

FEMINIST RESPONSES TO GROWING NATIONALISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION



A study commissioned by Soraya Post, member of the European Parliament, Swedish Feminist Initiative (FI), Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament



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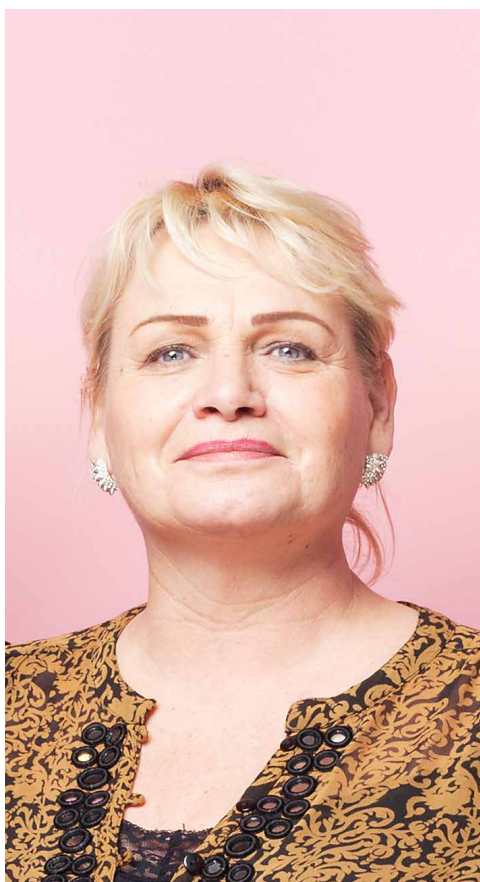
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Foreword by Soraya Post, Swedish Feminist Initiative (F!)



I am glad to put this publication forward – it shows how fundamentally important feminism and intersectional feminist work is to promote human rights, democratic values, rule of law, anti-racism and gender equality within the EU - work that makes us targets for the right wing.

During my 40 years as a human rights activist and now almost five years as a Member of the European Parliament, I have seen a development, or rather a regression, in the European member states towards nationalistic rhetoric and policies. This is a threat against democracy.

I have commissioned this study because I want to make people aware of the threat nationalism poses to our democracy, and the feminist tools we can use to oppose it. We have to protect our democracy together; we have seen what nationalism and silence can do to our societies.

The nationalists are using democratic tools; they are getting elected into our Parliaments and getting their language of hate and dehumanisation legitimized.

We cannot pretend that they will go away if we ignore them: they will not. We have to work actively against them.

The nationalist agenda is deeply anti-democratic, as the definition of who belongs to the community, who is part of the nation and who can be considered 'one of us', is narrowed down.

Among the ones that, from a nationalist agenda, pose a “threat” to the nation, we find ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and asylum seekers, the LGBTQI population, feminists and human rights activists. And it is not only nationalist parties that are picking up on this rhetoric, it is also established parties as well.

This means that the work to achieve human rights for all, and the space for action, is constantly being narrowed down. We can already see the consequences of growing nationalism for women’s rights in the EU. The interest for gender equality decreases and so-called traditional values receive increasing support. Sexual and reproductive rights are being attacked, women human rights defenders see their funding get cut and work harassed, while hate speech and hate crimes are on the rise. Issues related to gender equality and gender justice are never prioritized, unless there is a strong organisation and movement to support the gender equality agenda at every step. Hence we see gender equality bodies with no budget, no mandate and all-male members. We can see in many EU states’ failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention that violence against women is not taken seriously in our societies, and its trivialisation has a hugely negative impact on all of us. In the EU Agenda on Security, there is not a single line that says that interpersonal violence such as intimate or domestic violence, harassment, stalking or sexual assault has to be a priority.

This study maps this development and asks how gender equality within the European Union can be strengthened and developed, particularly in the political sphere, and we have found that women’s organisation and feminist work is fundamentally important to push the nationalist agenda back. Those of us with feminist values have to react, act, and get organised so that we have a future where all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

In Ireland, the government has agreed to hold a referendum on the liberalization of the strict abortion rights in May 2018. In Spain there are several movements against men's violence against women. In Poland we have the successful Black Protest movement, which gained international support. We see how groups join hands, how the women's movement acts in solidarity when the rights of other groups are threatened such as LGBTQI, Roma, homeless people, young people, people with disabilities, refugees. Most importantly, we see feminism as the most articulate opposition to nationalism. Nationalism is about going back in time, to traditional values that never really existed, to strengthen borders, to exclude people from communities and using harsh and violent language.

Feminism is the exact opposite. Feminism embraces the future, it challenges values that exclude people, to develop our common values into something that can support every individual in their diversity. Feminism believes in the capabilities of every individual to contribute to society, it believes in opening up borders and most of all, feminism does this with actions and organisation based in love and trust for one another.

It is two radically different futures and worlds we see. This is why feminist work and organisation in the EU is fundamentally important and why we need more feminism in Europe, in local governments, in national parliaments and in the European Parliament as well. Europe needs feminism wherever decisions are being made. We cannot expect others to fight for feminist policies - we have to take the power in our own hands, to fight for a more feminist, just, diverse, and inclusive vision for Europe.

