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Lessons from Feminist Foreign Policies: Rethinking the EU's Role in Promoting Peace and Human Rights Amid Anti-Gender Politics and Authoritarian Populism

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality and human rights are core principles of EU policies, backed by the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and UN Security Council Resolution 1325. These frameworks laid the foundation for feminist foreign policy (FFP), emphasising gender equality, and many countries have adopted them. However, the growth of anti-gender politics and authoritarian populism threatens progress in gender justice and human rights. Drawing on Judith Butler's theoretical framework, which views anti-gender politics as a psychosocial phenomenon, this paper argues that Butler's concept of the "phantasmatic scene" reveals the psychological logic underlying authoritarian populism. It also examines how FFP can serve as a political tool to confront the phantasm and how the EU can adapt its gender equality policies in response. The paper recommends viewing anti-gender mobilisation as a global security risk, empowering women's and LGBTIQ+ movements in policymaking, and adopting intersectional approaches to peacebuilding. Without using its institutional power to combat anti-gender politics, the EU's dedication to peace, democracy, and equality will remain inadequate.

Keywords: feminist foreign policy, anti-gender politics, authoritarian populism, phantasmatic scene, EU, human rights, peace

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1. Introduction

Gender equality and human rights are core values of Europe and are central to all EU policies. In 2018, the EU Council called on its member states to fully implement the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, which includes UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. Adopted in 2000, this resolution was the first to explicitly recognise the effects of war on women and emphasise the importance of women's roles in conflict resolution and building lasting peace. Fully integrating this resolution into all EU efforts to promote peace, security, human rights, justice, and development has helped ensure the inclusion of gender perspectives throughout EU policies.

UNSCR 1325 was also a groundbreaking and foundational element of feminist foreign policy (FFP), which was first adopted in Sweden in 2014. FFP extends beyond traditional notions of state security by focusing on human security and aiming for a sustainable and peaceful future. The Swedish model is vital for countries pursuing a similar path, such as Canada, Spain, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Mexico. However, in 2022, Sweden's new conservative government retreated from this policy, asserting that the "feminist" label could be counterproductive. This withdrawal from the birthplace of the FFP is striking, revealing the extent of ultra-conservative mobilisation against the feminist struggle today.

Feminists have historically encountered resistance when pursuing strategic actions toward gender justice and equality. Today, the rise of authoritarian populism has fortified anti-feminist movements across different regions, eroding institutional, legal, and political progress aimed at fighting gender-based violence. The anti-gender movements and campaigns that have appeared over the past decade, especially in Europe, should not simply be seen as a continuation of the anti-feminist backlash from the 1970s, but instead as part of a new political landscape. In fact, opposition to "gender ideology" has become a key element in the growth of authoritarian populism. In today's world, where neoliberalism faces a crisis and people have lost faith in the future, creating a sense of a "common enemy" helps foster "moral panics" and increases societal anxiety. Authoritarian populism is growing worldwide as a national movement that resonates with ordinary people's

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lives through conservative values like God, family, homeland, order, and patriarchy, thus reshaping common sense. In this context, "moral panics" emerge as a "crisis of masculinity"; discourses focused on protecting the family and homeland are efforts to defend masculinity. As Judith Butler (2021) states, the defence of gender equality, now often equated with "communism" or "totalitarianism," has become a key battleground globally. Therefore, there is an urgent need for feminist perspectives that reveal how power relations are gendered in international politics.

This paper aims to connect political trends with foreign policy and examine how FFP can help oppose the anti-gender agenda, which has become a key element of authoritarian populism. The paper argues that EU gender equality policies need to be restructured to address anti-gender politics and authoritarian populism, drawing on lessons learnt from a decade of FFP experience. To do this, I use the theoretical framework of Butler (2025), who views the anti-gender movement as a psychosocial phenomenon, and incorporate Laplanche's perspective to understand how deep fears and anxieties are socially organised to fuel political passions. I argue that Butler's "phantasmatic scene" reveals the psychic logic of authoritarian populism, which generates "moral panics" and weaponises fear to restore patriarchal, nationalist authority. Accordingly, the second section will discuss anti-gender politics as a "phantasmatic scene" for authoritarian populism and the third section will consider FFP as an ethical and political vision to counter the phantasm and confront anti-gender politics. The fourth section will propose three central policies for restructuring EU gender policies as a form of critical imagination that would be powerful to oppose the phantasm. It argues for recognising anti-gender mobilisation as a global security threat, empowering women's and LGBTIQ+ movements in policymaking, and adopting intersectional approaches to peacebuilding. Finally, the fifth section will offer some general conclusions about the potential of the EU's institutional power in its commitment to peace, democracy, and equality.

2. Anti-Gender Politics as a "Phantasmatic Scene" for Authoritarian Populism

Feminists usually see gender not as a biological fact but as a sociocultural process of becoming a historically rooted, performative, and relational category that affects how people perceive themselves. Simone de Beauvoir's

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famous statement, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" (1949), lays the groundwork: gender is not an innate condition but a process of becoming shaped by social and cultural influences. Later feminists highlighted that gender is constructed by norms, institutions, and power relationships, not solely determined by sexed bodies. Since it is often misunderstood or conflated with other categories, much of feminist literature focusses on clarifying what "gender" is not. A common mistake is to view gender studies as only women's studies. While feminism has traditionally concentrated on women's oppression, gender is an analytical category that includes the relations, roles, and expectations that shape all genders (women, men, non-binary, etc.). Another common misunderstanding is to confuse gender (social, cultural, symbolic roles and identities) with sex (biological traits). Ann Oakley (1972) is often recognised as the first feminist to systematically separate sex (biologically determined) from gender (socially and culturally constructed). This paved the way for feminist theory to explore how power, norms, and institutions shape gendered identities. Accordingly, Gayle Rubin (1975) theorised the "sex/gender system" as the social structures that transform biological sex into socially meaningful gender, and Joan Scott (1986) recognised gender as a central analytical category in history and the social sciences.

Today, after much discussion, some still believe that "gender" is the same as "women" or "sex." More often, others see it as a hidden way of referencing "homosexuality" or queer identity. Queer and feminist theorists (e.g., Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) have shown how norms of gender and sexuality overlap, but they are not interchangeable. Accordingly, gender teaches us how to appear "properly" male or female; sexuality influences who we are expected to desire. Together, they form the "heteronormativity," the cultural assumption that heterosexual desire is natural and that sex (male/female), gender (masculine/feminine), and sexuality (heterosexual) must align (Butler, 1990). Adrienne Rich (1980) already argued that social systems force women into heterosexual relations as part of patriarchy. Butler

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(1990) and Sedgwick (1985) extended this by showing how "gender performance" is shaped to secure heterosexuality. By exposing that neither gender nor sexuality is natural, but both are cultural scripts, queer and feminist theorists reveal the possibility of resistance and new forms of desire. This growing queer potential has faced one of the most conservative reactions of all time, the so-called "anti-gender ideology" movement, which has grown since the 2010s in Europe, Latin America, and beyond. This movement deliberately distorts the meaning of "gender."

The "anti-gender ideology movement," as Butler (2025) states, views "gender" as a single, unified idea that threatens society and consolidates various fears and anxieties under one label. Supporters of this movement argue that when feminists, researchers, or policymakers use the term "gender," it is really a "Trojan horse" for promoting homosexuality, same-sex marriage, or LGBTIQ+ rights. They claim that gender theory denies "God-given" or "natural" differences between men and women. Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni's warning that "gender ideology" will strip everyone of their sexed identity is a recent example of that. Some others see gender as "the work of the devil," a modern rival to God that must be eradicated at all costs, and they demonise all those who support gender. By describing gender as socially constructed, they assert feminists seek to eliminate sexual differences. They portray "gender ideology" as undermining the "natural family," parental authority, and the traditional roles of mother and father. In Russia, it has been labelled a threat to national security, while the Vatican has called it a danger to both civilisation and "man" itself (Butler, 2025). In various parts of the world, school curricula that include gender equality or sexual diversity are often called "indoctrination" or the "corruption of children." Pope Francis's description of gender education in schools as "ideological colonisation" and his comparison of it to "Hitler Youth" in 2015 were among the most provocative remarks, setting the tone for his anti-gender campaign (Dempsey, 2020). Butler (2025) notes that

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> In recent US campaigns to keep "gender" out of the classroom, "gender" is treated as code for pedophilia or a form of indoctrination that teaches young children how to masturbate or become gay. The same argument was made in Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil because gender calls into question the natural and normative character of heterosexuality, and that once the heterosexual mandate is no longer firm, a flood of sexual perversities, including bestiality and pedophilia, will be unleashed upon the earth. (Butler, 2025).

The anti-gender movement is not new. As Kandiyoti (2022) demonstrates, as early as the 1990s, there was a deliberate effort to discredit the idea of gender as a social construct and to portray gender relations not as human rights issues but as matters of doctrinal necessity. The 1990s also saw "gender" being portrayed as a threat to the family and biblical authority by the Roman Catholic Council for the Family. Since then, it has undergone changes that reflect the Vatican's shifting political influence. Today, the term "gender ideology" is mostly used as a rallying cry by conservative and right-wing populists to unite various concerns—about women's rights, reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, trans rights or even EU/UN human rights frameworks (Butler, 2025). Gender issues have increasingly been exploited as tools for demagoguery and populist propaganda. Anti-gender ideologies have become part of xenophobic nationalism, with claims that gender equality platforms are a "product of the liberal West" (Kandiyoti, 2022). In this way, "gender" becomes a broad symbol of moral decline, globalisation, or liberal elites (Butler, 2025). Russia's President Vladimir Putin's referring to Europe as "Gayropa," claiming that gender is a Western construct that will destroy the concepts of mother and father, is a clear example of this.

