groups and churches as the main actors behind the anti-gender movement in Ukraine, as well as right radical and traditionalistic organizations, such as “Tradition and Order”, “Vsi razom (All together). However, political leaders and political parties were mentioned as well.

NGO – 30%; religious groups- 40%, political parties – 50%, International influences – 40%, churches- 80%, political leaders – 30%, authorities – 10%.

### **What human rights issues is the radical right targeting?**

Violence against women, reproductive/sexual rights and sexual education, opposition to the ratification Istanbul Convention are common issues for all countries targeted by the radical right forces.

#### **Armenia**

Violence against women (88% or 22 out of 25), women human rights (84% or 21 out of 25), sexual education (84% or 21 out of 25), gender based violence (80% or 20 out of 25) and LGBTQ rights (80% or 20 out of 25).

#### **Georgia**

Reproductive/sexual rights - 28.6% (8 out of 28); violence against women - 18% (5 out of 28); LGBTQ rights - 18% (5 out of 28); WHRD - 14.1% (4 out of 28); Sexual education (10.7% (3 out of 28); Gender equality - 7.1% (2 out of 28) and Opposition to the Istanbul Convention – 3.5% (1 out of 28). Women's Reproductive/sexual rights - 28.6%, are the most targeted human rights issues by the radical right's in Georgia.

#### **Moldova**

WHR, gender equality; VAW, GBV; Reproductive/sexual rights; Sexual education; Opposition to the Istanbul Convention; LGBTQI rights; Children's rights; Human rights defenders; National/religious minorities; Freedom of speech; Right to assembly.

#### **Ukraine**

Gender equality, Violence against women, Reproductive/sexual rights, Sexual education, Opposition to the Istanbul Convention, LGBTQ rights as the main targeting issues in Ukraine. Human rights defenders, Refugees/IDPs, migration, National/religious minorities (Roma), Rights of homeless people, Freedom of speech, Right to assembly were mentioned as well.

### **What populations are most impacted?**

Women and LGBTQI were mentioned as the most impacted groups in all countries.

#### **Armenia**

As for the groups/representatives of populations which are most impacted in Armenia, the respondents most frequently mentioned LGBTQI (88% or 22 out of 25 respondents), Women

(76% or 19 out of 25 respondents), Human rights defenders and/or NGOs (72% or 18 out of 25 respondents) and Women's rights defenders (68% or 17 out of 25 respondents).

### **Georgia**

32% - named LGBTQI (9 out of 28); 28,5% - Women (8 out of 28); 18% - Women's Human Rights Defenders (5 out of 28); 10,7% - Human rights defenders and/or NGOs (3 out of 28) and 10,7 % - Authorities (3 out of 28) of respondents.

### **Moldova**

80 % of the respondents indicated that this problem mainly affects women and only 20 percent of the respondents also noted the following population groups - LGBTQI, Refugees/immigrants, ethnic minorities, human rights defenders and/or NGOs, women's rights defenders.

### **Ukraine**

68% of the respondents indicated that women are most impacted in Ukraine, the other groups that were mentioned - LGBTQI, Refugees/immigrants/IDPs, ethnic minorities, women's rights defenders.

## Organizations/groups involved in anti-gender movement: roles, strategy, messaging, communication channels

Analysis of the results for this section shows that the pre-identified groups and organizations standing behind the anti-gender movement are very tightly interlinked and connected, and often they appear to use each other's ideology, strategy and even communication channels, moreover becoming a direct or indirect communication channel for each other.

The pre-identified groups or organizations were as follows:

- religious organizations/groups,
- civil society,
- political parties,
- traditional media,
- social media and internet platforms,
- financial institutes/individual investments,
- Government,
- Foreign Governments.

### Role and strategies of religious organizations/groups

#### Armenia

Respondents in Armenia stated that religious organizations and groups activities focused mostly on active anti-propaganda and proactive reacting to what is happening.

The main messengers are the bishops who are emphasizing the concept of Armenians as the first nation to adopt the Christianity. They are manipulating that the European standards which are suggested by the "gender" movements might ruin not only Armenian identity, but also the Armenian gene pool and Armenian traditional families. The gender equality movements are often equalized with the anti-religious movements and propaganda.

The communication channels for their propaganda are the social media and some of the traditional media.

Among the used strategies is the emphasize of the role of a woman as traditionally submissive daughter, wife and family member, but never equal to a man. The hate speeches towards LGBTI community, their so-called destructive role in development of the society is another strategy used by the religious organizations/groups to substantiate their ideas and propaganda.

## Azerbaijan

Although there are religious groups in the country, they do not have significant influence and there is no single religious leader. There are few opposition parties in the country, and they follow the same page with the government on issues that are sensitive for society.

## Georgia

Respondents in Georgia stated that religious organizations and groups are the most influential actors in anti-gender propaganda.

According to respondents: The Orthodox Church and religious organizations/groups play a significant role in establishing and strengthening the "anti-gender" movement in Georgia (42.8%). Their appeal to traditional values and traditional "Womanhood" is used to emphasize a woman's role as a traditionally submissive daughter, wife and family member, but never equal to a man.

The Orthodox Church and religious organizations/groups are the main proclaimers of anti-Western propaganda. With the slogan "We are losing Georgia", they manipulate mass-consciousness and fabricate information on the harmful impact of gender equality on the nations integrity and cultural identity. The church is also trying to control private space – as did the Soviet authorities – defending traditional family hierarchies.

The communication channels for anti-gender propaganda are mass gatherings - during sermons, prayers and other religious rituals, traditional media outlets (TV Channels, Newspapers), and social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

## Moldova

The church and religious groups are guided by similar interests and arguments, relying on the patriarchal traditions of past centuries:

- to attract more people to church;
- to distract the population from the processes of European integration;
- These groups focus on the so-called traditional values - of strengthening the traditional family and, respectively, of the traditional role of the woman - of caregiver, mother, good wife! In this sense, all social issues are the responsibility of women - if women were good housewives and wives and mothers, then there would be no domestic violence, no children would be abandoned, there would be peace and quiet in the country.
- preserving patriarchal traditions in which men are the most privileged group. These groups promote biblical laws in which men are the ones who have the ultimate right over the woman's body and their own children, and women are the ones who serve and give birth to their children.

There are anti-abortion campaigns blaming women who decide to have an abortion. The fetus is equal in rights with a man born and even with the mother - woman.

The opinion the one of the lead human rights activist of feminist movement in Moldova:

“ I believe that the largest, most vocal and most organized radical anti-gender group is the religious one. The interest of religious organizations is to maintain their power of influence and participation in decision-making processes. From my experience, religious organizations are reactionary to feminism. These organizations become very vocal and toxic, especially when civil society starts advocacy campaigns.”

The main messages of these groups revolve around the following topics:

- family and traditional values are in danger;
- LGBTQI + people have a hidden agenda to erase heterosexual / cis / orthodox / etc. identity;
- nostalgia for the past;
- international organizations have petty goals of limiting the number of the population / controlling the population / imposing a global government / etc;
- feminism is a useless social-political movement in 2020 / radical / misandria (Female response to sexism. Misandria is a prejudiced attitude towards men, a man-hating attitude, according to experts, it is appeared after inequality and oppression of women)/ anti right to freedom of conscience / etc.