1. Introduction

During recent years, there has been a development towards stronger nationalism in the European Union member states. The last decade saw far-right movements growing in popularity and gaining seats in national as well as local parliaments. This study is an attempt to map the consequences of this development for women's rights and to give examples of how the feminist movements in the EU countries have responded. The aim of the study is to examine how the work to achieve gender equality within the European Union can be strengthened and developed, particularly in the political sphere, and if such a development could constitute a response to the right-wing push throughout the EU.

Method and limitations of work

The study was carried out between June and November 2016 and included visits to eight EU countries and meetings with more than 150 people. Meetings held in additional three countries done before the project period started have also been included in the report. A detailed report of countries visited can be found at the end of the report.

Besides the report author, Gudrun Schyman, a well-known Swedish feminist, who has been engaged in women's rights issues and politics for 40 years, also took part in the meetings.

The meetings ranged in size from one individual up to 50 participants. They mostly took place in the venues of feminist NGOs or in independent cultural centers. They were sometimes held in people's homes, in restaurants and cafes. The participants of these meetings were women (90%), feminist, union, Roma and LGBTIQ activists, academics, politicians, journalists, lawyers and many more.

Participants shared their views on the political situation in their countries concerning women's and human rights, as well as described the feminist movement and human rights activism in their communities. Gudrun Schyman shared information on feminist politics in Sweden and lessons learned from the Swedish experience of counteracting the rise of right-wing populism with feminist politics.

This report does not attempt to give a complete image of the consequences the growing nationalism has had on women's rights in the EU, or to cover the full range of feminist responses. It should rather be seen as an illustration of the situation through a number of examples and a few general conclusions.

The quotations in the report are from interviews done during the research, and are in most cases marked with just the country in question, in order to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

Research questions used in the interviews:

1. Describe the influence from conservative/far-right parties in your country/community
2. Give examples of how they are influencing women's and LGBTIQ/minority rights on a policy and public opinion level
3. How has the feminist movement in your country/community responded to possible threats to women's and LGBTIQ/minority rights so far?
4. Describe the movement's capacity to respond. From where do you get support? What is needed to further strengthen the movement's ability to respond?
5. How does the cooperation between feminists look like on a European level?

2. The Europe we are in

Nationalism is back on the stage. It shows itself in a stronger determination on the side of governments to defend their national interest within the EU and through the rise of right-wing populist forces that are islamophobic and anti-immigrant. It has reached new heights in the Eurozone's struggles and the refugee crisis.

A quick reminder of the 2014 European Parliament election results:

The election saw great gains for parties opposed to the EU project. National Front from France won 24 seats, and came first in 70% of the country's regions. UKIP won 24 seats in the UK. Greece's Golden Dawn won 3 seats. Beppe Grillo's Eurosceptic Five Star Movement finished second in Italy and won 17 seats. Alternative für Deutschland won 7 seats and the far-right National Democratic Party won one seat. In Denmark the anti-immigration party Dansk Folkeparti finished first and won four seats. Sweden Democrats won nearly ten per cent and two seats. The Fidesz party of Viktor Orbán in Hungary got over 50% of the votes and 12 seats. Far-right Jobbik won 3 seats.

These are just a few examples of the various nationalist parties' gains in parliamentary seats in the European Parliament and thereby the resources which accompany this presence in Parliament.

Closed borders, hate speech and racism

2015 was dominated by the refugee crisis. After some initial generous statements from some EU countries, the tone of the discussions started changing towards the end of the year. In November 2015 the Swedish government announced that it had no more space for refugees. Just before that there were terrorist attacks in Paris.

These events contributed to the final and complete closing of the European Union's borders. In March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal was signed, refugees arriving from March 20 and onwards were now to be returned from Greece to Turkey. Macedonia closed its border with Greece, with the blessing of the EU. Amnesty International estimates that only 6% of the refugees in Greece have been relocated to permanent homes, leaving tens of thousands stuck in inadequate conditions. Despite different deals, some 3600 migrants died crossing the Mediterranean in 2016.

Walls are being built, asylum centers are being set on fire, immigrants are being harassed, and hate speech and racism can be heard and seen in public spaces – also in our parliaments. Women wearing headscarves are being harassed; systematic racial profiling is being used at border crossings, in security checks and in our cities.

“Everyone hates migrants, and are afraid of them. The rhetoric is so strong. I am afraid to take the subject up with strangers, afraid of what they might say.” (Hungary)

Nationalism and women's rights

Nationalism feeds on having enemies. Who they are varies from country to country and from one political climate to another, but the rejection of “the Other” is something that unites over borders. Among the “others” one can usually find ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and asylum seekers, the LGBTQI population, feminists and human rights activists.

In a nationalist ideology, the role of women is primarily that of bearing the nation's children and supporting men as the nation's defenders. The heterosexual nuclear family is the foundation on which the nation is built, and a woman should be the cornerstone of the family.

We can already see the consequences that growing nationalism has on women's rights in the EU. The interest for gender equality decreases and traditional values receive increasing support.

"There has been no legislation improving women's right in the EU since 2008, for the past eight years." Joanna Maycock, European Women's Lobby, June 2016.