In her recent book "Who's Afraid of Gender?" (2025), Butler borrows the term "phantasmatic scene" from psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche to describe how the anti-gender movement shapes fear and anxiety into a distorted but compelling worldview. Butler emphasises that this is not a private daydream

but a shared psychosocial setup of fears, projections, and reversals. It combines unconscious anxieties with social narratives. In this scene, "gender" is seen as a destructive force—corrupting children, breaking up families, and weakening the nation. It functions as a placeholder that condenses many fears—about sexuality, religion, race, and the nation—into one powerful symbol. Hatred is justified through moral righteousness. The anti-gender movement portrays LGBTIQ+ and feminist communities as the true destroyers. For Butler (2025), calling anti-gender discourse a phantasmatic scene shows it is less based on rational argument and more on a hallucinatory politics of fear. Exposing this involves not just fact-checking, but also dismantling the fantasy structure and creating counter-imaginaries that support freedom, equality, and sustainable lives. Butler uses "phantasmatic scene" to show how gender serves as a battleground for collective fantasies of destruction, where fear and moral panic are projected onto marginalised groups—serving as a way of organising hatred that seems real but is ultimately false.

Butler (2025) emphasises that the weaponisation of this frightening illusion of "gender" is fundamentally authoritarian and can be exploited by those seeking to strengthen state power and restore a "secure" patriarchal order. This aspect is crucial to understanding anti-gender movements not only as a backlash against progressive movements, but also as a political project to reestablish a patriarchal system. I argue that Butler's conceptualisation of anti-gender discourse as a phantasmatic scene helps us understand how authoritarian populists legitimise authoritarian responses today. Bringing Butler's concept of the phantasmatic scene into dialogue with Stuart Hall's insights on moral panics will reveal that authoritarian populists do not just "discover demons"; they stage a phantasmatic scene where the "enemy" (feminists, LGBTIQ+ people, immigrants, "globalists") threatens the very survival of the family, nation or faith.

Stuart Hall (1978) has demonstrated that during moments of crisis, popular anxieties and perceived threats to the state merge through mechanisms such

as the "discovery of demons," the "identification of folk devils," and the "mounting of moral campaigns." These processes generate waves of moral panic and help justify authoritarian efforts (Hall et al. 1978; Hall 1988). Butler's idea of the phantasmatic scene enriches this framework by emphasising the psychic side of such politics: crises are not only described, but also staged as hallucinatory scenarios where broad fears are projected onto a single symbolic enemy. In these scenes, "gender" or "the left" often appear as destructive forces that corrupt children, dissolve families or weaken national unity. By reducing complex insecurities to an imagined existential threat, authoritarian populists stoke paranoia and mobilise collective emotions. Together, Hall's concept of moral panic and Butler's idea of the phantasmatic scene reveal how authoritarian populists create existential fears that justify a return to a "secure" patriarchal order—where fixed gender roles and authoritarian leadership are presented as defences against chaos.

Hall first introduced the idea of authoritarian populism to analyse Thatcherism, illustrating how her government manipulated moral panics through the "discovery of demons" and the "identification of folk devils." In Thatcher's Britain, these folk devils were not only racialised youth accused of "mugging," but also feminists, queer activists, and trade unionists— all depicted as threats to the moral and social order (Hall et al. 1978; Hall 1988). Thatcher herself was openly hostile toward the LGBTIQ+ community, implementing policies like Section 28, which banned "promotion of homosexuality."[1] Hall's explanation highlights the political mechanics of fear. Still, Butler's concept of the phantasmatic scene adds an important layer: authoritarian populism functions not simply by naming enemies, but by creating hallucinatory scenes where broad anxieties are projected onto vulnerable groups. Butler explains how "gender" becomes a focal point for fears about cultural decline, sexual deviance, and national collapse. This framework is crucial for understanding why authoritarian populism resonates

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[1] See Parker (2022) for how Jeannette Winterson's novels expose Thatcherism as a heteropatriarchy.

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with people today. Leaders like Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump use similar tactics: they link feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, and progressive education to threats against children, family, and the nation, creating existential dangers that call for authoritarian responses. Bolsonaro's attacks on "gender ideology" and Trump's demonisation of "critical race theory" and "trans ideology" serve as emotional displays of crisis — charged scenes that stir paranoia and promise salvation through patriarchal revival. Seen this way, Hall explains the political strategy (moral panic as a tool for securing consent), while Butler illuminates the psychic logic (phantasmatic projections that transform political disagreement into existential fear). Together, their insights reveal how authoritarian populists from Thatcher to Trump and Bolsonaro weaponise cultural anxieties, casting LGBTIQ+ people, feminists, and migrants as the enemies of "the people" to legitimise authoritarian rule and a return to a "secure" patriarchal order.

Jeremiah Morelock and Felipe Ziotti Narita (2021) identify the social and narrative trends that develop as the realms of authoritarianism and populism blend in the United States and Brazil. A key dynamic alongside the creation of charismatic leaders is the mythological use of the past, seen in phrases like "Make America/Brazil great again." Mythological references to the past inspire "retrotopia"—a term defined by Zygmunt Bauman (2017) as a utopian vision focused on an abandoned past—especially when there are no promising future utopias. This can be politically appealing because it fills or replaces "the loss of sense of the masses of people" who are disillusioned by the uncertainties built into the current social system, which they once regarded as more stable and secure (Akgemci, 2022). Similarly, Butler (2025) states that promoting a desire to restore masculine privilege seeks to craft an "idealised past" whose revival aims to target sexual and gender minorities and undo progressive policies and rights. The backlash we see against "gender," according to Butler, is part of this larger effort to restore authority that aims to legitimise authoritarian regimes as legitimate forms of paternalism, fulfilling this dream. Butler (2025) observes:

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The mobilisation of anti-gender sentiment by the Right relies on the credibility of this past dream for those vulnerable to authoritarianism's temptations. In this way, the fears are neither entirely manufactured nor completely real, as they already exist. This idea of the past belongs to a fantasy whose syntax rearranges elements of reality to serve a driving force that makes its own operation opaque. The dream functions only as a phantasmatic organisation of reality, offering a range of examples and accusations to support the political case it aims to make. Stripping people of rights in the name of morality, the nation, or a patriarchal fantasy is part of a broader logic amplified by authoritarian nationalism (Butler, 2025).

Butler (2025) also highlights that this project is fragile because the patriarchal order it seeks to restore never fully existed in the way it is now being presented. By showing that the references to the past — especially the patriarchal order — are themselves illusions, Butler (2025) deepens the critique of authoritarian populism. Just as Butler notes that the patriarchal order the anti-gender movement longs for is an impossible restoration, authoritarian populism also remains fragile: it relies on constantly fostering fear and fantasy, but its utopian past is always out of reach. It depends on establishing legitimacy by returning to a past that never truly existed. Like Butler's critique of patriarchy, its "retrotopian" promise is a false vision — persuasive but unsustainable. This gap between promise and reality is a vulnerability that can be politically challenged.

Similarly, Schleusener (2020) introduces the idea of "retrotopian desire," drawing on Bauman's concept of "retrotopia," to explain the longing for an idealised past that fuels right-wing populist politics. It also explores how right-wing populism uses nostalgia and gendered imaginaries to respond to neoliberal crises. Accordingly, right-wing populist movements frame a

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counterrevolutionary project: reclaiming "lost" social life rooted in the heteronormative family, the church, the homeland, and patriarchal gender relations. These narratives target both "inner enemies" (feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists, liberal elites) and "outer enemies" (migrants, cosmopolitan outsiders), framing gender as a key battleground in political conflict. Schleusener (2020) links this to class politics, noting that neoliberal restructuring has destabilised traditional male breadwinner roles and fuelled resentment. Authoritarian populism channels these anxieties into gendered, nationalist and nostalgic imaginaries. In summary, retrotopian desire acts as the cultural and emotional core of authoritarian populism, uniting economic fears, gendered masculinity crises and nationalist hopes.

In addition to the most notable cases, such as Donald Trump (2017-2021; 2025-) in the U.S. and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022), during the past decade, authoritarian populism has gained momentum worldwide with the rise of right-wing and far-right leaders, including Viktor Mihály Orbán (2010-) in Hungary, Narendra Modi (2014-) in India, Andrzej Duda (2015-2025) in Poland, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (2016-), and Andrej Babiš (2017-2021) in the Czechia. Authoritarian populism also appears in Shinzo Abe's 2012 campaign with the slogan "Take Back Japan," which promotes a national revival in Japan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repressive response to the failed July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, and Marine Le Pen's 2017 campaign to push nativist policies against Muslims and non-European immigrants in France (Gokay, Xypolia, and Mandelbaum, 2017, 3). Recent cases confirm that authoritarian populism is not a fading trend but a growing global phenomenon. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele has centralised power in the presidency, weakened checks and balances, and redefined democracy through his "mano dura" security strategy. In Europe, Giorgia Meloni became Italy's first far-right prime minister in 2022, merging nationalism with socially conservative values, while Robert Fico's return to power in Slovakia has echoed Orbán's illiberal model. Meanwhile, Spain's far-right party Vox has pushed anti-immigration and anti-gender narratives into the mainstream,

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reshaping national debates. Furthermore, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 showed that even if authoritarian populist trends do not dominate national politics, they can still influence the policy agenda by promoting anti-EU and anti-immigrant attitudes (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, 12). Therefore, it can be argued that authoritarian populist sentiments are expressed not only by right-wing leaders and political parties, but also in public opinion and social movements.