Strategies used by the religious organizations/groups in this context: official speeches at all levels, use of social networks, church services (meetings with parishioners), working with the electorate, etc.

## **Ukraine**

The main religious actor of the anti-gender movement in Ukraine, and leader of opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is the Ukrainian Council of Churches – organization that unite religious leaders of all churches operating in Ukraine. The Council has stated it is especially concerned about the word “gender” used in the Convention. In the opinion of the Council, the Convention could become an instrument of promoting new gender roles and same-sex relationships. Those new roles and relationships, according to the Council, would threaten the traditional institution of the family in Ukraine. Prior to consideration of ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Ukrainian government, initiatives and groups promoting an “anti-gender” message undertook several lobbying campaigns aimed directly at undermining any support for the Convention.

The other strategies used by the religious groups in Ukraine mentioned by the respondents:

- Collaboration with right-radical groups to stop LGBT events.

- Opposition to any gender-sensitive legislation (gender analysis of educational materials, sexual education in schools), opposition to Istanbul Convention. Promoting the traditional values of strong family and the value of motherhood. This strategy is very cunning because they appeal to social services (promoting kindergartens or paternity leaves) and make themselves more popular this way. At the same time, they oppose any gender-sensitive legislation, especially if it involved LGBT.
- Rejection of the description of gender as a social construct, the traditional role of women, actions against the right to abortion.
- Advocacy against sex education in schools and for incorporation Christian education in school, etc.
- Counteraction the promotion of the LGBT rights and freedom of peaceful assembly – lobby against same sex partnerships, adoption of children by same sex couples, attacks on LGBT marches activists, etc.)
- Counteraction to feminism, as a threat for the Ukrainian nation, and well organized and funded anti-gender initiatives
- promoting "traditional family values" and offenses against the reproductive rights of women

### **Role and strategies of civil society**

#### **Armenia**

The main messengers are those civil society organizations (CSOs) that are involved in the anti-gender movement. Their message is developed around the discourse of the traditional families, the role of submissive wife within her family, the image of modest and obedient woman in the society and the fake agenda of the national values and traditions which are being used to shame any deviations from the described traditional patriarchal society.

The communication channels of the civil society are again the social media and various projects and public actions implemented by these CSOs and funded by either previous oligarchic regime, or the foreign countries which are also fully involved in this anti-gender movement.

The strategies used by the CSOs are creation and propaganda of the image of an obedient woman in all spheres of the society and shaming of all deviations from these standards. As another strategic approach, those CSOs that voice these problems and stand for the women's rights protection are being subjected to the same abuse and being accused for spreading non-traditional and not appropriate (i.e. not patriarchal Armenian) values, standards and norms.

#### **Azerbaijan**

The large number of GONGOs in Azerbaijan shows that they are pursuing governmental interests. Smaller groups follow the same line with authorities in order not to go against the government, so there is no support for small marginalized groups.

## Belarus

Our research demonstrates, that gender populism is on the rise and that it is a dominant discourse shared both by the Lukashenko regime, and by those who struggle to replace it. Gender populism delineates a practice of affirming political leadership through opposition to feminism and upholding a view which objectified women and considers them no more but a symbol of a nation. Activists from the women's and feminist groups pointed out with great regret that the format of women's participation in the 2020 protests was severely limited. The media responded solely with the image of the peace loving and peace making female hero whose calling is to inspire and serve as an embellishment in the activity (struggle) of a male). Any attempt at expanding the format was resisted – there were multiple appeals not “dilute” the joined agenda of the protest, and many believed that “the time for gender agenda was not appropriate”. One of the activists pointed out: *“I would hate to get to a democracy in which I again will be silenced and in which they would say: “Domestic violence is a serious issue, of course, but we have so many other problems we need to address.” I join the protests with my own agenda because I consider this agenda important, I have been working on it for 17 years, and I would like to have an opportunity to talk about it; I do not want to be silenced, because we have been silenced continuously for the past 26 years. I advise us to learn how to let each other speak and how to uphold the right to free speech.”* The media in Belarus which constantly reproduces patriarchal attitudes remains a source of traumatic experience. When those who suffered from domestic violence are being constantly victimized, those who try to restore justice are doomed to have to constantly legitimize their position and explain it to the general public. Marginality of their position, which many of the activists feel, echoes their understanding of injustice being done to the victims of violence. Such “echo” can be both a risk factor and an additional source of reflexivity. Whether or not the optimistic scenario is going to be realized depends directly on whether or not we are able to create a platform for collectively reflecting and discussing a policy on violence.

At the same time, not only activists, but also media and public discourse around the protests started to draw parallels between the actions of the Lukashenko and those of a family head who uses violence to control his kin. Lukashenko is perceived as a perpetrator of violence who is not giving up his beloved Belarus; his pseudo love which is nothing more than power abuse became one of the targets of the protest movements expressed in a multiplicity of slogans. Few however are prepared to reflect how such an analogy between the institutional and interpersonal violence actually works, and on its strength and weaknesses. Hoping to exchange a bad father of the nation for a good one and to emancipate the deprived nation, we block the gender agenda this makes our struggle against gender violence meaningless. Analogy between

the political and the family violence severely limits political alternatives. The struggle to find a viable alternative to Lukashenko leads to ratification of the Istanbul Convention and reproductive rights (the right to abortion) being seen by the proponents of the New Belarus as something which is not relevant and forcefully placed on the agenda by the “bad” feminists; violence, abortion and LGBT rights in this context stop being social issues and become personal, private ones. However the fact that women have to address domestic violence without social support is not an personal, but a social problem; this problem has to be addressed at the social, not personal level. The reproduction of heteronormative patriarchal relationships between the President (seen here as the head of the family and the people) and that part of the population which suffers from (the family) violence obliterates the “batsko- populism” which for a long time has been cementing Lukashenko’s power. It would be false to believe that the President is able to hold to power exclusively due to the application of violence. Other factors that played a role here include are what we call “batsko-populism” -- a skilful performance of the role of the patronizing father who “understands” the needs of his people -- and the system of femocracy which promotes those women who serve the interests of the regime to the top at the cost of blocking the gender agenda. 40% of the members of Parliament in Belarus are female. Femocracy not only promotes and justifies the discursive practices desired by the authorities and builds the gender-friendly image of the regime, but is actively involved in helping the regime to preserve its power. Analogy between the family and the political violence without attention to such details risks to ignore important contexts, and this might not only ensure sustainability of the Lukashenko’s regime, but also leave little hope for the fast advance of democracy.

## Georgia

25% of the respondents think that there are groups in civil society that support growing and strengthening Georgia's anti-gender movement.

The organizations promoting far-right radical ideas that function under civil society's name include: Union of Orthodox Parents, Union "Zneoba", Georgian Demographic Society XXI. These are lead organizations that promote anti-gender propaganda and have close ties with Orthodox church and International far-right movements. The founder of Georgian Demographic Society XXI, Businessman Levan Vasadze, represents the World Family Congress<sup>35</sup> in Georgia.

