The Broader Influence of Anti-Gender Movements: The Digital Space as a Platform for Spreading Harmful Narratives
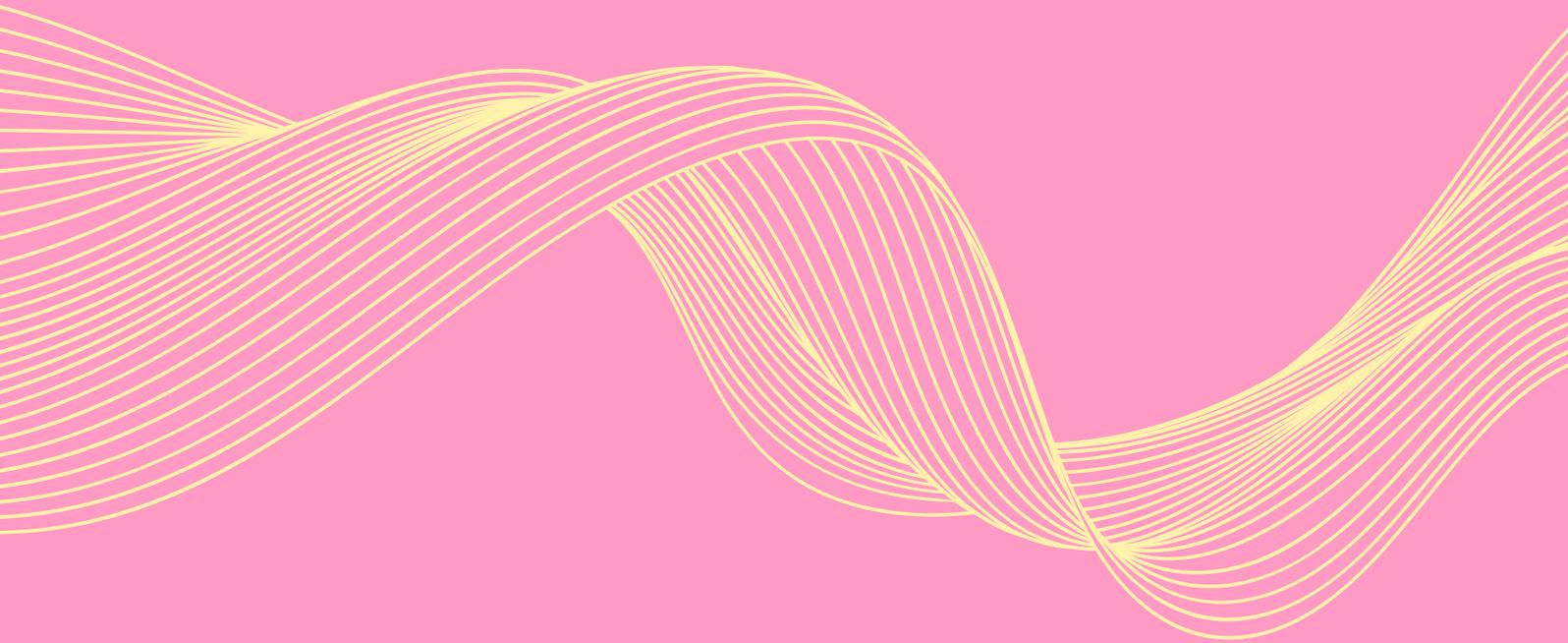
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The digital space plays a pivotal role in modern communication, offering both opportunities for advocacy and community building, as well as a platform for the proliferation of harmful narratives. On one hand, online platforms provide vital support for vulnerable groups, marginalized communities, and initiatives promoting gender equality. On the other hand, these platforms have become a fertile ground for the dissemination of hate speech, disinformation, doxing, cyberstalking, and other forms of online violence. The rapid rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans—closely aligned with far-right political actors—has made the digital landscape increasingly perilous by amplifying misinformation and fostering a hostile environment.