There are various agents cooperating on the current nationalist agenda, who strengthen each other's messages. Religious communities have played a major role in many countries to fire up anti-abortion campaigns and suggest on prohibition of family constellations that do not follow the traditional nuclear family model. In the project of protecting the nation's interests, the definition of who belongs to the nation is narrowed down, and those who do not fit within these definitions are considered threats to the nation. Religion plays an important part in the process of (re-)building a national identity. Especially in some of the newer EU member states, this process is partly a consequence of what is seen as forced adjustments and a threatening influence of "western values" during the EU integration process.

3. Consequences of nationalism on human rights

In this section some examples of how the above-mentioned developments have influenced human rights within the EU will be presented. These are examples that were discussed at our meetings. This is not a comprehensive overview, but should rather be seen as an illustration of the problem.

Referendums on human rights

In **Slovenia**, the national assembly passed a bill to allow same-sex marriage in March 2015. However, opponents to the bill managed to collect enough signatures for a referendum to be held on the issue. Although the national assembly rejected the referendum, the constitutional court allowed it, despite the fact that referendums are not allowed for human rights and minority issues. The referendum was held in December 2015 and the original bill was rejected. After the research study was completed, Slovenia did in fact adopt the law and same-sex marriages are legal in the country.^[1]

The same year in **Romania**, an alliance was formed among over 30 Romanian NGOs under the name of *Coalition for Family* (**Coaliția pentru Familie**). The coalition's main activity consisted of promoting and collecting signatures for a citizen's initiative aiming to revise the constitution and prevent interpretations that would permit same-sex marriage. By May 2016 the coalition had gathered over 3 million signatures. The Romanian Orthodox Church is actively supporting the proposal. On 20 July 2016, the nine judges of the Constitutional Court ruled unanimously that the proposal to change the constitution's definition of marriage was valid.

The parliament must approve the revision, which must then pass a nationwide referendum. Currently, the constitution says family starts "on the basis of freely consenting marriage between spouses."

Croatia also held a referendum, in December 2013, on whether an amendment should be added to the constitution that would define marriage as an act between specifically a man and a woman. It was initiated by the conservative citizens' organization "In the name of the family", with support from the Catholic Church. The anti-gay marriage side won.

Abortion rights at risk

Conservative parties in **Slovenia** have a big network of civic organizations that is active in various on different levels. One example is the anti-abortion movement (Zavod Božji otroci) that first protested for months in front of the Gynaecology hospital and later organized a projection of the video "Abortion is a killing act" in a public space; it was projected on the walls of the church in the main square. The actions were supported by the Slovenian Bishops' Conference.^[2]

The Coalition for The Family in **Romania** has a strong pro-life discourse, and they recently promoted the idea of compulsory counselling before abortion, which in fact would work as a masked form of pro-life indoctrination.

Also in **Italy** the right to abortion is constantly under threat, especially due to the high number of conscientious objectors among physicians.^[3] It is considered a risk for one's medical career to have performed abortions. National data shows that as many as seven out of ten Italian gynaecologists are conscientious objectors.^[4]

Ireland has the strictest legislation on abortion in Europe (alongside Malta). Between 10 and 12 women travel to the UK every day to have an abortion. It is the Article 40.3.3, known as the Eighth Amendment, in the Irish Constitution that makes abortion illegal in almost all cases. The amendment states:

'The state acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due

regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.'

The amendment equates the life of a pregnant woman with that of an embryo or foetus and has created an unworkable distinction between a pregnant woman's life and her health. (See below about the movement to repeal the eight amendment).

Women in **Croatia** are faced with constant threats to their sexual and reproductive rights. The prohibition of the right to safe abortion is put forward by both politicians, representatives of the church and citizens' movements close to the church (advocating the Polish model for regulation of the rights on abortion). The possibility of assisted fertilization and the use of frozen embryos in the process is also at risk.

During the presidential primaries in **France 2016**, one of the candidates, Francois Fillon, expressed his "personal conviction" about abortion. He claimed that he is personally against abortion, but that he will not change the law.[5] It is an illustration of the fact that abortion no longer is an untouchable right, but a subject of public debate.

In Berlin, **Germany**, there was an anti-choice demonstration organized by the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland, which gathered around 6000 people. Both in **Croatia** and **Poland** activists testify that the anti-choice rhetoric, also known as "pro-life", has become mainstream lingo. The anti-choice advocates use human rights language to claim anti-feminist issues, by focusing on the right of the foetus, or the right to life for persons with disabilities as well as addressing traditional family values. The rights of the women themselves are not at all highlighted. Rather women's rights to self-determination and to their own bodies is being ignored or put in question by the anti-choice movement.

“15 years ago the question “is abortion illegal” wasn’t part of the conversation at all in Croatia. Now it is.” (Croatia)

Restrictions on civil society, the right to demonstrate, the freedom of expression

Women human rights defenders across the EU bear witness to declining accessibility in the public space to act, advocate for and protect human rights. While conservative and homophobic citizen’s initiatives are getting financial as well as logistical support from like-minded businessmen, churches, politicians and media, the human rights activists are seeing their financial support being cut, tax authorities are arbitrarily investigating them and they are either ridiculed or completely ignored by media. Furthermore, they get threatened and even physically attacked, and these crimes are rarely punished.