Their strategies include collecting signatures for petitions and advocating against gender-responsive legislation, organizing anti-gender rallies, intimidating activists and LBGTIQ organizations, migrants.

Despite strong opposition from the progressive civil society, especially WHR activists, who plays a central role in protecting WHR and promoting public awareness of gender equality issues, anti-

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<sup>35</sup> The World Congress of Families (WCF) is a Christian-Evangelical organization that incites the LGBT community's hatred. Its mission is to fight for the spread of LGBT rights in the name of protecting the "natural family" worldwide. Congress defines the "natural family" as a union of husband, wife, and biological children.

gender movements create a hostile environment for integrating gender equality in human development, putting taboos on discussions on sexual identity, sexual freedom, sexual harassment, sexual education, and reproductive health and abortion rights.

The resistance towards SOGI concept embraces a larger part of Civil Society.

## **Moldova**

- Raising public awareness of the inadmissibility of discrimination on grounds of gender, sex, ethnicity.
- to promote gender equality, the fight against gender-based violence and sexual violence (necessity of ratification of the Istanbul Convention), against sexist messages and hate speech, discrimination;
- promotion of women in politics and decision-making functions, etc.

Civil society is a broad notion, which includes various non-state organizations. Non-governmental religious associations are oriented towards the promotion of the traditional, practical family, they are against gender equality - they work at community level, but also through the media.

Some political parties (socialists), their NGOs are strongly focused on the doctrine of the traditional family, against the Istanbul Convention - ratification of which, in their view, will undermine the traditional family and LGBT families. They work at the parliamentary and local levels.

We see that the role of religious NGOs and public organizations of civil society is diametrically opposed in relation to the equality of men and women in Moldova.

Active civil society in Moldova supports equal rights for women and minority groups. Those who support the anti-gender movement are rather various religious groups and some political leaders. Their basic message is "Pro-life" (anti-abortion) and supporting the traditional family. The message is distributed through various sites.

## **Ukraine**

The main issues regarding the civil society role and strategies were mentioned by the respondents:

- The anti-gender movement has its own civil society organisations, which are well organised and are able to mobilise large groups of people for campaigns, marches and protests. They also cooperate with far-right groups to attack human right campaigns and public events.
- Speculation on the welfare of children, the opposition between "normal" women and those who are against being "right women": having children, taking care of her husband.
- Appeal that their demands are "the will of the majority of citizens of Ukraine"
- Permeate in the parliament, government and authorities in the regions

- Permeate in the law enforcement - the local police, establish para-police formations (public formations)
- Referring to the experience of participating in a military conflict in the East of Ukraine, participation in the Maidan and "their key role in preserving the Ukrainian state", use "impunity" from the part of the law enforcement system and the courts (in the Lviv region there are two court decisions where there were conditional sentences for rape by ATO participants)
- Collaborate with the Council of Churches in promoting "traditional family values" and offenses against the reproductive rights of women
- Conducting youth camps and actively recruiting young people in their ranks (often through sport and cultural-folk initiatives)
- Arguments: populism - a threat to national security from the side of Russia - therefore, it is "not the right time" for human rights; the extinction of the nation; manipulative unconfirmed references to the opinion of the "authoritative persons of the nation"
- Establishing and supporting of girls' and women's "traditionally-oriented" groups and organizations
- Threats, intimidation, blackmail and physical attacks to activists and supporters

### **Role and strategies of the political parties**

#### **Armenia**

The messengers are the members of the political parties themselves who are/were on power currently or previously. Their message is also created around the national traditions and values and norms rooted in Armenian society. Hate speeches about the gender equality, women's rights protection and similar discourses are among the messages being spread by the political parties and their individual members.

The communication channels are the Parliament, TV channels, social media and public speeches.

The political parties, however, do not have a concrete strategy, thus, they are less active and more latent in their propaganda, as they act in accordance with their interest at the time. Sometimes they stand by the women's rights movements, other times they act as anti-gender activists. At the same time, given that the Armenian society is more traditionally patriarchal and is in general against the gender equality, the political parties are tending to seem more anti-gender in order to attract more followers and be accepted by a wider community.

#### **Azerbaijan**

Political parties set approximate direction on their platforms and none of them adheres to a single political ideology. Most of them focus on welfare issues in their programs, and more tend to social democracy. There are no political parties that we can name the radical right, however there are only a few right-wing nationalist groups, but they don't have significant influence.

There are more than 150 political parties registered in Georgia. More than 80% of these parties have no institutional structure or ideology and practically do not function. Remaining political parties are also lacking clear ideological ground, which is essential for balanced development and institutional capacity to reach out to diverse social groups.

Twenty-five years of work on the formation of women's caucuses within party structures and the inclusion of gender aspects in party programs resulted recently in promotion of women in politics:

Major political parties - "Georgian Dream and "National Movement" - supported the adoption of obligatory quota and additional funding mechanism for the gradual increase of women's representation in politics.

Additionally, more progressive political party programs became more responsive to women's needs.<sup>36</sup>

The progress does not free us from precision - Still, there is a large pool of political parties that hold anti-gender sentiments, well demonstrated in the run-up to elections period.

Anti-gender rhetoric and the language of homophobic hatred is often used by radical, anti-Western political parties in the run-up to elections to portray liberal political parties in the eyes of a traditional section of society as patronizing and promoting LGBT "degradation.

For the Parliamentary Elections 2020, Sandro Bregadze<sup>37</sup> registered the most extreme far-right political party "Georgian March" based on the Nationalist organization Georgian March, which functions in Georgia, since 2017. The Party opposes LGBT rights, immigration, and Islam. "Georgian March" received insufficient support to acquire the Parliamentary Seats.

Women's Party is only one with high Gender Equality profile.

But this Party is ideologically and structurally very weak and can't influence the electoral process.

The 2020 parliamentary elections again plunged the country into crisis. Opposition parties denounced the election because of deception and renounced their parliamentary seats. Negotiations on re-elections are on the agenda.

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<sup>36</sup> Nino Gogoladze - "The Political Landscape of Georgia" Tbilisi, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Sandro Bregadze is a former politician and current political activist in Georgia. He was a member of parliament from 2000–2004. From 2014–2016 he served as the deputy minister in the State Ministry on Diaspora Issues of Georgia. In 2017 Sandro Bregadze and Gia Korkotashvili established the Nationalist organization Georgian March.

However, the political parties are less vocal in anti-gender propaganda, as they act following their interest at the time. Sometimes they stand by the women's rights movements, other times - by anti-gender activists. Georgian society is more traditionally patriarchal and holds strong prejudice against gender equality. The political parties tend to seem more anti-gender to attract more followers and be accepted by a wider community.

## Moldova

35% of survey participants did not answer this question in any way.

Other opinions: PPs do not have a strategy for promoting equality and combating gender-based violence. The vast majority of PP representatives are reluctant to ratify the Istanbul Convention, ratification of which, in their view, will undermine the traditional family and support LGBT families.