Anti-Gender Movements in the Western Balkans

Today, the actors of the anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans are a mix of civil society organizations (often with religious affiliations), political parties, intellectuals, and the church. They have close links with each other and cooperate. Some ferociously anti-gender American intellectuals are influential in the Balkans. Jordan Peterson, a Canadian intellectual famous for his anti-feminist, anti-left, and transphobic positions, has had his work translated into Serbian. Generally, the triggering issue for the anti-gender movements in the Balkans is the question of LGBTQI+ rights.[1] [1: Lucille Griffon, EuroMed Rights, Charlotte Pruth, and Maria Johansson, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, THE FIERCE AND THE FURIOUS, Feminist Insights Into The Anti-gender Narratives And Movement, (November 2019), 16]

In North Macedonia, the anti-gender movement has arisen in a way that could qualify as a backlash against gender equality. During the very traditionalist and religious government that ruled for ten years, from 2006 to 2016, the values that were promoted were traditional and religious, and the government itself campaigned against abortion, and generally emphasized the traditional role of women. As the anti-gender rhetoric was coming from the state itself, there

were few movements as such fighting against women's and LGBTQI+ rights.
[2] [2: Lucille Griffon, EuroMed Rights, Charlotte Pruth, and Maria Johansson, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, THE FIERCE AND THE FURIOUS, Feminist Insights Into The Anti-gender Narratives And Movement, (November 2019), 17]

Since then, anti-gender movements have strengthened their influence by forging alliances with far-right politicians and conservative religious organizations. The digital space, with its ability to rapidly spread content, has been instrumental in extending their reach, visibility, and impact.

Anti-gender movements often present themselves as grassroots organizations representing the concerns of "ordinary citizens" or parents. However, these movements are frequently part of a well-organized, transnational network of religious associations, political parties, and other interest groups. Through coordinated propaganda campaigns, they actively oppose gender equality, framing it as a threat to traditional values and the protection of children from so-called "gender ideology."[3] [3: Sara Milenkovska, How Do Anti-gender Movements Set Back the State of Gender Equality and the Fight Against Gender-based Violence?, (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, December 2022), 3-4]
In the Macedonian context, there currently are several active anti-gender organizations and groups, as well as a coalition titled "Coalition for the Protection of Children," which unites 26 entities (associations of citizens, informal initiatives, religious groups, etc., and political parties).[4] [4: Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, Who Is Afraid of Gender?, (Coalition Margins, 2022), 15-16]

Online Narratives and Gendered-Based Disinformation

Anti-gender movements have harnessed the power of social media to mainstream their messages, often cloaked in the language of protecting children and preserving family values. By exploiting fears related to sexual education and transgender rights, they have sown distrust among parents and the broader public.

For example, in North Macedonia, anti-gender actors spread disinformation about the introduction of Comprehensive Sexual Education in schools and Gender-sensitive Education, claiming it would expose children to harmful "gender ideology." Although these claims lack a factual basis, they have nonetheless succeeded in mobilizing public opposition to educational reforms approved by national authorities. Mainly, regarding the Comprehensive Sexual Education program, in the groups for anti-gender mobilization, various contents are published about how the educational materials are finally "debunked and really interpreted." Their implementation is always talked about anecdotally, or about certain assumed intentions of individuals in the government or the civil society organizations, by which they slip in a lot of untrue and unverified information. Through social media posts, they address their followers directly and keep them informed with their activities, constantly reminding them of what has happened so far and what comes next. In this way, among social media users, the excitement of membership and contribution to a particular group of like-minded people with whom they identify is maintained.[5] [5: Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, Who Is Afraid of Gender?, (Coalition Margins, 2022), 83-85]

The report, "Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation," highlights how media outlets have facilitated the spread of anti-gender narratives, enabling these movements to dominate the public discourse.