With the outbreak of the European migrant crisis in 2015 and the Central American migration crisis in 2018, xenophobic nationalism drew voters of all ages toward right-wing extremes and laid the groundwork for right-wing populism to shape the current "authoritarian turn." However, one could argue that authoritarian populism can also be combined with economic protectionism or left-wing social policies. Still, I maintain that the phenomenon emerged in response to specific conditions, where far-right leaders used populist rhetoric to appeal to the "people" and advocate for authoritarian measures. In other words, a leftist leader can also be both authoritarian and populist; however, the term "authoritarian populism," coined by Hall, describes a distinct form of far-right populism. It is crucial to understand how authoritarian values intersect with right-wing populist rhetoric in today's context. Scholars have identified several factors—such as economic insecurity, financial globalisation, technological change, mass immigration, and the failure of representative politics—to explain how right-wing populism has gained so much power today. The authoritarian element stemmed from the harsh repression of leaders, fuelled by growing anxiety and hopelessness in society. A significant work also focused on discovering the relationship between far-right populism and anti-gender politics, especially in Europe.

Populist radical-right movements and parties rally around what Dietze and Roth (2020) call an "obsession with gender": demonising feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, and "gender ideology" while endorsing heteronormativity, patriarchal family models, and masculinist identity politics. These highlight

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gender as a key analytical tool for understanding the success and ideological strength of right-wing populism, rather than treating it as a secondary or cultural side issue. According to Roman Kuhar (2023), the anti-gender movement, which includes radical nationalist parties and right-wing populists, has become a potent transnational force because it redefines feminist, LGBTIQ+, and equality struggles as a threatening "gender ideology," offering simple and fear-based narratives that resonate with various societal crises. Even in countries like Poland and Hungary, anti-gender ideology has become the official stance of the ruling political elites. The "traditional family" is where the anti-gender movement and the radical right intersect in this framework, being presented as the main thing to be protected from "abnormal" LGBTIQ+ lifestyles or radical feminism (Kuhar, 2023, 120). Considering "gender ideology" as a tactic that intersects with debates within the Catholic Church and the recent rise of right-wing populism in Europe, Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) illustrate how both anti-gender and populist groups operate on a binary opposition: "the pure people" vs. "the corrupt elites." Here, gender functions as a "symbolic glue" that unites diverse actors (religious, secular, far-right, conservative) against a common enemy. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017, 15) describe "gender ideology" as an empty signifier, enabling coalition building with various actors precisely because of its "populist emptiness." Populists blame international and supranational authorities, often called "Brussels" in the European context, for secretly imposing "gender ideology" on ordinary people (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, 14). Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, referenda serve as a key strategy. Anti-gender campaigns in Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and France utilised referenda as "the people's voice" to oppose elites.

Similarly, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) see the current wave of anti-gender mobilisation not just as a continuation of an older conservative backlash, but as a new ideological and political movement closely linked to right-wing populism. They highlight that anti-gender campaigns and right-wing populism support each other through an "opportunistic synergy": populist

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parties use anti-gender rhetoric to stir emotions and depict themselves as defenders of "the people" against liberal elites, while anti-gender groups gain strength and resources from populist alliances. In this context, understanding how gender plays a vital role in the populist moment is crucial. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue that conflicts over gender equality are not minor "cultural issues," but essential arenas that shape the future of democracy. Similarly, Kourou (2022) states that right-wing populism and anti-gender movements are "two faces of the same coin": both leverage social discontent, mobilise resentment against elites, and define "the people" in opposition to feminists, sexual minorities, and liberal institutions. Their cooperation centres on gender in populist politics, undermines democratic norms, and turns anti-gender ideology into government policy where populists hold power (e.g., Poland, Hungary). This convergence poses a serious challenge to gender equality and democratic values globally. Fassin (2020) contributes to this debate by arguing that anti-gender politics should be understood as part of the global rise of illiberal neoliberalism, where neoconservative and neoliberal logics converge. Instead of being a contradiction, Fassin (2020) sees their alliance as functional: neoliberalism shifts responsibility from the state to the family, while neoconservatism enforces patriarchal norms to support this privatisation. Therefore, anti-gender campaigns are not just cultural conflicts but key tools of contemporary populism, transforming socioeconomic dissatisfaction into moral panic about "gender" and fuelling authoritarian politics across Europe and Latin America.

Lastly, Mehring and Wojnicka (2025) make a significant contribution to the literature on right-wing populism and gender by combining both qualitative and quantitative research across 16 European countries, providing a cross-national, comparative perspective. They introduce the concept of "protective masculinity"—defined as the intersection of gender-unequal and nativist attitudes—into the study of populist radical right (PRR) voting. This shifts the focus from a simple male/female binary to masculinity as a social construct that influences political behaviour. This is a clear improvement over

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earlier explanations that focused only on socioeconomic status, political efficacy or anti-immigrant attitudes. Mehring and Wojnicka (2025) argue that masculinity — especially protective masculinity — is a crucial yet underexplored element in understanding PRR support and the gender gap. PRR parties use protective masculinity by portraying themselves as defenders of women and the nation against "foreign" masculinities, especially Muslim men. Although this only partially explains why men are more likely to vote for PRR, it shows that gender norms and masculinities are central in shaping today's far-right politics.

Overall, research on anti-gender politics and populism also confirms that the anti-gender phenomenon is best understood as a "phantasmatic staging" of crisis. In this sense, gender acts as a projection surface where authoritarian populists express fears of social collapse, demographic decline, and cultural decay. The success of anti-gender campaigns comes from their ability to simplify complex issues — such as neoliberal insecurity, weakening welfare systems, and changing ideas of masculinity — into emotionally charged displays of danger. Butler's concept of the phantasmatic scene helps explain the mental reasoning behind this politics: the more phantasmatic the "gender threat" seems, the more convincing it becomes as a justification for authoritarian measures. In conclusion, these works share a common insight: right-wing populism (therefore authoritarian populism) is driven less by rational policy and more by fantasies of restoring lost order and fear, often fuelled by demonising gender equality and sexual rights. As a result, anti-gender politics serve not only as ideology or discourse, but as phantasmatic scenes — hallucinatory yet socially real scenarios that shape desire and hatred, making authoritarian rule seem like a paternalistic "return" to order. That is why it is crucial to envision ethical and political futures to counter authoritarian populisms rooted in phantasmatic scenes that are becoming increasingly ingrained.

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3. FFP as an Ethical and Political Vision to Counter the Phantasm and Confront Anti-Gender Politics

Feminist foreign policy (FFP) has been adopted by numerous countries and organisations, enabling them to prioritise gender justice and equality in their foreign policy strategies. However, the adoption of the FFP in Sweden occurred during a global rise in right-wing populism, which led to far-right parties forming governments in several nations. As explained above, authoritarian populism, as a specific form of far-right populism, is rooted in distrust of what is referred to as "gender ideology" and is driven by a reaction against feminist values in global politics. Therefore, successfully launching and implementing new foreign policy initiatives, including feminist foreign policies, requires the ability to challenge anti-gender sentiments (Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Hedling, 2024, 20). Furthermore, FFP must be reconsidered in the context of rising anti-gender politics and be crafted as a strategy to counter it.

Confronting anti-gender politics was central to Sweden's initial adoption of FFP in 2014. Margot Wallström, who was the Foreign Minister of Sweden back then, referred to "unsettled times" in which "Sweden will take global responsibility by being a strong voice in the world. For freedom, peace, and human rights. For democracy, equality, and solidarity." In this, "gender equality and a feminist foreign policy" were presented as "building blocks for a foreign and security policy" guided by "the necessity of common security" (Government of Sweden, 2015). Wallström's successor as Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, also emphasised that:

> The rights of women and girls are under attack. Conservative forces are trying to restrict the right of women and girls to decide over their own bodies and lives. Issues relating to women, peace and security, as well as women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, are especially important to stand up for. To reverse this trend,

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courageous action is needed at all levels. This is why we are pursuing

a feminist foreign policy. (Government of Sweden, 2020).