Some political parties support this movement in exchange for support in the elections by the members of this movement. Opinion of one feminist leader: "I believe that the political parties in the current government often oppose feminism. Political parties (PPs) and their members abound in sexist messages that reinforce gender stereotypes. There are very few politicians who talk about gender-based violence, about sexual harassment at work, about violence against children, about the rights of LGBTQI + people. Few politicians are indeed human rights advocates. 1-2 deputies come to the marches and protests for the ratification of the Convention and for gender equality, maximum."

Current political parties do not have as a priority the eradication of the phenomenon of violence against women. This topic is not considered a priority, and that is part of the problem.

Some political parties are helping to strengthen the anti-gender movement by refraining from taking a firm stand on intolerance of any hate speech, violence and harassment. Thus, the lack of actions is also an action that transmits certain messages. Another part of the political parties are engaged in an active and constant dissemination of discourses that fuel the anti-gender movement.

Various communication channels used by PPs: media, social networks, administrative resources of the former president (specialized TV shows), meetings with people.

The main message is the "value of the traditional family" which seeks to be destroyed by the "gender movement". The message is distributed through official statements and media channels related to these parties.

## Ukraine

Respondents emphasize on role of political parties and leaders in the anti-gender movement in Ukraine.

On January 17, 2020 there was an inter-factional union formed in Verkhovna Rada under the name of “Values, Dignity, Family”.

The union consists of 307 deputies from all the factions but the faction “Voice” (led by a popular Ukrainian singer Svyatoslav Vakarchuk from the band “Okean Elzy”).

“Values, Dignity, Family” is the biggest inter-factional union in the history of Ukrainian Parliament. There are 423 deputies in the Parliament of Ukraine, united into 5 factions. The biggest faction is the President’s “Servant of the People” (248 deputies)

Svyatoslav Yurash (the youngest deputy of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine ever) is the initiator and coordinator of the union from the faction “Servant of the People”. Other coordinators are the representatives of other factions.

The goal of the union is declared as “protecting the everlasting values of Ukrainian society and opposing the attempts at destroying the fundamental natural right in the name of a political fad”.

The people's deputies promise to prepare laws that would “strengthen family values, the principles of dignified society and upbringing of children and youth based on family values”.

The leader of the party “Servant of the People”, people's deputy Oleksandr Kornienko stated that the prospects of Istanbul Convention ratification by Verkhovna Rada are now very low.

“We understand that the Church is an institute that inspires trust among people, including the deputies. The prospects of ratifying Istanbul Convention as it stands are very low. However, we have responsibilities, and we need to move forward with the help of mediation”, - said the deputy.

Majority of respondents did not answer this question, the following arguments were provided:

- Some parties or separate people in some parties can directly support anti-gender messages, speak against LGBT and so on. Different types of discrimination, support `strong leaders` such as Lukashenko.
- Political parties either ignore these groups, or cooperate with them. They know that church is a strong influence and for them it is important to cooperate with the church, to promote their candidates. Therefore, they listen to advice of the Council of churches on what laws to pass or to block. they also use far-right violent groups occasionally as their proxy for civil society mobilization
- Political parties often use dangerous messages to crystallize their electorate without taking responsibility for this.
- Political parties develop anti-gender policies
- Some political leaders/party members are using sexist and discriminatory messages in electoral speech and public communication

## **Role and strategies of the traditional media**

### **Armenia**

The messengers of the traditional media are the so-called experts who are being invited to different debates where the anti-gender discourses are held and the opponents of those experts usually happen to be less competent people, who are in fact unable to present the real idea of the gender equality movement, thus, usually losing the debates to those quasi-experts.

Traditional media is using itself as main communication channel.

The strategy of the traditional media is, however, quite unclear and vague. In fact, there is no concrete strategy, except for leading to permanent win of the traditional views and values. Often those discourses being discussed in the social media happen to appear on the traditional media, thus these two are perfectly interlinking and complement each other.

### **Azerbaijan**

The media is completely censored by the government, and although there is freedom of speech on social media, people face pressure for their opinions.

Most Azerbaijanis receive their information from mainstream television, which is unswervingly pro-government and under strict government control. According to a 2012 report of the NGO "Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS)" Azerbaijani citizens are unable to access objective and reliable news on human rights issues relevant to Azerbaijan and the population is under-informed about matters of public interest.<sup>38</sup>

### **Georgia**

Traditional media is populist, manufacturing stereotypes. It focuses mainly on scandals and remorse.

Since the Istanbul Convention's ratification, the traditional media became more responsive to gender equality and LGBTI people's rights.

### **Moldova**

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<sup>38</sup> [\*"Semi-annual Azerbaijan freedom of expression report, January 01 – July 01, 2012"\* \(PDF; 3,0 MB\)](#)

The media has an important role to play in raising public awareness of the inadmissibility of discrimination in any form. Some representatives of the media publish relevant materials in the field.

There are a lot of media channels in Moldova. Some wear the political coloration (NIT - the party of the socialists, the Central Television - the Șhor Party), respectively, reflect - more traditionalist approaches. It is important to mention that the antigender messages are veiled by emphasizing the strengthening of the values of the traditional family, the return to traditions, that Moldova - as an Orthodox Christian country is based on the family. Various shows, political messages, interviews with the selected population, advertising, etc. are used as propaganda tools.

Traditional media is a tool for shorthanding sexist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, racist messages of politicians. Traditional media contributes to the consolidation of the anti-gender movement by not counteracting the anti-feminist discourse in any way. Show presenters often operate with toxic messages, journalists lack the courage and arguments to contradict the misconceptions of politicians and other opinion leaders.

The advertising that various economic agents order is delivered without a bit of analysis (see the example of the firm Darwin's sexist campaign).

Politically unaffiliated media do not support the anti-gender movement.

## **Ukraine**

Majority of respondents mentioned that they do not follow traditional media and did not answer the question; some of the provided answers were the following:

- I don't follow them but unfortunately they exist. those can mostly be local media. common messages - anti LGBT, supporting `traditional families` and so on
- the media is often reproducing gender stereotypes, sexism and xenophobia, and supports the culture of discrimination
- normalization of violence, stigmatizing the victim, demonstrating the situation and blaming the woman if something happened to the children. Removal of responsibility from the state.

## **Role and strategies of social media and internet platforms**

### **Armenia**

Social media appears to be the main propaganda tool for all the initially identified groups involved in the anti-gender movement, including the social media itself. The messengers of the social media are those either true anti-gender activities, or those being paid for sharing such opinions, thoughts and hate speeches. The key anti-gender messages are built around the anti-LGBTI propaganda, anti-Soros propaganda, conspiracy theory, national norms, values and traditions relevant to mainly patriarchal society.

Obviously the communication channels for the social media is social media itself, more widely concentrated on Facebook.