This analysis, which reviewed over 1,000 online reports and 7,000 Facebook comments related to events like the 2023 Skopje Pride Parade and protests organized by conservative groups, reveals that the media often serves as a conduit for disinformation. Rather than fostering informed debate or countering harmful stereotypes, media outlets frequently amplify the messages of conservative organizations, indirectly promoting hate speech and gender-based violence. This trend underscores the broader societal challenges of entrenched patriarchal norms and low public awareness of gender equality issues.[6] [6: Bojana Jovanovska, Jovana Jovanovska, Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation, (Institute of Communication Studies, 2023), 37-40]

Moreover, these groups have targeted feminist and civil society organizations, as well as human rights defenders and journalists, with coordinated online harassment. Hate speech, personal attacks, and the public sharing of personal information (doxing) are commonly used tactics, making activists vulnerable to both online and offline violence.[7] A large proportion of the media outlets do not have a policy for regulating the content of their comment sections, by concealing or deleting content containing gendered disinformation, hate speech, insults, and other harmful content. Taking into account that the spread of gendered disinformation mainly happens through social media, with the absence of regulation, the media contribute to the spread of these contents and enable the mobilization of the public for support and the additional creation of new content.[8] [7: Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, Elena Gagovska, Sexual Minorities, Gender, and Media, (Coalition Margins, 2021), 64-70] [8: Bojana Jovanovska, Jovana Jovanovska, Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation, (Institute of Communication Studies, 2023), 37-40]

A recent example of a coordinated attack by the anti-gender movements was the attack on the Macedonian journalist Snezana Lupevska Sozen, who, in her investigative journalism TV show „KOD," researched and analyzed how the anti-gender movements are financed. Before and after the show, she was a

target of hate speech, defamation, and insults by a series of posts on the anti-gender movement's social media platforms that had a goal to discredit her work and her as a journalist, while personally attacking her and the other journalists who worked on the investigative TV piece.[9] [9: See more: https://www.facebook.com/koalicijazadecata/]

These findings indicate that the anti-gender movements have successfully leveraged social media to create and spread gendered disinformation, particularly in the Macedonian context. Social media platforms have emerged as a key battleground for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the incitement of gender-based hate speech. This disinformation is often embedded in broader narratives that vilify the LGBTI+ community, with alarming levels of hate speech and explicit calls for violence being commonplace in online discussions.

Conclusion

The rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans poses significant challenges to gender equality and inclusivity. These movements have capitalized on the digital space to amplify harmful narratives, often with the use of the unregulated online space. The proliferation of gendered disinformation, hate speech, and online harassment against vulnerable communities underscores the need for robust policy responses. Media organizations, civil society, and governments must take concerted action to counter these harmful trends and protect the rights of marginalized groups, while fostering an online environment that supports equality and inclusion for all.

By acknowledging the dangers posed by these movements and their digital strategies, policymakers can work towards creating a safer and more equitable online space that promotes inclusivity and combats harmful disinformation.

Policy Recommendations

In order to address the systemic drivers of digital gender-based violence and to ensure a safer, more inclusive online environment, this paper recommends the adoption of the following measures:

Criminalize Digital Gender-Based Violence

- Define and criminalize cyberstalking, doxing, online harassment, and other forms of digital gender-based violence.
- Hold platforms accountable for allowing harmful content by requiring clear reporting mechanisms and timely responses.

Enhance Law Enforcement Capacity

- Provide specialized training for law enforcement on handling digital gender-based violence and supporting victims.
- Ensure victim-centered reporting processes that offer confidentiality and legal support.

Incorporate Intersectionality in Policy

- Design policies that address the heightened risks faced by marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQI+ communities, and minorities.
- Engage affected communities in policymaking to create inclusive and effective solutions.

Introduce Gender-Sensitive Education

- Implement comprehensive sexual education that promotes gender equality and counters harmful stereotypes.
- Teach media literacy to help young people recognize and resist gendered disinformation.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for governments, institutions, and civil society to combat digital gender-based violence and uphold the rights and safety of all individuals in online spaces.

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