In **Hungary** women’s and human rights groups are under constant attack, receiving threats and are struggling for financial means to survive. The country’s new CSO law that was passed in June 2017 has hindered civil society organisations from receiving foreign funding.^[6] There is hardly any independent media left in the country, and the complete domination of one party means that a person must be connected to the party in order to get a job and other opportunities. The country is experiencing a brain drain where people feel forced to leave.

Also in **Poland** the media is increasingly under the control of the government, which is using it to shape public opinion, for instance on issues related to women’s and human rights. Authorities harass women’s rights organisations through raiding their offices^[7] and new regulations restrict demonstration rights in the country.^[8]

In **Croatia** right-wing politicians called for the reduction of the financial support from the state budget to non-governmental organizations, specifically those most critical toward political conservatism and negative

influence of the church on women's rights (sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQI rights). There are continuous attacks on civil society organisations. The vast majority of brutal hate crimes against lesbians and gay men go without sanctions for perpetrators.

Issues related to gender equality are never prioritized

The interests of the nation come first, and these interests always take priority over other issues. Hence we see gender equality bodies with no budget, no mandate and all male members. We see budget cuts for women's health as well as reduced funding to combat violence against women. In **Romania**, the parliamentary committee for gender equality consists of only male members.

In **Spain** severe budget cuts have been made regarding women's health and measures to prevent and protect from violence against women.

New craze for the traditional family

Across Europe we witness a focus on the family as the most important building stone of a nation, presented as something that equals healthy and normal values. Family-focused politics strengthens traditional gender roles and makes women economically dependent of their husbands. It often includes proposals to make it more beneficial for the woman to stay at home, and more difficult to combine motherhood and professional life. The role of the father's parental leave is not on the agenda. The pressure on women to have children is rarely followed up with measures that would actually make it easier for women to have and finance children, rather very populist promises of one-time money awards.

Furthermore, the love for the nuclear family means that others are being discriminated, especially the LGBTQI population, but also single mothers and other family constellations.

In **Ireland** the childcare is very expensive – it is more or less equal to an annual salary, effectively taking away the incentive for women to work. The church runs most of the sexual education in schools. Many schools do not accept students who are not baptized.

The **Polish** government uses the state budget to invest in traditional family values. The Catholic Church is a very influential political actor and the ruling conservative party's ally.

In **Romania** pupils are offered no sexual education in schools. A Pride parade could only be organized with a very heavy police presence, and on empty streets. A “normality” march was organised by a far-right party the same day, as a protest.^[9] As mentioned earlier, NGOs close to the Orthodox Church, joined in Coalition for Family, has strong support in its opposition to same-sex marriages.

In **Germany** a movement called “*Demo für alle*” organizes demonstrations for traditional family values and against “gender-ideology” and sexual education in schools.^[10]

There is also a **European initiative** called “*Mum, Dad and Kids*” collecting support for an EU regulation to define family as “father, mother and their children” and marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

To be added to this is the general perception that the **EU is not something to count on** in these issues. At least that is the feeling shared by most activists we met. People feel alone and left out and point to the lack of effective mechanisms to prevent and protect from human rights violations once a country has become a member.

“It has become very clear that the EU will not help us with human rights issues” (Croatia)

“We don’t feel connected with the international feminist movement” (Romania)

4. The fights for our rights - strategies that work

In every place we visited, in every meeting we had, we were told amazing and strong stories on how women organize to protect human rights in their countries – despite often being threatened and ridiculed, and despite having very little financial resources. Below are just a few examples, categorized according to what seems to be successful strategies.

Using the momentum – surf on the wave of a recent success, or the anger of women when rights are taken away from them.

After the positive result in the referendum in 2015 on same-sex marriage in Ireland, the human rights movement felt empowered and ready to take on the next issue – the right to abortion. A movement called Repeal the 8th ^[11] (referring to the 8th amendment to the constitution that makes abortion illegal, see above) has managed to mobilize a broad coalition of people for this cause. As a result of this, the Irish government has agreed for a referendum on liberalization of the strict abortion rights to be held on May 25, 2018.

Feminist awareness is increasing in **Spain**. One example is the “Freedom train”, a movement ^[12] that organised a demonstration in Madrid on February 2014 ^[13] and that stopped an amendment of the abortion law, which the Ministry of Justice was promoting –to the extent that it triggered the resignation of that Minister. ^[14]

The platform 7N related to the violence against women is another example of feminist mobilization in Spain. This platform was created in 2015 as a response to government cuts in gender equality policies, specifically for combatting violence against women. The activism done during 2015 resulted in a march that took place in Madrid on the 7th of November, in which around 200 000 people from all the country gathered - the biggest demonstration on the issue of gender violence to had taken place in the capital. ^[15] The platform consists of feminist

associations at national and regional level. A lot of young people are involved in it. Its work is recognized as a social and political stakeholder.