The adoption and spread of FFP by other countries can be seen as a success story. Sweden, a nation where gender equality has long been a key part of its foreign policy, has developed and implemented the concept of FFP for nearly ten years, becoming a model others can follow. Wallström introduced the "three Rs," encouraging Swedish foreign policy actors to adopt policies that promote equal *rights*, fair *representation*, and an equitable distribution of *resources* among men and women, as well as boys and girls. This policy was a part of broader global efforts to promote gender equality internationally, which evolved over the past few decades following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, 323). The resolution marked a significant milestone in feminist international relations and global security governance in 2000, establishing the foundation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and serving as a normative framework for Swedish foreign policy. In 2019, the need for a fourth "R," *Reality*, was emphasised in Sweden's Handbook, encouraging the Foreign Service to understand the context in which they are working and engage with local actors, aiming to contribute to strategic, effective feminist foreign policy (Thompson, Ahmed, and Khokhar, 2021, 2). As a result of the FFP, efforts to promote gender equality increased significantly, and Swedish trade policy experienced its most notable change. Before 2014, agencies, missions and embassy sections involved in trade paid no attention to gender issues at all, and they had to start figuring out what FFP meant for Swedish trade policy (Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård, 2024, 1267).

Scholars specifically criticised the role of Sweden as one of the world's leading arms exporters because the arms trade has come into conflict with the FFP. In 2015, Sweden ended its military cooperation with Saudi Arabia due to concerns about Swedish-made arms being used in the war in Yemen (Foster and Markham, 2024, 58). Still, Sweden was the 13th largest arms exporter in

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the world in 2020, posing a significant challenge for FFP, since we see that gender-based violence is increasing in current conflicts and weapons enable this violence. Some feminist scholars have also criticised the Swedish application of FFP for not being transformational enough. They argue that, in fact, these policies do not reshape government structures, reduce militarism or address power imbalances (Foster and Markham, 2024, 58).

Despite its limitations, the launch of the FFP in Sweden sparked a noticeable rise in gender equality initiatives in other regions. Canada launched the world's first Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in June 2017, further solidifying its leadership in promoting the FFP. Canadian vision for international aid was outlined as follows:

> Canada is adopting a Feminist International Assistance Policy that seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive, and more prosperous world. Canada firmly believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to achieving this goal. (Government of Canada, 2018).

For several years after the launch of the FIAP, Canada's explicitly "feminist" approach to foreign policy was limited to its international aid policy. In 2020, Global Affairs Canada released a discussion paper on developing the FFP, acknowledging pressure from civil society and scholars to go beyond aid. The document suggested expanding the feminist approach to trade, diplomacy, migration, environment, and security — but Canada had not yet officially adopted a comprehensive FFP (Thompson, Ahmed, and Khokhar, 2021, 6). Canada offers a good example, showing us that we should not focus only on the content of feminist foreign policy, but also consider the policy ecosystem that determines whether feminist commitments can be practically implemented. Gloria Novović (2024) argues that Canada's FFP remains more rhetorical than substantive because the government lacks the systemic, organisational and individual policy capacity to implement it

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effectively. According to Novović (2024), without stronger political will, inter-ministerial coordination and sustained institutional funding, Canada's FFP risks becoming symbolic branding and technical rhetoric rather than a transformative feminist global engagement.

Luxembourg first included the goal of adopting FFP in its Coalition Agreement in 2018 and created an important model often called the "3 Ds": defence, diplomacy and development. Accordingly, three main priorities were: (1) protecting and promoting the human rights of women and girls; (2) increasing women's representation and participation in multilateral forums, as well as involvement in civil and electoral observation missions; and (3) promoting gender equality within the structures of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) (Thompson, Ahmed, and Khokhar, 2021, 8). Luxembourg adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security for 2018–2023, linking it to its external efforts in diplomacy, defence, and development, while also strengthening domestic prevention and protection mechanisms. In 2025, it launched a second NAP for Women, Peace & Security (2025–2030), organised around four pillars: (i) participation, (ii) protection, (iii) prevention, relief, and recovery, and (iv) promotion (Government of Luxembourg, 2025). In the second five-year plan, the rollback of women's rights was seen as a global challenge alongside climate change and the emergence of new and rapidly evolving technologies. The plan was adopted to address these challenges, emphasising the importance of full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in peace, security, prevention and conflict management processes, while focusing on issues such as disarmament, non-proliferation, the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence, the fight against impunity and the protection of individual rights (Government of Luxembourg, 2025).

France was among the first countries to adopt the FFP approach in 2019, becoming the fourth country after Sweden, Canada, and Luxembourg to do so. French officials have consistently referred to the French approach as France's "feminist diplomacy," and after the March 8th op-ed, as FFP

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(Thompson, Ahmed, and Khokhar, 2021, 9). Like Canada, France prioritised gender equality during its G7 presidency, focusing on access to education for girls and women, combating gender and sexual violence and elevating the status of African women (Foster and Markham, 2024, 67). The FFP of France is based on the principle that women's and girls' rights, together with gender equality, must be at the heart of its international and European efforts. All areas, such as diplomacy, development, trade, humanitarian work, digital policy, environment, security, among others, are intended to incorporate gender equality. In March 2025, France introduced its International Strategy for a Feminist Foreign Policy (2025–2030), which built on and broadened previous gender initiatives (Government of France, 2025). This new approach stems from an inclusive process that involves ministries, agencies, civil society, and external partners with more than 200 participants across various working groups. Despite strong ambitions, the French FFP faces significant challenges. The High Council for Gender Equality (*Haut Conseil à l'Égalité*) released its 2023 accountability report, highlighting key shortcomings: the policy lacked an inclusive conceptual definition, political support was weak, and resources were limited. Critics also argue that France's FFP sometimes lacks clarity in its implementation, with limited transparency around budgets specifically allocated for gender equality. Some observers emphasise colonial legacies and power imbalances, noting that as a former colonial power with close ties to Africa, the feminist diplomacy of France must address critiques of neocolonialism or paternalism in its foreign actions (Foster and Markham, 2024, 68).

In 2020, Mexico became the first country in the Global South to adopt FFP. This policy is based on five principles: (i) implementing policies to promote gender equality and a feminist agenda; (ii) achieving gender parity at all levels within the foreign ministry; (iii) combating all forms of gender-based violence, including within the foreign ministry; (iv) making equality visible; and (v) practising intersectional feminism (Government of Mexico, 2020). To put this policy into practice, specific steps were outlined for each

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area, such as the presentation of the Manual of Foreign Policy Principles, the Foreign Ministry support for the *HeforShe* program, certifications of labour equality and non-discrimination, the development of training sessions, workshops, and working groups with key actors, and establishing a safe, violence-free zone near the Foreign Ministry. Mexico also linked its FFP to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advocated in the fight against intersectional injustices, as seen at COP27. The main critique of Mexico's ambitious FFP agenda was the gap between the country's goals and the current state of gender relations. Eradicating gender-based violence was a top priority for implementing the FFP since Mexico has one of the highest femicide rates in the world. However, funding was cut for *Inmujeres*, the Mexican federal agency that coordinates gender equality policies and fights violence against women, at the same time as the FFP was announced (Foster and Markham, 2024, 70). Women's rights activists criticised government inaction and the lack of acknowledgement of domestic violence, state violence, and femicide (Deslandes, 2020). Another issue that makes FFP problematic is the rapid increase in militarisation under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Easier access to firearms, a 50 percent increase in the armed forces budget, and a 25 percent rise in military personnel, along with the military taking over some public security tasks, contradict feminist principles. AMLO has also faced criticism for his government being based on a "masculine vision" (Foster and Markham, 2024, 70). Following the disappointment due to his hostility towards the feminist movement, there have been expectations for his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico's first female president, to strengthen the FFP. She is seen as re-engaging Mexico on the global feminist diplomacy stage with the potential to align foreign policy with domestic feminist agendas.

Spain officially adopted FFP and became the sixth country to do so in 2021, releasing its Guide to Spain's Feminist Foreign Policy as a plan to promote gender equality in its international efforts. The government describes it as part of its commitment to the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development

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Goal 5 (gender equality). Spain's FFP is organised around five guiding principles: (i) Transformative approach – moving beyond a symbolic adoption to change institutional culture and practices within the foreign service; (ii) Committed leadership – ensuring those in leadership roles take responsibility for promoting gender equality; (iii) Ownership – integrating gender equality into management, resource allocation, and decision-making across the foreign ministry; (iv) Inclusive participation and alliances – working with other ministries, civil society, research institutions, and international networks; and (v) Diversity and intersectionality – acknowledging overlapping forms of discrimination and including them in analysis and programs (Government of Spain, 2021). In terms of lines of action, Spain combines: (i) Gender mainstreaming: embedding gender perspectives into all phases of foreign policy; (ii) Bilateral and regional diplomacy: ensuring gender issues appear on agendas of official visits, negotiations, and diplomatic dialogues; promoting women's organisations in partner countries; (iii) Multilateral diplomacy: promoting gender equality in UN forums, EU external action, conventions, and global agreements; and (iv) Monitoring and resources: creating mechanisms to track implementation, and an Equality Unit in the Foreign Ministry (Government of Spain, 2021). The guide details instruments, stakeholders, monitoring efforts, and specific actions, making the FFP more operational rather than merely declarative. It employs a dual approach: strengthening priority areas in foreign service while incorporating gender throughout all external policies. Its focus on structural change and intersectionality highlights its significance as a key case study.