The strategy is creation of fake titles for the news and articles, spreading fake news, highlighting and presenting the ideas and ideologies of anti-gender experts and activists. Voicing and emphasizing the anti-gender problems and issues without providing any clear solutions or alternatives for the presented concerns. Another strategy is creation of reverse concepts on the social media to oppose those presented by the gender-sensitive CSOs

## **Belarus**

Women's/ feminist initiative will have to focus more on creative strategies and to use multimedia platforms if they are to explain issues around gender inequality and to break away from the gender populism which exists in the present-day Belarus. For example, they could organize various awareness-raising campaigns to change the public attitudes towards violence against women and to explain the urgency to ratify the Istanbul Convention. In the current political context, talking about scaling feminist initiatives up and increasing the number of NGOs is difficult. Many activists left when they faced a choice between emigration and deprivation of liberty offered by the authorities to those who oppose them.

Attempts to draw parallels between the protests in Belarus and recent demonstrations against abortion in Poland, and to represent both as instances of the invincible female revolution ignore the fact that protests in Belarus lack feminist agenda. In other words, the myth about the protests being a "women's revolution" obliterates the fact that gender populism is present in the opposition as well, and blocks the gender agenda, which the Polish case made demonstrations a truly women's' rights protest. Women's NGOs and feminist initiatives in Belarus will still have to strive towards freeing protest movement from gender populism.

## **Georgia**

Social media and internet platforms play a significant role in shaping in Georgia anti-gender movement. The troll-factories and supporter groups, multiply uncontrolled, unbalanced and often radical and hateful information mixed with anti-gender rhetoric. They systematically harass and attack women politician and activists.

## **Moldova**

Every NGO that fights against discrimination, gender-based violence has pages on social networks where they publish information materials, come up with reactions / answers to identified illegalities, come up with appeals to the authorities, etc.

In principle, in Moldova there are no social networks and internet platforms that directly contribute to the formation / consolidation of the anti-gender movement. There are some critical messages to women in the context of promoting the traditional family. Pro-family messages

intensify especially during election periods, being promoted by some politicians and / or church leaders.

Gender is often associated with LGBT, being criticized for promoting LGBT marriages and destroying society

The messages of religious groups are mostly distributed online.

Social networks are the platforms through which people persist in echo-chambers. Social networks do not contribute to broadening the horizon of knowledge, to questioning opinions, stereotypes but to consolidating and confirming them.

## Ukraine

Many respondents mentioned that social media are used by radical right and religious groups as an instrument for their anti-gender activities.

- those are social medias of radicals - public groups on fb or private chats in tg. they can post any type of information - racist, homophobic ext
- social media is used as a platform for mobilization of the anti-gender movement, as a tool for bullying of activists and gender advocates, and as a space of online threats towards activists
- The impunity of bullying and hate propaganda in social media will make this debate go into real life.

## Role and strategies of the financial institutes/individual investments

### Armenia

In fact, the role of the financial institutions and individual investments in anti-gender propaganda was not very clear for the majority of the respondents. The most common idea was that they are financing and funding the anti-gender movement in general, therefore all the messengers, messages and strategies described above for the already discussed organizations and groups are empowered and supported by these financial institutions and individual investments. This group doesn't have a separate structure within the anti-gender movement, it is well dissolved in all of the above.

### Belarus

Civil society remains the only guarantee for developing joint strategy of cooperation with the state in the context of unstable democracy. Activists and activist communities will have to decide if they (still) have resources to build partnership with the state, or if the only strategy they have left is opposition to the state and promotion of their own agenda by voicing their positions and recommendation on various fora (for example, in the EU — Belarus Coordination

Group). CEDAW reporting remains a potentially efficient instrument to solve a number of problems: to achieve accountability of the state bodies; to promote networking of different stakeholders around the gender agenda and to optimize civil society strategies for achieving gender equality. Consequently, in order for the reports to be used to the fullest extent possible, we have to achieve active participation of the civil society organization, their cooperation at the stage of data collection, analysis, reporting and in the subsequent discussion of the report and application of the lessons learned to the work of the National Platforms. Furthermore, National Platforms can become a space for such communication and cooperation providing that efforts at aligning different directions of work are coordinated; that the gender subgroups at the various platforms work consistently; and that there is a separate women's secretariat (program) working at the civil society forums.

### **Georgia**

Financial institutions' role and individual investments in anti-gender propaganda are not very clear.

The most common vision is that financial institutions and individual investments, directly and indirectly, support anti-gender movements through finding Orthodox church and far-right organizations. Further research in this area is needed.

### **Moldova**

The majority of respondents (90%) answered that this is a difficult question for them. And only a small part of the respondents believe that there are no separate financial institutions / investments focused on the formation / consolidation of the anti-gender movement. This is happening under the slogan of protecting family values. There are several groups of politicians, church leaders of various denominations (Orthodox, Baptists) who support actions to promote the values of the traditional family against gender equality.

### **Ukraine**

Majority of respondents did not answer the question due to the lack of information.

- I don't know who invests into them. I can only think that it could be Russia or American churches)
- sources of funding are diverse, and need to be investigated further. some preliminary research links sources of funding to: 1) similar groups in Russia; 2) conservative religious groups in the US; 3) government funding inside Ukraine (for certain activities of the far-right).
- A nominal approach to the problem of gender inequality devalues the efforts of many women, when many officials, donors and public figures use "gender themes" for their own PR. Very often equality is presented formally, without specifying the reasons that lead to inequality.

## **Role and strategies of the Government**

### **Armenia**

The messengers of the local Government are obviously its representatives. Respondents couldn't report any specific strategies or messages used by the Government. In fact, the vast majority of the respondents were unsure about the role and the activities undertaken by the local government to define their relation with the anti-gender movement. Moreover, the Government, especially the latest one, was reported as more loyal and liberal towards the gender issues and gender sensitivity.

It was described as more reactive responding to the reality they face in a time, however, still with no certain strategic vision in this regard. At the same time, the respondents noted that the new Government has adopted more LGBT tolerant and gender-sensitive approaches compared to what was before.

The communication channels of the Government were the social and traditional media, public speeches and meetings and all other formal and alternative non-formal ways of communication with the society.

### **Georgia**

Georgia has the most progressive legal framework for prohibiting discrimination and promoting SOGI concept: In 2012, passed the amendment adding to the list of aggravating circumstances of the criminal code the crimes committed on the grounds of a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2014, Parliament passed an anti-discrimination law prohibiting discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). SOGI issues are also part of Georgia's Human Rights Strategy. In the same year, the country signed the Istanbul Convention and ratified afterwards in 2017.

The Istanbul Convention's ratification required the state an extensive the harmonization process - I stage 11 legal amendments; II stage 25 legal amendments.

On the one hand, the state is working to meet its international obligations, but directly funding Orthodox church, which is the utmost inspiration of anti-gender movement.

Insufficient institutional support results in the weak implementation of Gender equality legislation and the inclusion of the broader public in gender equality policy development.

### **Moldova**

The position of the Government is often determined by the orientation of the party that promotes / supports it.

Usually, the official discourse is in line with international commitments, but "de facto" - there are many challenges.

For example, the Socialist-promoted Chicu government formally supported ratification of the Istanbul Convention and forwarded the package of documents to Parliament, reporting that it supports this process. But at the parliamentary level, the Socialists blocked the process.

The Government Commission for Equality between Women and Men has been suspended within the Government.