A third coalition active in Spain today is the 8 March Commission that initiated the 24-hour woman strike across Spain for the international women's day, with the support of millions.^[16]

A recent example in **Poland** is the Black Protest, which consists of several feminist movements and was created just after the Polish Parliament accepted the draft bill on a total ban on abortion during its first reading session. There were still two sessions ahead before adopting the new law, nevertheless the threat to women's rights seemed to be so real and close that the Black Protest organized the Black Monday (3.10.2016) - the largest women's demonstrations in the Polish history - all over the country. Almost 100 000 people took part in the demonstrations on Black Monday. Three days later the Parliament rejected the draft bill on a total ban on abortion. Protests have continued in Poland since then, with one of the bigger demonstrations organized in March 2018.^[17]

"The anti-choice swing will have a pendulum effect – for the first time in a long time we see big protests, pro-choice activists speaking out. And the readiness and the anger we see in women is the result of 20 years of feminist work, everything from women studies to activism." (Poland)

International attention and international solidarity – openness and information as pressure and protection

When an action or a specific issue gets international attention it means moral support to the activists on the streets – the importance of this should not be underestimated. It also means some kind of security – with the eyes of the world watching, the risk of violent or repressive response from authorities decreases. Thirdly, governments are not immune to pressure from the outside. It most certainly plays an important role when they decide on how to move ahead.

“We need your help and your voice in the European Parliament to raise what is happening in Poland.” (Poland)

Creating broad coalitions – fighting for each other’s (everyone’s) rights

There are examples in every country of how the women’s movement acts in solidarity when the rights of other groups are threatened. The most common example is the fight for LGBTQI rights, but there are also plenty of other examples, such as fighting for the rights of the Roma population in Spain, Romania, Italy and Croatia, or the rights of homeless people in Hungary, or those of refugees/immigrants in Slovenia and Greece.

In the last 5 years a very strong collaboration and coalition building took place in the **Romanian** feminist, Roma and LGBTQI NGO sector. These NGOs are working together in order to fight sexism, racism, classism, homophobia by organizing protest actions, open letters addressed to governmental representatives, reports, research, awareness-raising activities like Gay Pride, the 28 November March “God does not do politics” (as a reaction to Coalition for The Family initiative). Twenty-eight human rights groups, including Amnesty International, joined forces to urge the court to reject the proposal to organize a referendum on same-sex marriage.

In **Spain**, more than 300 organisations are working together in the CEDAW platform (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) to produce a shadow report to the UN committee reviewing how its signatories are addressing the rights in the convention.

“People say “impossible” when we say Roma AND feminist.” (Spain)

Social media – cheap and effective – but there is also a need for real-life conversations

The power of social media does not need to be explained. It is unarguably the most effective and the cheapest way to reach out and to globalize an issue. The 2014 election campaign on social media by the Feminist Initiative party in **Sweden** was a significant factor to the success of the campaign – and at the same time the only possible strategy, since there was a zero cent budget for the communications campaign. However, had it not been complemented with another success factor, the “Home Party” concept, (i.e. holding political meetings in people’s homes with the condition that the host had at least 25 participants, similar to the concept of Tupperware parties), it might not have had the same effect.

We can also see how the different citizen’s initiatives for conservative family values use the tactic of being present on streets, squares, outside (and inside) churches and talking to people, and how they manage to recruit a lot of support that way.

“We need to use a language that people understand, and talk about topics that people care about. The other side is good at this, at approaching people.” (Croatia)

Feminism as the most articulate opposition to nationalism

In a time when many people are lacking a sense of belonging, of being listened to and seen, populist parties present themselves as the ones that care for these people. They do so by presenting themselves as something different than the established parties, and by pointing at “others” to blame for the situation. They use the language of fear and hatred to raise support. Feminism, as it is based on inclusion and solidarity should be put forward as the main alternative to this. Using the language of love instead of hate and inclusion instead of exclusion.

In the **Swedish** parliamentary election in 2014, the Feminist Initiative stood out as the clearest opponent to the nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats. Feminist Initiative used the slogan “Out with the racists, in with the Feminists” which attracted many voters to the party, tired of other political parties’ more vague response, or in many cases, taking on some of the rhetoric used by the nationalists.

Feminists in **France** have created a network and initiated a website to denounce the extremist right wing and its ideas about women’s rights.^[18] Ahead of the elections in Germany in 2017, the initiative Women against AfD mobilized on social media. These are only a few examples of feminist initiatives against far-right forces connected to election campaigns.

“I’m convinced feminism is what’s going to stop fascism in Europe. I’m sure of it!” (Belgium)

Infiltrating institutions – forming feminist parties

We can see a wave of feminist political parties being started around Europe. **Sweden’s** Feminist Initiative has been the most successful so far, having entered parliaments on local level in 13 municipalities in the last election in 2014, as well as gaining one seat in the European Parliament the same year, held by Soraya Post who became the first member of the European Parliament on a feminist ticket.

In **Finland** a feminist party was founded in the summer of 2016, aiming to take part in its first election in the spring of 2017 (at municipal level). Already in its first six months the existence of a new party energized other actors in the public sphere to come out as feminists and take on a more feminist agenda.

UK has its Women's Equality Party, which started in 2015 and counts 65 000 members at this date. It took part in the local election in London in May 2016 and got 7% of the votes. The party leader who ran for mayor gained 250 000 votes.

There are also active feminist parties in **Denmark, Poland, Germany, Spain** and **Norway**.