The German government included the FFP in its coalition treaty in 2021. After initially mentioning it in its coalition agreement, the German Federal Foreign Office further developed its FFP with guidelines published in March 2023 (German Federal Foreign Office, 2023). Building on the rights, representation, and resources framework initially laid out by Sweden, the guidance explains how the German foreign service should foster an "internal culture that is free of discrimination, one that values our employees' diversity,

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nurtures it, and harnesses its potential" (Foster and Markham, 2024, 72). Critics argue that Germany's guidelines on FFP are still a "work in progress," and mechanisms for transparency and accountability in foreign policymaking need to be strengthened. Self-reflexivity is seen as a key feminist principle in the guidelines, paving the way for a more transformative foreign policy (Hauschild and Stamm, 2024, 3-4). However, the key challenge to such a policy was the war in Ukraine, which sped up debates about what a feminist peace and security policy should look like. A new National Security Strategy (NSS) was also established alongside FFP in the coalition treaty in 2021. Pragmatists in government argued that FFP is compatible with arms deliveries for defence, while normative advocates opposed weapons, viewing militarisation as a patriarchal practice (Pierobon, 2024, 286). Tensions persist between feminist ideals and strategic military development, and its success relies on whether resources, representation and accountability measures are effectively implemented.

Chile became the first South American country to establish a formal FFP framework. The new FFP was officially announced when former student leader and leftist President Gabriel Boric took office on March 11, 2022, making the announcement part of a new government. The idea of FFP was already part of the 2021 electoral campaign and the new government successfully incorporated it into Chile's traditional foreign policy principles (Thomson and Wehner, 2025, 14). The policy aims to establish gender equality and non-discrimination as core principles in Chile's foreign affairs, promoting respect, protection and the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for LGBTIQ+ individuals. It also seeks to embed gender mainstreaming into diplomatic, consular, multilateral, and bilateral activities (Government of Chile, 2022). The Sub-secretariat of Foreign Affairs is responsible for leading the design, monitoring, and implementation of the policy, including establishment of a follow-up mechanism. However, some scholars warn that Chile's FFP 2024–2025 action plan may fall victim to "purple washing"—that is, using feminist language symbolically to boost

reputation without enacting meaningful structural change. Thomson and Wehner (2025) argue that the Chilean FFP largely emerged from favourable domestic mobilisations, political entrepreneurs, and Boric's left-leaning government. They emphasise that this adoption remains very fragile and dependent on various factors. The critique is that Chile's FFP is politically opportunistic, lacks strong institutional support and is at risk of becoming more symbolic than meaningful if it doesn't outlast the current government. Still, Chile's adoption helps expand FFP beyond countries in the Global North. It provides South America with a local example, alongside Colombia, which is a relatively recent case that is still in the early stages of FFP implementation.

In November 2022, the Dutch government aligned itself with a growing group of countries, including Germany, Spain, France, Canada, Mexico, and others. It announced its plan to implement FFP, emphasising equality and equal rights across all aspects of Dutch foreign policy. According to the official policy paper, "Feminist foreign policy means protecting human rights and promoting meaningful participation in decision-making by women and LGBTIQ+ people. The focuses of feminist foreign policy are rights, representation, resources, and reality check" (Government of the Netherlands, 2022). However, after an evolution report found that gender in the context of FFP is mainly seen as synonymous with women and that gender mainstreaming does not sufficiently address more fluid gender identities, the Dutch government, as of June 2022, committed to extensive consultations with civil society to ensure the meaningful development of this policy (Foster and Markham, 2024, 73). The government released a Feminist Foreign Policy Handbook in November 2024 to provide practical guidance for implementation. The handbook outlines seven priority areas: embedding gender perspectives into policy cycles; gender-sensitive budgeting; addressing root causes of inequality; inclusive consultation with civil society; monitoring and evaluation of feminist policies; institutional strengthening; and organisational change (within the ministry and related bodies). Although

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these steps are part of a transformative agenda, critics argue the Dutch FFP needs to more strongly address colonial legacies, global power imbalances, and various intersecting forms of discrimination (race, class, disability) instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Meanwhile, after serving as a model for many states, the Swedish government revoked its FFP on the same day the newly elected liberal-right coalition government took office in October 2022. The new Foreign Minister, Tobias Billström, announced that the Swedish FFP would end and explained: "The use of the label feminist foreign policy has obscured the contents of our policy. This is why the government will discard its use. But we will always support gender equality" (Towns, Jezierska and Bjarnegård, 2024, 1263). This was symbolically important because it marked the world's first withdrawal of an FFP, raising fears of a wider international backlash. However, Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård (2024) argue that due to international norms, decentralised implementation and role expectations, its practices and influence are difficult to completely reverse. The FFPs, once institutionalised, are more resilient than opponents expect. The discontinuation of FFP also signifies a major shift in Sweden's current foreign and security policy, prompted by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Sweden's subsequent application for NATO membership, which shifted the focus of foreign policy primarily toward national security interests in the region. (Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Hedling, 2024, 96). This suggests that the worsening security environment carries a risk of moving away from normative commitments and values.

What lessons can we learn from these cases? Three stand out. First, although anti-gender politics have become a significant threat to democratic governance and human rights, most feminist foreign policies lack strong strategies and tools to directly confront this backlash. Second, countries implementing FFP often fail to develop lasting institutional capacity and resources to support and empower women's and LGBTIQ+ movements as meaningful voices in policymaking, resulting in limited or symbolic civil

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society participation. Third, while intersectionality is often cited as a guiding principle, in practice it frequently remains a rhetorical statement rather than a consistently used framework, resulting in fragmented and uneven implementation across ministries and policy areas. Having principles is one thing; coordinating budgets, institutional mandates, staff capacity, evaluation frameworks, and sustained political commitment is another. Observers are watching to see whether the FFP remains rhetorical or becomes substantive. FFP requires coordination across trade, defence, climate, migration, and justice, which can create institutional tension — a significant obstacle to the FFP, which promises a "whole-of-government" transformation. This institutional tension can be managed by combining strong political leadership, cross-ministerial structures, effective accountability mechanisms, cultural change, and engagement with civil society. Without these, FFP risks being siloed in development or diplomacy while other ministries continue with business as usual. Furthermore, managing institutional tension in FFP requires more than just coordination mechanisms; it also needs significant institutional transformation. High-level mandates, inter-ministerial structures, accountability frameworks, and engagement with civil society are essential steps. However, for these measures to be effective and sustainable, gender equality must become a firmly rooted norm within government institutions. When gender equality is integrated as a shared value — rather than a fluctuating or contested principle — ministries are more likely to align their policies rather than resist them. In this way, institutionalising gender equality as a lasting norm works hand in hand with structural reforms, reducing friction between sectors such as trade, defence, climate, and migration, and enabling FFP to serve as a genuinely cross-cutting agenda rather than a siloed initiative.

Thomson (2024, 57) considers gender equality in foreign policy a "fluctuating norm" that appears not only in the actions of pro-gender equality countries, but also in its challenge by anti-gender actors and its adoption in illiberal states. The concepts of "gender bashing" and "gender washing"

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represent two opposing political strategies regarding gender equality norms. "Gender bashing" involves openly rejecting and demonising gender equality, often framing it as a foreign or corrupting "gender ideology" that threatens the family, nation, or religion. In contrast, "gender washing" refers to a superficial adoption of gender equality language and symbols without meaningful policy change — a form of superficial compliance that aims for legitimacy while maintaining structural inequalities. That is why Thomson (2024, 61) describes gender equality as a global norm that is viewed as "content-in-motion" and in a state of "flux" compared to other established norms. It is essential to understand the contrasting ways in which gender equality functions as a normative force in foreign policy. FFP, then, must be designed to oppose "gender bashing," which seeks to mobilise conservative supporters and legitimise authoritarian populist leadership, and against "gender washing," which exploits women's rights discourse to gain international prestige.

The adoption of gender equality from a temporary "fluctuating norm" to a lasting and deeply rooted standard in international politics is critically essential. While increased support for gender equality by liberal democratic countries has helped promote the norm, its long-term strength cannot rely solely on national backing. For gender equality to transition from a fragile, disputed idea to a firmly institutionalised one, it must also be integrated into powerful international and regional structures that actively defend human rights. The EU offers a strong example: as a cross-border entity with both normative influence and policy tools, the EU can protect gender equality even when facing domestic opposition within its member states. By incorporating gender equality into its peace, security, and human rights efforts, and by making it a core principle in both its external and internal policies, the EU can help transform gender equality from a vulnerable, shifting goal into a constant element of democratic governance and global order.

To oppose anti-gender ideology politics, as Butler (2025) recalls, we need transnational coalitions that gather and mobilise everyone they have targeted.

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Rethinking how the EU can adjust its gender policies to build such a transnational coalition is a worthwhile task. We need to develop a sense of solidarity and a strong ethical and political vision capable of exposing and defeating the brutal norms promoted under the banner of the anti-gender ideology movement (Butler, 2025). I argue that by reshaping the FFP as a tool against anti-gender politics, foreign policies can become a powerful means for promoting gender equality and global peace. Lessons from a decade of experiences in countries implementing FFP can help the EU craft an ethical and political vision to oppose anti-gender politics, which has become a "phantasmatic scene" for authoritarian populism.

4. EU to Counter Anti-Gender Politics: Three Pillars Against the Phantasm

Hence, what role should the EU play in this complex landscape? Before urging the EU to act on this section, it is helpful to look at examples from Europe and elsewhere that show how anti-gender politics is becoming an increasing threat under authoritarian populists, as discussed earlier.