## Ukraine

Activists in Ukraine note that there is a growing trend in state policies to emphasize the “preservation of family and family values” over the protection of women’s rights or combating domestic violence – radical right and religious initiatives promote the establishment of special government bodies on “family protection issues” and other legislative initiatives, national and regional “family forums”, and the incorporation of “family values” into school agendas, among other things. This, in addition to state subordination to the influence of the Council of Churches, has the effect of prioritizing the preservation of the family unit and a man’s control of the family over a woman’s right to equality before the law and in marriage, the security of her person or that of her children, or even her life.

There are growing trends on governmental (national, regional, local levels) support to radical rights NGOs/groups/political parties initiatives of work with youth – military camps and other activities that promote militarization, traditional patriarchal gender roles, weapon use skills, etc. among children and youth.

- sometimes they support via money educational programs for kids organised by radicals. they give the space national corpus to exist as a party. also we have a law so people can organise specific groups and patrol streets - what some radicals sometimes do. also they promote themselves as good guys who protect our country, give blood to medical centers, clean parks and so on
- the government has taken on the strategy of "patriotism", which promotes and supports nationalistic ideas and gives more freedom to conservative groups; the government is also weak/incapable of calling out and investigating attacks of far-right groups against the activists. which creates the culture of impunity
- The government does not provide any support for women's care work, and many women, especially after the pandemic, simply do not have the time and energy to be politically and economically active. On the one hand, they accept spelling rules that take into account the possibility of using female endings, and on the other hand, they reduce funding for social infrastructure.

## Role of the foreign Governments

### Armenia

The messengers of the foreign Governments were reportedly those CSOs actively involved in the anti-gender movements and implementing various projects including trainings and propaganda style events to disseminate the anti-gender attitudes among different social groups. The messages were reportedly more vogue similar to those hate speeches spread towards LGBT community, CSOs or individuals, who stand for the human rights and freedoms, as well as gender equality. Some of the respondents reported Russia to be the main foreign Government leading the anti-gender propaganda.

The communication channels as mentioned are the CSOs and their projects implemented in different communities and with different timeframe.

The strategy of the Foreign Government was described as latent one, to ensure their involvement is not obvious and no traces are tracked to link any of abovementioned activities with them.

### **Georgia**

Russia has a leading role in the fight against Western and liberal values - the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of Russia's most potent outposts in the country. But the role of foreign governments in strengthening the anti-gender movements recently.

### **Moldova**

80% of respondents had no answer to this question. 20% of experts expressed the opinions: - the Government of the Russian Federation indirectly contributes to the strengthening of the anti-gender movement in Moldova:

- The Dodon government was supported by Russia, which officially promotes patriarchal family values.
- Moldova is always in a dispute between Europe and Russia.
- Representatives of the Government of the Russian Federation took part in a traditional family conference organized by the former President of the Republic of Moldova and the foundation of his wife - Galina Dodon.

### **Ukraine**

Majority of respondents did not answer the question due to the lack of information.

- On the one hand, the growth is ignored by the influence of far-right groups, on the other hand, the shift in emphasis from structural inequality to patriarchal norms, often donors that support the gender agenda have no idea what are the causes of gender inequality in Ukraine.
- foreign governments are either silent about this issue, or they call out human right violations and support pro-democratic civil society in Ukraine



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## Istanbul Convention: impact of the anti-gender movement

### Armenia

The impact of the anti-gender movement on the ratification/implementation of the Istanbul Convention was reported to be mostly negative by the vast majority of the respondents. The respondents noted that incomplete and non-competent interpretation of the Convention, as well as manipulation of the ideas taken out of the context lead to a situation when the society and the public protest against the Convention perceiving it as unacceptable ideology fully opposing to the traditions, values and perceptions of the so called normal Armenian society. As a result, this social mood created through the fake agendas automatically hinder ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

When rating the effectiveness of the civil society in overcoming the negative impact of anti-gender movement on ratification of the Istanbul Convention, more than the half of the respondents (56% or 14 out of 25 respondents) answered “not very effective”, the other part (36% 9 out of 25 respondents) rated the impact of the civil society as “effective” and two respondents together computing 8% of respondents provided cardinaly opposite responses stating that the impact was “very effective” vs “not effective at all”.

The importance of the regional cooperation was highlighted by most of the respondents, who expressed the significance of dialogues, experience exchange, joint projects on awareness raising and competent discourse of the Convention as best forms of collaboration. One of the respondents expressed a thought that the joint participation and regional cooperation might neutralize the consequences of the movement against the ratification of the Convention, at least in terms of presenting more bases and arguments proving that the Convention is not about destroying traditional perception of the Armenian family and Armenian values.

### Azerbaijan

In comparison to previous years there is a growing awareness of the Istanbul Convention in society in Azerbaijan. The women’s rights community is well-informed about the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe and has been advocating for the signature and ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Azerbaijani government. The issue was also approached by the Azerbaijan National Platform of EaP Civil Society Forum, which in 2018 addressed the letter to the President of Azerbaijan with the request to ratify Istanbul Convention.

As a matter of fact, the concluding observations and recommendations of the UN CEDAW Committee, issued to the government of Azerbaijan in March 2015 (latest review of Azerbaijan

was held on 18 February 2015) contained 7 concrete recommendations in relation to GBV and domestic violence (DV) for implementation before the end of 2018, among which was the signature with further ratification of Istanbul Convention. However, Azerbaijan remains to be one of two remaining countries (the second is Belarus), that neither signed, nor ratified the Istanbul Convention. Overall, in March 2015 the UN CEDAW Committee 74 recommendations in 17 areas of concern for the Government of Azerbaijan.

The major obstacle for signing and further ratifying the Istanbul Convention is the lack of political will, that is mainly related to the reluctance of the government of Azerbaijan to undertake a new set of international commitments. Azerbaijan is already facing the urgent calls to be more respectful to its international commitments in front of numerous international and multilateral institutions, especially the ones in relation to the human rights issues. In addition, the implementation of the Istanbul Convention is costly, especially the part in relation to the establishment and maintenance of the adequate infrastructure, including the shelters, might be a burden for Azerbaijan, which has entered the so-called “post-oil” period and did not manage to adequately diversify the economy for the high level of corruption in the country. In the period of Covid-19 and post war (Nagorno-Karabakh) situation the financial priorities of the government do not include GBV-related actions. Additionally, the ratification of Istanbul Convention needs substantial reforms in the areas of legislation, rule of law, decision-making and economic development, most of which fall within the good governance challenges in the general.

## Georgia

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention activated anti-gender campaigns. The Orthodox Church and religious groups tried to demonize the Convention and impose misconceptions and stereotypes on the population.

At this stage, the anti-gender movements can't hamper or distract the Istanbul Convention's implementation (the current political establishment composition, strong women's organizations and rise of support in a population - 3 times rise of support among women).

When rating the effectiveness of the civil society in overcoming the negative impact of anti-gender movement on ratification of the Istanbul Convention, 14,3% of respondents stated that the impact was “very effective; 39.3% - “effective”; 25% - “not very effective” and the part of respondents 21,4% rated the impact of the civil society as “Not effective at all”.