"At one point or another you have to infiltrate the institutions. Or to smash them completely, but I don't see that happening soon. So, we need a proper political party." (Croatia)

"Feminism is still a bit taboo here, it is embarrassing. It would be difficult to find a female politician brave enough to step forward." (Germany)

"I believe the gender agenda could be a poster agenda for a new political party" (Hungary)

5. Executive summary

There is no doubt that Europe is facing serious challenges as we see nationalist parties and movements gaining in strength and influence in many corners. This development poses serious threats to the stability, peace and democracy. Nationalism needs enemies to thrive, and it specifically targets groups that are different from what is considered “normal” in a traditional context. Minority groups are at risk, but so are women’s rights as nationalist politics views women’s main role as mothers and caretakers. Women human rights defenders are particularly targeted since they, by choosing activism and being outspoken in the public sphere, go against the expectation of what a woman “should do”.

Consequences

We can see a stronger focus on traditional family values, something that strengthens traditional gender roles and discriminates other family constellations, especially those including the LGBTQI population. Feminism and gender equality are viewed as an ideology wanting to destroy family values. We see the use of referendums as a way to decide on human rights issues, such as who has the right to get married.

When the nation needs to be protected, other issues are pushed off the political agenda. This is happening to measures that could improve gender equality. There is less funding for women rights organisations, as well as for state bodies dealing with gender equality and human rights issues.

With a stronger focus on women’s traditional roles in society comes limitations on her right to her body, and abortion rights are attacked, also in countries with a long tradition of respecting a woman’s choice. Here we can see a dangerous meddling of religious communities in political questions.

In addition, the space for women's rights activism is shrinking in Europe. It can be seen in the decreasing of funds available for these organisations, as well as in legal limitations to receive funds from abroad. Women's rights organisations have their offices raided, they are attacked and threatened physically as well as online, and they are discredited by state-controlled media and organisations close to the government. As a strong women's movement is a prerequisite for sustainable measures against violence against women, this is a dangerous development.

Responses

Despite the harsh climate for women activists, there are a lot of strategies and actions being used to fight the growing nationalism. One of the strongest responses can be seen when broad coalitions are being built. Indeed it makes sense that groups pointed out as "the others" join forces to protect their rights. A popular rise of feminism and human rights values can be seen in countries where the movement has positioned itself clearly as the opposite of nationalism. Timing is important and so it has seemed to be wise to move human rights demands forward immediately after a success in a similar question, or when there are serious violations that provoke fury (and sympathy of the public). Regarding communication with the public, the mixed use of social media and real-life/local meetings seem to be what is most efficient. Nationalists recruit followers by presenting themselves as the solution to people's fears; feminists need to reach out to people as an answer to their hopes instead.

As nationalists also enter the political assemblies, presenting themselves as the alternative to the establishment, it is urgent that also feminists enter these structures in a more organized way. And there is a wave of feminist political parties being formed in Europe, campaigning on local, regional, national and European level, ready to put forward the human rights dimension in politics.

6. Background information about the study

List of EU countries visited

October 2015

Ljubljana, Slovenia
Zagreb, Croatia

March 2016

Athens, Greece
Lesbos, Greece

June 2016

Warsaw, Poland
Gdansk, Poland
Barcelona, Spain
Madrid, Spain

September 2016

Berlin, Germany
Brussels, Belgium
Dublin, Ireland

October 2016

Budapest, Hungary
Bucharest, Romania
Turin, Italy

Presentation of MEP Soraya Post

Soraya Post is a Roma activist and the first Member of the European Parliament from an ideologically anti-racist and feminist party – The Feminist Initiative from Sweden. She is the first Roma person in Sweden to stand as a candidate for a political party. She founded the International Roma Women's Network, and is a co-founder of the European Roma and Travellers Forum. She is also a former Human Rights Strategist at the Region Västra Götaland.

Since entering the European Parliament in 2014, Soraya has been a champion of human rights. She is a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group. In the S&D group Soraya is the coordinator of the subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) and the spokesperson on Roma issues.

Soraya is member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and substitute in the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). She is also part of the delegation for relations with the countries of Central America. She is the co-chair of the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI) and member of the Disability and LGBTI Rights Intergroups.

About the S&D group

The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats - S&D group is the leading centre-left political group in the European Parliament and the second largest, with 189 members from all 28 EU countries.

European feminist meeting in Brussels, December 9, 2016, hosted by MEP Soraya Post, Feminist Initiative

At the end of a year of travel and meetings in the European Union, a number of the interviewees were gathered for a one-day conference in Brussels, hosted by MEP Soraya Post. At the meeting a draft version of the study was presented, followed by plenary and group discussions on different feminist responses to nationalism in the EU, successful interventions at both local and national level and on how the work to improve gender equality within the European Union could be strengthened and developed, particularly in the political sphere. Below is a summary of these discussions.

Summary of group and plenary discussions

What tools and support are needed to become a clear opposition to nationalism, and to be able to defend human rights?

Contact and communication

To organize more meetings similar to this one.

To set up a website and a common social media platform, as well as a closed FB group for this group.

The importance of language

Be aware that when we talk about nationalism or left-wing politics it means different things in different countries.

We need to **reclaim the word feminism**; in many countries it has bad reputation. Many women would not say that they are feminists, even though they support gender equality.

We should focus on equality topics that affect women in every day life, and use a **simple language**. We talk about poverty and women's lives instead of using some abstract vocabulary and technocratic language. We need to say to people: "this is the Europe we have, this is our home. How do you want it to look like?"

People need a sense of belonging. We need to strengthen each other, and provide **space** to women to be able to talk on topics that affect their lives, spaces like "Home Parties" (Tupperware style). We need to be local when doing actions, to **be close to people**.