In Poland, anti-gender politics under Andrzej Duda (2015-2025) have functioned as a classic phantasmatic scene: a hallucinatory yet socially impactful narrative that projects existential fears onto "gender ideology." Duda's 2020 re-election campaign solidified this approach. By stating that "LGBTIQ+ rights are more destructive than communism" and signing the Family Covenant (committing to ban same-sex marriage, halt gender education, and defend the "traditional family"), he turned gender into a symbolic threat to the Polish nation. This scene condenses various anxieties — about sovereignty, demographic decline, cultural change, and EU influence — into a single, emotionally charged enemy. Policies like the spread of "LGBTIQ-free zones" and the near-total abortion ban reinforce this projection, depicting feminists, sexual minorities, and their allies as threats to "the people" and the nation's moral order. These measures stage a

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psychosocial drama of fear and defence: citizens are encouraged to see themselves as besieged by foreign ideologies with Duda cast as the paternal protector.

In Brazil, during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022), anti-gender politics became a central part of the narrative used to stage authoritarian populism. Bolsonaro repeatedly invoked the threat of "gender ideology" as a corrupting influence endangering Brazilian children, families, and Christian morals. His administration promoted the "Escola Sem Partido" (School Without Party) initiative to ban discussions of gender and sexuality in classrooms, framing it as protection against indoctrination. LGBTIQ+ issues were removed from human rights policies, funding for films with queer themes was blocked and teachers faced intimidation for including feminism or sexuality in their curricula. These actions created a hallucinatory scenario in which widespread social fears—such as rising crime, economic instability, and the decline of patriarchal authority—were projected onto feminists, LGBTIQ+ communities and progressive educators. The "enemy within" was imagined as sexual deviance imposed by global elites, corrupting children's innocence and threatening the natural order. By depicting gender as a fundamental danger, Bolsonaro positioned himself as the paternal protector, defending Brazil's moral fabric against both domestic "subversives" and foreign conspiracies. This symbolic scene condensed crises of masculinity, religious conservatism and nationalism into a single struggle, enabling Bolsonaro to incite paranoia and justify authoritarian actions.

In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003-) and his political party AKP have increasingly used anti-gender politics as a tool to strengthen authoritarian populism. A pivotal moment was when they withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, the Council of Europe treaty aimed at preventing violence against women. Erdoğan justified this by portraying the Convention as an alien, Western imposition that threatened "Turkish family values." This act portrayed gender equality itself as a foreign ideology corrupting the nation. Beyond the treaty withdrawal, Erdoğan has consistently

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amplified social anxieties related to gender. He has stated that "women and men are not equal by nature," warned against "Western feminism," and stressed that a woman's primary role is motherhood. LGBTIQ+ rights have been portrayed as "perversions," and Pride marches have been repeatedly banned and violently suppressed. These narratives portray feminists and sexual minorities as enemies, undermining the moral and demographic stability of the nation. By attributing broad crises—economic uncertainty, political division, declining birth rates—to the concept of "gender ideology," Erdoğan positions himself as the paternal protector who reestablishes order through patriarchal authority and religious morality. Under Erdoğan's leadership and with support from the Ministry of Family and Social Services, 2025 has been declared the "Year of the Family" to "protect and strengthen the family institution" against "harmful influences." In this regard, "the increasing visibility of genderless ideologies and LGBTIQ+ narratives" was identified as a global risk to the family structure.

In the USA, Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021; 2025-) weaponised anti-gender politics by creating a false narrative where feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights and reproductive freedoms were portrayed as threats to "real America." Trump repeatedly cast himself as the defender of the "forgotten man" and the "traditional family" against coastal liberal elites, feminists and "gender ideology." This narrative simplified fears about demographic change, economic insecurity and cultural diversity into a distorted fight over sex, gender, and sexuality. Concrete policies underscored this narrative: Trump reinstated and expanded the Global Gag Rule, cutting U.S. funding to international organisations that supported abortion rights. His administration worked to weaken Title IX protections for victims of sexual assault on campuses and sought to define sex narrowly as biological and binary, effectively erasing trans rights in federal law. At the UN, U.S. diplomats under Trump pushed back against references to "sexual and reproductive health and rights," aligning with conservative and religious states in global forums. Rhetorically, Trump demonised feminists as "nasty women," mocked

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survivors of sexual violence, and depicted trans people as threats to women and children in bathrooms, echoing the moral panic tactics used by other populist leaders. These actions attributed broad cultural and economic insecurities to "gender" and "sexual ideology," portraying them as existential threats to American values. This dramatisation justifies regressive policies, energises conservative evangelical and right-wing supporters, and portrays Trump as the paternal protector of the nation.

Since the early 2010s, Vladimir Putin has made anti-gender politics a key part of his authoritarian consolidation, framing it as a scene where "gender ideology" represents the corruption of Western liberalism and the threat to Russian civilisation. The 2013 "gay propaganda law" banning the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations" to minors marked a turning point: LGBTIQ+ people were portrayed as dangerous outsiders undermining children, family and national survival. In 2023, the Russian Supreme Court took it further by banning the LGBTIQ+ movement entirely, labelling it "extremist," which was followed by police raids on queer spaces in Moscow. Putin repeatedly characterises feminism and LGBTIQ+ rights as Western imports that clash with Russian tradition and Orthodoxy. His rhetoric links various crises — such as declining demographics, economic instability, and geopolitical tensions — to "gender ideology," framing it as a foreign plot aimed at weakening Russia. In his geopolitical rhetoric, Russia is depicted as the global guardian of "traditional values" against a decadent West, exporting anti-gender ideology as part of its soft power play.

Andrej Babiš, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic (2017-2021), represented an oligarchic style of authoritarian populism that employed anti-gender rhetoric to appeal to conservative voters and counter liberal opposition. Although less obvious than in Poland or Hungary, his government reflected regional patterns of framing "gender ideology" as a symbolic threat. In public debates about the Istanbul Convention, Babiš and his allies argued that ratifying the treaty would force an alien "gender theory" on Czech society, undermine traditional family values and weaken sovereignty. The

government delayed ratification under pressure from right-wing populist forces, rendering the treaty a proxy for concerns about EU interference and cultural liberalism. Babiš's movement ANO 2011 also exploited moral panics surrounding sex education and LGBTIQ+ rights. Right-wing media outlets and allied politicians portrayed debates over same-sex marriage and gender equality as "unnatural" or "foreign impositions." This created a phantasmatic scene where diffuse anxieties—about corruption scandals, inequality, EU dependency, and political instability—were projected onto "gender ideology" as the enemy of the Czech family and nation. The surreal narrative of gender as an existential threat offered cultural cover for his power growth, normalising illiberal tendencies under the pretence of defending tradition. As with other cases, the patriarchal stability that Babiš's discourse evoked had never truly existed, but presenting it as a lost order legitimised resistance to progressive reforms and aligned Czechia with the broader Central European anti-gender wave led by Orbán and Kaczyński.

Since returning to power in 2010, Viktor Orbán has positioned Hungary as the center of anti-gender politics in Europe. Orbán depicts the EU, liberal elites, feminists, and LGBTIQ+ activists as corrupting influences that threaten the Hungarian family, nation and Christian civilisation. Concrete policies illustrate this dramatisation: In 2018, Hungary banned gender studies programs in universities, framing them as "ideology, not science." In 2020, the government amended the constitution to define family strictly as based on marriage between a man and a woman, and limited adoption to heterosexual couples. In 2021, the Hungarian Parliament passed a law banning the "promotion" of homosexuality and gender transition to minors, linking LGBTIQ+ rights to pedophilia — a classic moral panic tactic. Orbán's government uses slogans like "Stop Brussels" and "Hungary must protect its children" to blend anti-gender politics with nationalist and anti-EU campaigns. In these efforts, multiple crises such as economic instability, rural inequality, and migration fears come together into a single symbolic battle against "gender." By depicting gender as a life-threatening issue, Orbán

positions himself as the paternal guardian of the nation, justifying authoritarian policies and illiberal democracy.

Drawing on examples from around the world, here is evidence that anti-gender politics has played a crucial role in bringing authoritarian populists to power, solidifying their rule, and becoming an increasingly urgent global threat. These cases also demonstrate how anti-gender mobilisations have shifted from local cultural conflicts to an increasingly urgent global threat to democracy, human rights and gender equality. Since anti-gender discourses consistently portray the EU values and institutions as primary targets, the EU has a special responsibility to respond. It must therefore craft strong and clear policies that not only defend its core commitments to democracy, human rights, and gender equality, but also actively combat the spread of anti-gender mobilisations inside and outside its borders.