Most of the respondents highlighted the importance of regional cooperation. They underlined the significance of dialogues, experience sharing and uniting civil society's efforts from different countries against the anti-gender movement.

## Moldova

At this stage, Moldova has signed the Istanbul Convention (2017), but at the parliamentary level, the ratification procedure is blocked by the majority (socialists), who believe that this document

belittles traditional values and the family. There are groups of priests and believers (Orthodox, Baptists) who support these ideas. They organized an anti-march on March 8th.

The church and some political leaders oppose the ratification, claiming it is a document of the gender movement.

Anti-gender activists spread false information about the provisions of the Convention. In particular, anti-gender, homophobic and sexist rhetoric is reinforced whenever there is a loud and visible propaganda campaign to ratify the Convention.

Regarding the effectiveness of the civil society in overcoming the negative impact of anti-gender movement on the Istanbul Convention the opinions of gender experts and activists of women's organizations in Moldova were divided. Some argue that civil society is effective in overcoming the negative impact of the anti-gender movement on the ratification / implementation of the Istanbul Convention, others say that it is not effective enough

The general opinion of the experts who took part in the survey is that it is very important to work together, in particular, to exchange best practices on actions taken to obtain informative and documented feedback and responses on the need to ratify and implement the Convention. Any form of regional cooperation is important. Round tables, joint information actions / campaigns, feminist schools, conferences - as many visible joint actions as possible - are urgently needed. By sharing best practices, challenges and setbacks, civil society can streamline the ratification process, improve its effectiveness, but can also raise public awareness of the actual causes of gender-based violence.

## **Ukraine**

The main obstacle to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention has been the opposition from the Ukrainian Council of Churches and some radical right initiatives. The Council of Churches has stated it is especially concerned about the word "gender" used in the Convention. In the opinion of the Council of Churches, the Convention may become an instrument of promoting new gender roles and same-sex relationships. Those, according to the Council, would threaten the traditional institution of the family in Ukraine. Prior to consideration of ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Ukrainian government, the "anti-gender initiatives" undertook several lobbying campaigns. These campaigns were comprised of "visible" mass appearances in media, advertisements, propaganda at public events as well as "personal" influencing of legislators convincing them not to vote for the treaty's ratification.

As a result, the Convention is not ratified to this day. In August 2019, newly elected Members of Parliament from the Presidential party stated that they will take consultations with the Ukrainian Council of Churches regarding any future ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

Regarding the effectiveness of the civil society in overcoming the negative impact of anti-gender movement on the Istanbul Convention all respondents' response was – not very effective.

The general opinion of the respondents is that it is very important to work together.

- it is very important. exchange of experience, joint strategizing and mobilization can be useful
- to be louder together, to show that anti-gender movements are not a consequence of our backwardness and we do not have to follow the path of the West, since there have been periods in our history when our regions were more progressive in the topic of gender equality. Share experiences, both positive and negative.
- highly important. we look at what is going on in close countries and can use their information and messages. that can influence us a lot unfortunately

## Organizations working on women issues: awareness about the radical right anti-gender movements, radical right influence on work

### Armenia

The majority of the respondents (60% or 15 out of 25) reported that the organizations working on women issues in Armenia are totally aware about the radical right anti-gender movements, whereas more than one third or 9 out of 25 of the respondents noted that those organizations are partially aware about the radical anti-gender movements. Only one respondent thought that the existing organizations are unaware of the radical anti-gender movements in Armenia.

One fifth of the respondents found it difficult to identify the extent to which and the way of negative impact of the radical right towards their or other NGOs' work. Another one fifth of the respondents noted that the radical right is not affecting their NGO's work or ability to do their work.

Those remaining 40% of the respondents, however, who have really been affected by the movement identified three main consequences:

(a) being subjected to the hate speeches and negative social attitude, by various means such as dissemination of disinformation and fake news, labeling those CSOs as Soros-workers, destroyers of the Armenian traditions and values, etc.,

(b) being obliged to concentrate extra efforts, resources and time to respond to the whole bunch of anti-gender ideology spread by the movement supporters,

(c) being subjected to psychological and often physical abuse perpetrated by the anti-gender movement supporters.

Given the opinions of the respondents, the radical anti-gender movement can be viewed as mainly negatively affecting the work of the CSOs devoted to the human rights protection and gender equality, which in fact hinders their normal performance and concentration of their main efforts on implementation of their direct mission and vision, instead of fighting the anti-gender waves of anti-propaganda and negative social moods development.

### Georgia

The majority of the respondents - 53% (15 out of 28) reported that the organizations working on women issues in Georgia are aware of the radical right anti-gender movements, 46% (13 out of 28) that they are partially aware of them.

25% (7 out of 28) - of the respondents note that their NGO's work or ability to do their job is "significantly affected" by anti-gender movements, subjecting activists to psychological and

often physical abuse. 42.29% (12 out of 28) thinks that it is "affected", 14.29% (4 out of 28) -not "less affected", 3,57% (1 out of 28) – "not affected".

## Moldova

Most of the NGOs promoting women's rights are aware, because this topic has been discussed more than once on various platforms. However, not all organizations are sufficiently aware of these issues to effectively respond to and confront radical right-wing anti-gender movements. Many organizations working on the problems faced by victims of gender-based violence do not understand the dangers of right-wing radicals. Given the alarming number of cases of domestic violence, but also the tolerance of the population towards this phenomenon, it is believed that we have too few organizations that support victims and perpetrators. For this reason, these organizations simply do not have the ability to devote resources to assessing the influence of the radical right.

Some NGO leaders said that the radicals had not influenced their activities in any way. And at the same time, lawyers and especially women's rights defenders are often harassed / attacked by anti-gender activists.

An active feminist statement: "In 2019, I, along with other NGO colleagues, participated in an advocacy campaign for the ratification of the Convention. Radical right-wing religious groups have misrepresented our message by spreading false information about the provisions and objectives of the convention. And their radical, anti-human rights appeal still resonates with a significant part of Moldovans."

There were attempts to attack the Pride march, the office of the NGO GENDERDOC-M, attacks against LGBT people.) In practice, mechanisms have been worked out how to act in various circumstances.

## Ukraine

Most of the organizations and activists working in the field of women's rights and violence against women are aware about the radical right movements because they face threats and challenges related to them. But, not all organizations are sufficiently aware of these issues to effectively respond to and confront radical right anti-gender movements. Some organizations working with domestic violence and sexual violence do not clear understand the dangers of radical right activism in Ukraine, do not have enough knowledge and information, lack necessary tools.