If nationalists propose traditionalism, we propose norm-criticism. If they propose closed borders, we propose open borders. This can be attractive for ordinary women.

We need to use **art and activism**, so that people be touched.

We need to use the **international tools** that exist.

What issues could unite the feminist movement in Europe and mobilize people? How can we cooperate around these issues?

We need to be mobilizing women. Encourage them to understand their power. Bring them into the political process. Many women would not consider joining a political party. So the answer might not be a feminist party on each continent. In some places we need to do other kinds of work. We need to show women that feminism is their life, feminism is the big issue, feminism is not what you focus on when other things are finished. Politics is being claimed by politicians who say that they represent the people. And they are not. There has to be an alternative to that.

We need to show that we do politics differently and collaboratively. It is not only *what* we do but also *how* we do it. How we are collaborating, seeking common grounds, teaching people to debate with respect.

Reproductive rights, abortion, violence against women are issues that can unite women. Sexual harassment and rape culture is a topic among young people that could unite.

We need to bring the feminist movement closer to women. We **need to deal with issues that affect women every day**: childcare, pay gap etc. To talk about the value of care work that women are doing.

On a bigger and more ambitious scale – to create a **Women's World Bank**. So that we can invest in women's education, jobs for women.

A women's budget group in the UK has done important research. If that could be made available, it would be very useful.

We should put together a **training program** for women who want to be politically active. Between all of us we have the knowledge to put together such a program.

In terms of **mobilizing people**, one way could be to use specific dates to celebrate. One example is the 100-year's anniversary of women's voting right in Poland, which will be celebrated with an event in Gdansk in November 2018.

Engaging with **broader coalitions**. We all support Pride in all our countries, but they do not always support us. One idea is to start a **feminist fund**. There are very few such options. We should start our own. It would be a way to make it possible for us to meet. Maybe try crowd funding. Maybe ask famous women to support it.

On the 25th of November 2016, 200 000 women in Rome protested against violence against women, and got almost no media coverage, while a much smaller political party meeting got a lot of coverage the same day. So maybe **starting a political party** can be a way to get media coverage for our issues?

Political lobbying is not as effective as having a political party, especially not when we try to **challenge the idea of traditional politics**.

We should cover and **spread coverage of each other's events** on social media.

We should have **regional meetings** where we can work on the transfer of knowledge between countries. Finland jumped ten years only by learning from the Swedish party.

We should find funding for **translation of policies of the feminist parties** around Europe.

Perhaps we should try to start to have some **common logos**, to **brand ourselves as feminist parties**.

Probably Soraya Post is not the only MEP that is a feminist. One idea is that we all **write to our MEPs** and ask them to host a meeting of feminists in Europe.

Closing remarks by Gudrun Schyman, party leader of the Swedish Feminist Initiative



"This year of travelling in the EU has been a lot of searching in the dark, but we have found a lot of sunshine. We haven't yet visited all member states, but we also need to continue with the next step, which could be new conferences where we should be able to provide tools and discussions.

Well, after listening to you it is clear we need an office. And three persons employed full time. We need to see more feminists and feminist policies in the parliament. Why shouldn't we? We are all paying for this democratic thing. Why should we be quiet? Why should we accept that this is happening? I think we shouldn't.

We have to talk to people, in people's language. The Home Party idea turned out to be a great idea. People were delighted that they could have a politician in their own home, with their own friends and neighbors. And it was easy, and a good way to start a relationship.

*A lot of people are sure that they are not represented in the political system. That is why **it is so important HOW we do it**. It's about introducing a new dimension of politics – the **human rights dimension**.*

*We work out policies with **love as the strongest force**. With respect for every human being. With understanding. A relationship without power and control. **We call it solidarity.**"*

Regional follow-up meetings in 2017

Two conclusions from the European conference in Brussels in December were the need for regional meetings, further discussions and capacity building in making feminist analyses as bases for politics as well as in communicating feminism, especially in relation to a nationalist and conservative discourse. In response to that, MEP Soraya Post hosted 4 regional meetings between June and October 2017, with the kind support from the S&D group. Prominent lecturer in gender equality, Gudrun Schyman was the main speaker at the meetings. They were held in Budapest, Warsaw, Frankfurt and Turin, with an average of 25-30 participants at each meeting.

The structure was the same at all 4 meetings, with some adjustments depending on the size of the group and the local context.

In her opening speech Soraya Post, human rights activist and member of the European parliament talked about how the Feminist Initiative is using its seat in the European Parliament to advance women's rights. She explained why the party had chosen to be part of the S&D group, and how the size, strength and common values of the group makes it possible to make achievements for the advancement of human rights in the EU and beyond. She spoke about the S&D group's ambitions to counter nationalist and conservative tendencies in the EU. She talked about her work against violence against women, and her efforts to gather women belonging to minority groups and to let their voices be heard. Mrs. Post also spoke about her initiative to create an inter-parliamentary group against racism and the work with the Anti-Gypsyism resolution that was adopted in the fall of 2017.

She wants to work for the inclusion of violence against women in the area of security and defence. “I use the word gender terrorism and patriarchal fascism”, she said. She concluded by saying that feminists need to organize and to enter the rooms where the decisions are taken. “We make a difference!”