The EU has significantly shaped gender equality policies by guiding member states, organising its structure and acting globally. In 2019, the EU launched its own Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, aligning with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. This plan aims to mainstream gender equality and women's rights in the EU's external efforts, especially in conflict prevention, crisis management, and peacebuilding. The EU's Action Plan mainly targets prevention, protection, relief and recovery. Its goals include increasing gender expertise and focal points within EU institutions and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, raising funding for gender-sensitive programs, forming partnerships with civil society and women's organisations in conflict zones, and tracking progress through indicators, reports, and evaluations. The EU's Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security complements its Gender Action Plan (GAP) III, which sets targets for including gender perspectives in external actions. In this way, the 2019 EU Action Plan strives to do more than just words by setting concrete goals for women's participation, protection, and empowerment, though it still faces challenges. Critics argue that the EU Action Plan is sometimes absorbed into traditional security agendas, like

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counterterrorism and migration control, which can weaken its ability to promote real gender equality. Although the plan emphasises consultation, feminist and grassroots groups often say that engagement remains superficial rather than meaningful. Additionally, the EU's credibility is questioned because, even though it promotes WPS internationally, some member states (e.g., Poland, Hungary) pursue anti-gender policies at home, undermining consistency.

In this context, the EU must reassess and strengthen its normative power as a global promoter of democracy, peace and human rights. To address the anti-gender challenge, I propose three pillars, drawing from over a decade of feminist foreign policy experience: (1) Recognising the anti-gender movement as a global threat to human security, especially for women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, and prioritising efforts to combat this threat; (2) Supporting social movements, particularly those of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, while creating avenues for their participation in foreign policy decision-making; (3) Adopting an intersectional approach to peacebuilding that addresses all forms of injustice and inequality by considering how gender intersects with other forms of inequality.

First, recognising anti-gender politics as a transnational threat to human security—especially for women and LGBTIQ+ communities—and including this analysis in peacebuilding and foreign policy strategies is urgent. It should be treated with the same urgency as other forms of extremism that threaten peace and democracy. Instead of seeing anti-gender movements as isolated or cultural phenomena, the EU must view them as part of a coordinated, ideologically driven challenge to liberal democratic values. Addressing this threat requires the EU to incorporate a gendered analysis into its security, foreign policy, and peacebuilding efforts. It is, of course, inaccurate to say that the EU has taken no action on this matter so far. The EU has recognised the rise of anti-gender rhetoric in its internal and external communications. The European Parliament has condemned anti-gender campaigns, especially in Poland and Hungary. Additionally, the 2020-2025 EU Gender Equality

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Strategy explicitly links gender equality to democracy and the rule of law (European Commission, 2020). The Strategy commits to challenging gender stereotypes and countering sexist hate speech as key priorities. It emphasises intersectionality as a core principle for implementation, recognising that discrimination is complex and intersects with factors like gender, race and sexuality. The Strategy aims to incorporate a gender perspective across all EU policy areas. It also acknowledges that progress is neither guaranteed nor irreversible, suggesting that advances in gender equality encounter resistance. However, it does not explicitly reference "anti-gender politics," "gender ideology," or "backlash movements" as threats. It lacks a comprehensive framework within the Strategy to monitor or oppose anti-gender discourse or organised efforts against gender equality. It does not include language about defending rights from ideological or cultural attacks; the focus is more on structural inequalities, stereotypes, and gender balance. Because the Strategy does not directly address anti-gender movements, it may underestimate or lack adequate mechanisms to counter political backlash. Recognising that equality is not guaranteed forever is a weak acknowledgement of potential resistance, but it does not serve as a clear defence stance. Petra Debusscher (2023) argues that, although the Strategy makes progress, its legislative initiatives are modest, and many proposals have been stagnant for a long time, showing limited ambition in fighting resistance. As the European Commission faces increasing pressure from far-right and anti-gender groups in some Member States, the absence of stronger defensive language could leave the Strategy vulnerable.

On the other hand, the 2025 "Roadmap for Women's Rights" explicitly signals the concern of the European Commission about backlash and contestation of gender equality (European Parliament, 2025). The Roadmap recognises "worrying trends that challenge existing gender equality and promote a sexist political discourse." It partly aims to counteract political movements that oppose or try to roll back gender equality policies. It includes a declaration of principles for a gender-equal society, reaffirming the EU's

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commitment to protecting women's rights and urging all EU institutions to adhere to it. The Roadmap is designed to guide the next Gender Equality Strategy (post-2025) and is explicitly connected to addressing opposition and setbacks in gender equality. While the Roadmap extends beyond the 2020-2025 Strategy by acknowledging backlash and contestation, its language remains cautious — it does not employ strong, confrontational framing (e.g., labelling anti-gender politics as an existential threat). It falls short of proposing new measures or legislative initiatives; instead, it primarily serves as a guiding document, highlighting the challenge. Some civil society voices argue that it does not go far enough. For example, the End FGM European Network says the Roadmap "missed the opportunity to be stronger and more uncompromising" in its stance against anti-rights movements. The 2025 Roadmap is a significant symbolic step, but without stronger tools and an explicit acknowledgement of the anti-gender threat, it risks remaining largely symbolic. To be effective, the EU must shift from symbolic reaffirmation to establishing an institutionalised defence of gender equality as part of its larger fight against authoritarian populism.

To strengthen its external actions, the EU should also reevaluate how its Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and emerging FFP frameworks address the rise of anti-gender politics beyond Europe. Butler's concept of the phantasmatic scene shows that authoritarian regimes weaponise "gender ideology" as a hallucinated threat, justifying repression domestically and exporting illiberal values abroad. If the EU only promotes technical gender mainstreaming, it risks being dismissed as part of the "ideology" these actors demonise. Instead, the EU must frame WPS and FFP as tools to challenge anti-gender illusions — by emphasising how gender equality promotes real security, empowering civil society movements that oppose authoritarian narratives, and ensuring that intersectionality is genuinely integrated into peacebuilding and diplomacy. In doing so, the EU could reposition itself as a global actor that not only advances gender equality but also actively resists authoritarian uses of gender as a weapon of fear. Another problem is that the

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EU often views anti-gender politics as a domestic issue within member states rather than a coordinated transnational threat. It is rarely integrated into foreign and security policies. Instead, the EU could officially recognise anti-gender mobilisations as a human rights concern in its foreign and development strategies and include counter-disinformation and strategic communication tools to combat anti-gender narratives.

In fact, recognising "gendered disinformation" as a foreign policy issue is essential for a comprehensive understanding of digital disinformation as a security threat (Hedling, 2024, 137). Digital disinformation campaigns, often spread by autocratic regimes or groups, weaponise sexist narratives within domestic debates as part of a foreign policy strategy (Hedling, 2024:138). Hedling (2024, 139) stresses that gendered disinformation is not marginal; it is increasingly acknowledged as a widespread, deliberate, and cross-cutting tactic used by actors aiming to weaken the core of democratic systems. In an era marked by populism and a regressive attitude toward gender equality in many nations, Hedling (2024) explores how gendered disinformation functions as a "divide and conquer" tactic. This approach frequently employs divisive gender narratives to divert attention from other pressing social and political issues, manipulating language and imagery to reinforce biases. This further solidifies discriminatory practices and deepens societal divisions (Hedling, 2024, 142). Over the past decade, rising concerns about this issue have prompted countries like the USA and the UK, along with organisations such as the UN and the EU, to issue statements and reports acknowledging gendered disinformation as a significant foreign policy issue and a global threat to democracy. Nonetheless, more gender-informed analyses are necessary to effectively address this form of influence and the vulnerabilities that sustain it (Hedling, 2024, 139).

Secondly, supporting grassroots movements—especially those led by women and LGBTIQ+ individuals—by creating meaningful ways for them to participate in foreign policy and peacebuilding efforts is crucial for the EU to reevaluate its gender policies amid anti-gender politics. These groups are

often the first to confront authoritarian and exclusionary politics. To effectively counter anti-gender politics, the EU must do more than just rhetorical support; it must actively fund and legitimise feminist and LGBTIQ+ social movements as drivers of democratic renewal. This includes providing sustainable funding, legal protections, and transnational networks for grassroots activism. Equally important is developing institutional mechanisms—such as advisory councils, consultative platforms, and co-decision processes—that enable these movements to influence foreign policy agendas. Their inclusion boosts democratic legitimacy, improves policy responsiveness, and strengthens the EU's role as a defender of pluralism and rights-based governance.

The EU has taken significant steps on this issue to date, supporting civil society through programs such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the NDICI – Global Europe, and the Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) program. EIDHR was established in 2006, with a focus on supporting human rights defenders and pro-democracy civil society groups, particularly in repressive regimes where EU delegations could operate independently of governments. It funded projects on gender equality, combating violence against women, and LGBTIQ+ rights. It was replaced by NDICI in 2021, but its legacy continues as part of NDICI's thematic programmes. Launched in 2021 for the 2021-2027 budget cycle, NDICI–Global Europe is the EU's primary external action funding tool, with a €79.5 billion budget. It allocates funds explicitly to human rights defenders, gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, and women's organisations, both inside and outside conflict zones. It includes the "Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy," which directly funds NGOs, grassroots feminist movements, and civil society groups without requiring them to go through national governments (a key feature in authoritarian contexts). CERV is another vital instrument. It is the EU's most comprehensive internal funding program for rights and democracy, running from 2021 to 2027 with a budget of €1.55 billion. It supports civil society organisations within the EU,

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especially those working on gender equality, anti-discrimination, LGBTIQ+ rights, the rule of law and civic participation. This support covers initiatives combating anti-gender movements, projects advancing gender equality in member states and networks defending LGBTIQ+ rights. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED), a flexible funding tool that supports pro-democracy activists, including women's and LGBTIQ+ groups, especially in the EU neighbourhood, will also be considered, along with other relevant instruments. Through these instruments, the EU has built one of the largest global funding ecosystems for civil society with a strong emphasis on gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights.