- I believe they are aware, but the acceptance of the extreme right is closely related to the military conflict and the active role of the right in this. Many organizations don't want to talk badly about "heroes"
- well aware, but not formally. little research is done about them

Majority of respondents mentioned a great influence of radical right forces on activists and NGOs work, as well as consequences of such influence. It is corresponding with the above mentioned research report of the Ukrainian Women's Fund according to which the interviewed activists noted the negative impact of anti-gender groups and actions they perform on their lives, work, and society as a whole. Among other things, they spoke about the fear, harassment, threats, powerlessness they experienced, their reservations about holding feminist actions in the regions. They also mentioned the demands to have them dismissed and actual loss of jobs and shared that they wanted to move abroad.<sup>39</sup>

- effected a lot. we can not work that much at public, feel afraid. we cannot erase lgbt topics at public without police help
- band impunity for human right violations.
- Since my work is related to women's rights, women's rights in times of conflict and women's peacebuilding, I very often hear threats against me and this forces me to be careful even in words.
- Threatens, breaking up events and attacking activists
- create an atmosphere of "rejection / threat of feminism"
- derogate the value of human rights
- Permeate into politics
- take all funds from local administrations for youth programs and patriotic education
- In social networks spread discrediting videos
- Attacks on activists on March 8, and marches of equality (with bodily injuries)
- Attacks and disruptions of lectures, cinema shows, discussions, exhibitions, etc.

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<sup>39</sup> GENDER OR ANTI-GENDER: Who Is Attacking Democracy in Ukraine? Ukrainian Women's Fund research report.  
[https://www.uwf.org.ua/files/210\\_210\\_short\\_.pdf](https://www.uwf.org.ua/files/210_210_short_.pdf)

## Anti-Gender Movements in Other Countries and Regional Cooperation

### Armenia

According to the survey results, the vast majority of the respondents (72% or 18 out of 25) were not aware of the anti-gender movements in Eastern Partnership Countries. The remaining 7 out of 25 or 28% of respondents noted that their information about the movements in EPC is very generic and based on what they have learnt during the exchange programs and visits. The main idea, however, was that in all of their visited Eastern Partnership Countries the situation was similar to the one in Armenia, the same manipulative propaganda, same fight for protection of the traditional family models, and targeting of the CSOs working on protection of LGBTQI rights.

As for the situation in Europe, even more percent of respondents (84% or 21 out of 25) were unaware of the nature of anti-gender movements in Europe. Only four respondents mentioned that they have heard about the situation in Poland and Hungary, which is much similar to the general situation, particularly the Polish law on banning almost all kinds of abortion. Other similarities were seen in religious propaganda which is held by the Church in a very similar to the scenarios performed in other countries.

As a conclusive question, the respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which is important the regional cooperation of civil society to overcome the anti-gender movements in the EaP countries, to which more than the half of the respondents (64% or 16 out of 25) answered "very important", the remaining 36% or 9 out of 25 respondents responded "important". These results speak for significance of the regional cooperation which should be based on mutual support and development of a unified agenda outlining all the concrete activities to be undertaken to overcome the negative impact of the anti-gender movements in EaP countries.

### Georgia

According to the respondents, 67.9% (19 out of 28) have no information about anti-gender movement in the Eastern Partnership countries, 21,4% (5 out of 28) are more or less informed and only 10,7% (3 out of 28) of respondents are informed about the anti-gender movements in Eastern Partnership Countries.

Out of 28 respondents, only 10.7% (3 out of 28) have information on anti-gender movement in Europe.

To evaluate the extent of the importance of civil society's regional cooperation to overcome the anti-gender movements in the EaP countries, the vast majority of the respondents assessed the civil society's regional collaboration as "very important".

### Moldova

Most of the activists of gender organizations are aware of the situation in the EaP countries from the press and from colleagues of the NP, National Networks - "For Gender Equality", the Coalition "Life without Domestic Violence".

The Eastern Partnership countries are strongly influenced by conservative, radical religious rhetoric. This influence comes largely from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In the case of the Republic of Moldova, President Igor Dodon has repeatedly reiterated his commitment to promoting traditional family and Orthodoxy, and his commitment to combating gender-based violence seems to have been completely absent from the pro-Kremlin president's agenda. At every meeting with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Igor Dodon openly declared his support for the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova, although this institution turned out to be extremely anti-human rights, democratic, European values.

50% of the respondents noted that they do not have such information, but they are interested in it. The second half of the respondents answered in the affirmative, indicating sources of information, such as new media, colleagues on the gender network.

All respondents unanimously spoke about the importance of regional cooperation of civil society in overcoming anti-gender movements in the Eastern Partnership countries.

## Ukraine

Many respondents stated that they do not have enough information.

- *i know they exist, they use force, they can physically harm activists, intimidate them*

About half of the respondents stated that they do not have enough information, the rest of the respondents said that they are aware of it.

- *i don't know much. i know that nazis still exist and do different stuff in Germany unfortunately*

## How significant is regional cooperation of the civil society to overcome the anti-gender movements in the EaP countries?

All respondents stated about the importance of regional cooperation of civil society to combat anti-gender movements in the Eastern Partnership countries.

## Conclusions

On the basis of all of the above, the possibility and necessity of coordinated practical actions on the part of civil society in close cooperation with the national authorities, other relevant actors of the community, both in countries and at the regional level of the Eastern Partnership countries, is clearly indicated.

In order to counter the challenges of anti-feminist law radical movements and to facilitate the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in our countries, as well as in other partner countries, a joint advocacy plan for the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the National Platforms of EaP CSF should be developed and implemented. partnerships to promote the implementation / ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Eastern Partnership region, a wide public awareness campaign was organized; the positive experience of Georgia in this area should be analyzed and expanded.

- Mechanisms for implementation of anti-gender policies:
  - o engagement of a broad range of tools for influence on the political elite and target audiences;
  - o creation of large volumes of virtual products related to the idea of family values;
  - o exploitation of public opinion leaders for promoting the anti-gender ideology;
  - o news hooks used as factors of information influence on the country's leadership;
  - o gradual increase in the number of anti-gender policy supporters;
  - o organization of active widely publicized events supporting the implementation of family values and elimination of gender policies;
  - o attempts to provoke mass protests that may be driven by the religious factor, including the attitude to traditional family values;
  - o radical attitude towards LGBT people.
- The ratification of the Istanbul Convention has become one of the main targets for anti-gender initiatives. Thus, the discussion on common strategies to promote the Istanbul Convention is extremely important.

Such strategies may include:

- o Using both traditional and new channels of informing and mobilising supporters:
  - Chat-bots
  - Engaging celebrities/influencers
  - Street rallies
  - Awareness raising campaigns
  - Story-telling
  - Viral videos
- o Using international platforms (including the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum) to convey the importance of the Istanbul Convention ratification to the national authorities.

- It is extremely important to draw on the experience of the countries that have already ratified the Istanbul Convention (including Georgia)
- Engaging the groups and organisations that may be indirectly interested in promoting the ratification: namely, ecological, European integration, children, human rights groups and organisations.
- Working with improving the quality of state services and promoting the Istanbul Convention standards in the state practice.
  - It is crucial to improve the situation regarding stalking and assaulting activists by the right-wing radicals – by engaging international courts and procedures.
  - It is important to offer high quality shadow reports to the UN international committees reporting on the situation on the antigender initiatives in Ukraine.
  - As the research has shown, Ukrainian human rights activists lack information on the possible sources of funding and supporting of anti-gender movements. Thus, it is crucial to engage the international networks of journalists and researchers who identify the links between anti-gender powers around the world as well as the sources of their funding and support.