After the opening speech by MEP Soraya Post, project coordinator Christina Wassholm gave the background to the meeting, presenting the findings of the study carried out in 2016, as well as the conclusions from the December 2016 conference in Brussels. Gudrun Schyman, a well-known lecturer on feminism and gender equality issues, held an hour-long presentation on how feminism can be used as a tool for analyzing politics and formulating policies. She introduced feminism, and human rights, as the new dimension in politics, similar to how the environmental dimension entered politics and became mainstreamed in the 80’s and 90’s. She also described some of the methods used by Feminist Initiative in Sweden to reach out and communicate with citizens, especially the “home party” concept, i.e. her and other politicians visiting people’s homes if they promised to gather at least 25 people for the “party”.

Separated in smaller groups, the participants discussed the possible answers to three questions:

1. How is growing nationalism affecting human rights in this region?
2. What are the specific challenges and opportunities to do so in this region?
3. *How can we cooperate better around these issues on EU level?*

The political context of each regional meeting differed, as did the profile of the participants. The answers to the questions above are therefore difficult to summarize, but some challenges and ideas did come up on all four occasions.

Conclusions:

As for how growing nationalism is affecting human rights, the pattern is quite similar everywhere, as has been shown also in the study. The conservative and traditionalist discourse is getting stronger, making more space for voices saying that feminism and the work for gender equality is part of a “gender ideology” that wants to destroy family values, something that gives permission to extreme opinions in media and in the parliament.

Participants testified that the working climate for women NGOs is getting more and more restrictive, and that also “harmless” organizations, who work against violence against women, are targeted by the authorities. In general, the examples given by the participants on the resistance and obstacles they are meeting, painted a dark picture of the situation for the women’s movement in EU.

Just one week before the meeting in Budapest, the Hungarian government had adopted the “foreign agents” law (similar to the Russian version), that, among other things, demands that all NGOs that receive foreign donations state this fact on the top of every message they send out, be it a Facebook status or a tweet or an invitation to a seminar. One participant said: “We are blooded out here, drained out of energy. There are not enough people here to take the fight.” In Warsaw, the office of our host organization had been raided two days before our meeting.

Something that occurs in many places is that far-right movements are trying to take over the human rights discourse, by claiming that they work for women's rights by protecting them from immigrants, or by safe-guarding what they claim are "western values" against "Muslim values". Similar arguments are used to win the LGBTQI population. In the abortion debate in Poland, the right-wing claim that liberalized abortion rights could lead to sex selective abortion, thus saying they defend girls' rights by restricting access to abortion.

Participants from women rights NGOs on all four meetings brought up the reduced or declined funding to women's rights organizations as a consequence of growing nationalism and conservative values. The need for EU funds for women's rights organizations to be more accessible was discussed, as well as the need to improve the knowledge in the EU foundations about the specific needs of feminist organizations in EU countries, so that the criteria of the funds could be adjusted.

The participants underlined the importance of building networks on European level, and to have real-life meetings where focus should be on practices and exchange of experiences in order to get better at sharing success stories from different countries. One idea was to create a European archive online with success stories and tools. The archive could be part of an online European Feminist Platform, a platform for feminism and equality.

It was also emphasized on several meetings that the feminist movement should use arts and culture to a larger extent, as it is borderless in its nature.

Two concrete ideas were:

- a European Union billboard campaign, highlighting the violations of women's rights in different EU countries, making it a call for solidarity and with the potential of bringing women from different parts of the EU together.
- to make the 100-year anniversary of women's voting right (that occurs in many countries in the coming years) a European celebration, with common actions in many EU countries.

A list of topics that could form a common ground for feminists in Europe to work together with has been created as a result of the meetings:

- Equal salaries for women and men
- To end violence against women
- The right to abortion
- To fight sexual harassment and sexualized violence

A couple of meetings took place when the #metoo-movement had recently started, so some time was devoted to speak about different experiences of sexual harassment and sexual violence in different countries. Participants thought that this movement should be used as a base for joint organizing within the EU around this topic. It was also said that the topic of sexual harassment is a good entry point for discussing feminism, gender roles and power structures and that it could be used for the purpose of reaching out to more people and to be more relevant.

- [1] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovenia-rights/slovenia-allows-same-sex-marriage-but-not-adoption-idUSKBN1630U0>
- [2] <https://english.sta.si/2311164/pro-life-film-screened-on-ljubljana-church-causing-stir>
- [3] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/claudia-torrison/abortion-italy-conscientious-objection>
- [4] http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_2552_allegato.pdf
- [5] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38063622>
- [6] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/hungary-ngo-law-a-vicious-and-calculated-assault-on-civil-society/>
- [7] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/05/police-raid-offices-of-womens-groups-in-poland>
- [8] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/10/poland-government-must-end-crackdown-on-peaceful-protests/>
- [9] <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/117954-160626-bucharest-gay-pride-rally-draws-crowds>
- [10] <http://www.dw.com/en/wave-of-protests-against-sex-education-reform-in-germany/a-36413964>
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- [13] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/01/thousands-pro-abortion-protesters-spain-madrid>
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- [17] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/23/abortion-poland-mass-protests-against-tightening-of-law>
- [18] <http://droitsfemmescontrextremesdroites.org/>