These instruments are crucial for countering anti-gender movements because they enable direct support to grassroots actors, bypass hostile governments, and reinforce the EU's external role as a defender of democracy and human rights. However, funding often remains short-term, bureaucratic and difficult for grassroots movements—especially in the Global South—to access. Application and reporting procedures tend to be too demanding for small grassroots groups. This benefits large and professionalised NGOs and can marginalise the very movements—such as feminist collectives, queer activists, and local women's groups—that are most impacted by anti-gender backlash. In authoritarian contexts, EU funding can expose recipients to risks, like state harassment, stigmatisation or of being labelled "foreign agents" (e.g., Russia, Hungary). Anti-gender groups exploit this by portraying EU-funded NGOs as illegitimate elites imposed from abroad. Additionally, while CERV aims to promote equality within the EU, in countries like Poland and Hungary, governments have restricted access or delegitimised EU-funded organisations. This highlights the gap between EU-level commitments and national realities and limits the success of the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which seeks to support LGBTIQ+ organisations and protect their rights.

In other words, the EU's civil society funding programs are vital for countering anti-gender mobilisations, but they are also vulnerable. Without

reforms to simplify access, guarantee long-term sustainability, and protect partners from authoritarian retaliation, these tools risk merely reproducing the very fragility they aim to address. If the EU wants to be a credible defender of democracy and gender equality, it must do more than just fund projects. It also needs to invest in movement resilience, ensuring that feminist and LGBTIQ+ actors can withstand authoritarian and anti-gender pushback over the long term. Easing bureaucratic barriers in calls for proposals and reporting requirements—especially for small grassroots organisations—and creating user-friendly application systems, along with providing technical support like translation and training for local actors who may lack professional grant-writing skills, will facilitate access. Moving beyond short-term project cycles by offering core, multi-year institutional funding to feminist, LGBTIQ+, and human rights organisations, and expanding micro-grant programs with rapid disbursement for urgent activism (e.g., responding to sudden state crackdowns) will foster more flexible and sustainable funding. Another necessity is connecting civil society support with broader rule-of-law conditionality tools—such as suspending EU funds to member states that suppress feminist or LGBTIQ+ NGOs—and ensuring that CERV funds are not blocked or undermined by hostile governments in countries like Poland or Hungary, thereby linking funding to rule-of-law mechanisms.

Furthermore, although the EU has created some mechanisms to amplify the voices of women's and LGBTIQ+ movements in foreign policy decisions, these are still limited in scope and impact. What is needed is a systematic institutionalisation of participatory processes. For example, the EU could establish permanent consultative forums or foreign policy advisory groups that formally include feminist and LGBTIQ+ civil society organisations in agenda-setting, policy design, and evaluation. Such structures would ensure that equality concerns are not seen as external additions but as core elements in shaping EU external action. Additionally, the EU should supplement participation with practical support mechanisms. This could include rapid-access funding options for feminist and LGBTIQ+ advocates working in

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hostile or authoritarian settings, enabling them to respond quickly to crises. Equally, capacity-building programs that enhance the advocacy, security, and organisational skills of grassroots actors, enabling them to engage effectively with EU institutions and international organisations, are crucial. By connecting participatory structures with sustainable support and protection measures, the EU would go beyond symbolic inclusion to foster an environment where civil society can play a vital role in shaping FFP.

Thirdly, adopting an intersectional approach to peacebuilding that recognises overlapping systems of oppression—such as gender, race, class, migration status, or sexuality—is essential for creating a genuinely transformative gender policy, especially in response to the anti-gender backlash. As Thompson and Clement (2020, 5) note, a common mistake is for institutions to claim their policies as feminist by focusing solely on girls and women or by considering a quota of women as enough, without addressing intersectionality. A sustainable and just peace cannot be achieved without understanding how gender-based inequalities are compounded by race, class, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and other axes of marginalisation. The Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025) explicitly commits to intersectionality and gender mainstreaming across EU external actions. However, the plan pays limited attention to intersecting inequalities like race, class, sexuality, and disability, which reduces its overall inclusiveness. Some EU-funded peace and development projects also include gender-disaggregated data and participatory assessments. But intersectionality is often a rhetorical pledge; in practice, implementation varies across EU institutions and delegations. Data collection remains limited, especially regarding race, migration status and other intersecting forms of inequality.

Maes and Debusscher (2024) examine how the idea of intersectionality has been portrayed in the EU three Gender Action Plans (GAP I: 2010-2015; GAP II: 2016-2020; GAP III: 2021-2025) for external relations. In GAP I, there is no mention of intersectionality; women are viewed as a uniform group. GAP II introduces intersectionality, but mainly as an additive concept (gender +

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other categories = additional discrimination). The focus remains on women as a single group. GAP III shows a significant change, explicitly identifying intersectionality as a core principle. The plan recognises multiple disadvantages (e.g., race, age, disability, migration, and LGBTIQ+ status), emphasises inclusivity, and increases consultation with diverse civil society groups. Still, it often treats intersectionality more as an individual identity issue than a structural one. It overlooks reflection on the EU's own role in perpetuating inequalities (e.g., through trade or migration policies). Maes and Debusscher (2024) argue that the EU has developed a more comprehensive and explicit approach to intersectionality in its external gender policy, especially under GAP III. This marks a significant advance, giving advocates more influence and demonstrating the EU's goal to be a progressive global leader in gender issues. However, the EU's framing of intersectionality remains limited and lacks political nuance: it tends to highlight individual disadvantages rather than examining broader systems of power (e.g., sexism, capitalism, colonialism); it often overlooks privilege and relational dynamics, focusing only on marginalised groups without addressing dominant positions; and it lacks critical self-reflection regarding the EU's own policies and its role in maintaining inequalities worldwide.

In short, while the EU has made progress in addressing various inequalities, these are often implicit and poorly articulated. A more systematic, explicit and transformative approach to intersectionality is necessary to improve the inclusiveness and effectiveness of EU equality policies. The EU should adopt intersectionality not only as an analytical tool but also as a guiding principle in shaping and executing its foreign, development and security strategies. This includes data disaggregation, participatory methods and policy coherence across different fields. By tackling the root causes of structural inequality in a unified way, the EU can promote a more inclusive vision of peace that resonates with diverse communities and strengthens democratic solidarity.

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5. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that anti-gender politics are not just fringe culture wars but are central tools of authoritarian populism. As Butler's concept of the phantasmatic scene shows, authoritarian leaders in Poland, Brazil, Turkey, the USA, Russia, Czechia, and Hungary depict "gender ideology" as a hallucinated threat, transforming broad social anxieties into existential battles over family, nation and sovereignty. In doing so, they harness fear and nostalgia to justify illiberal governance. The power of this dynamic lies precisely in its fantasy nature: the patriarchal order that authoritarian populists vow to restore never fully existed, yet its envisioned revival fuels the emotional core of their politics.

The EU is not just an external observer of this phenomenon but a main target. Anti-gender movements across Europe regularly portray EU values and institutions as hostile impositions, depicting Brussels as the face of "gender ideology." The EU therefore has a special responsibility: to defend its core commitments to democracy, human rights and gender equality against organised backlash. While the 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy and the 2025 Roadmap for Women's Rights reaffirm these values, they risk staying symbolic without stronger tools. If the EU does not directly challenge the illusionary logic, authoritarian populists will keep setting the terms of the debate.

To meet this challenge, the EU must move beyond rhetorical reaffirmation to institutionalised defence. This involves explicitly identifying anti-gender movements as coordinated illiberal actors; connecting gender equality to rule of law mechanisms and funding conditions; and providing direct, ongoing support to feminist and LGBTQ+ organisations. It also requires developing counter-narratives that reveal the falsehood of "gender ideology" myths, while presenting inclusive and intersectional visions of democracy and security.

Externally, the EU should adapt its Women, Peace, and Security agenda and emerging FFP frameworks to meet this challenge. Instead of treating gender equality as just a technical add-on, the EU must view it as a strategic tool to counter authoritarian illusions that exploit gender to spread fear. By empowering grassroots actors and integrating intersectionality into peacebuilding and diplomacy, the EU can strengthen its role as a global leader in promoting equality and democracy.

In short, anti-gender politics are an increasing global threat, and the EU's credibility depends on its ability to recognise them. By challenging the illusory scene that fuels authoritarian populism—both inside and outside its borders—the EU can turn gender equality from a fragile value into a strong pillar of democratic resilience. The EU has played a vital role in shaping gender equality policies, guiding member states, influencing its organisational structure, and acting internationally. However, unless it uses this institutional power to create inclusive and effective ways to fight anti-gender movements, progress will not meet expectations. Its efforts in promoting gender equality and human rights have been significant, but its ability to resist and counter anti-gender mobilisation remains underdeveloped.

In conclusion, the rise of anti-gender politics and authoritarian populism presents a major challenge to the EU's identity and core values. As the global political landscape changes, the EU must reaffirm its commitment to gender justice, not only as a matter of rights but as the foundation of sustainable peace and democracy. By adopting a reimagined FFP that is intersectional, inclusive and resilient, the EU can lead in safeguarding human security and democratic principles for all.

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