Eszter Kováts

Anti-gender politics in East-Central Europe: Right-wing defiance to West-Eurocentrism

Zusammenfassung

Antigenderpolitik in Ostmitteleuropa: rechter Gegenwind für den Westeurozentrismus

Auch in Ostmitteleuropa sprechen AntigenderaktivistInnen von Gender als ideologischer Kolonisierung. In diesem Artikel wird versucht, diese Vorwürfe den tatsächlich bestehenden Machtverhältnissen der globalen und europäischen Genderarchitektur gegenüberzustellen und zu erörtern, ob sie – zumindest in gewissem Umfang – auf sozialen Realitäten beruhen.
Weder Antigenderkampagnen noch der Aufstieg illiberaler Kräfte sind *per se* Phänomene des ostmitteleuropäischen Raumes und sollten nicht als solche behandelt werden. Allerdings muss die Relevanz der geopolitischen Einbettung von Gleichstellungsmaßnahmen, Gender Studies sowie feministischer und LGBT-Politik eingehend analysiert werden, um den rechtsgerichteten Diskurs besser zu verstehen. Der vorliegende Beitrag bietet eine theoretische Erklärung, die sich auf bestehende empirische Studien und kritische theoretische Literatur stützt. Der Fokus liegt auf den vier Visegrád-Staaten Polen, Tschechische Republik, Slowakei und Ungarn. Es wird versucht, die spezifischen Ursachen der Antigendermobilisierung in dieser Region aufzuzeigen und darzustellen, dass der Antigenderdiskurs Ausdruck eines rechten Widerstands gegen bestehende materielle und symbolische Ost-West-Ungleichheiten in Europa ist.

Schlüsselwörter
Ostmitteleuropa, Europäisierung, Antigender, Feminismus, LGBT, Rechtspopulismus

Summary

Anti-gender actors in East-Central Europe (ECE) too claim that gender is an ideological colonization. In this article, in contrasting these accusations with actually existing power relations of the global and European gender architecture, I discuss whether they are – at least to some extent – based on social realities. Neither anti-gender campaigns nor the rise of illiberal forces are ECE phenomena *per se* and should not be treated as such. However, the relevance of the geopolitical embeddedness of gender equality policies, of gender studies and of feminist and LGBT politics needs to be analysed thoroughly in order to better understand the right-wing discourse. This paper offers a theoretical explanation, based on existing empirical studies and critical theoretical literature. Focussing on the four Visegrád countries, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, it attempts to demonstrate the specific drivers of the anti-gender mobilization in this region and argues that anti-gender discourse is a right-wing language of resistance against existing material and symbolic East-West inequalities in Europe.

Keywords
East-Central Europe, Europeanisation, anti-gender, feminism, LGBT, right-wing populism

In 2017, the conservative-fundamentalist World Congress of Families held its annual meeting in Budapest. Katalin Novák, then Hungarian State Secretary (now Minister) for Family Policy, gave one of the opening speeches, speaking about an experience

she has had at the United Nations in Geneva. She was reporting on the Hungarian government's position on same-sex marriage (i.e. its opposition to it), upon which she allegedly received this reaction: "This is a learning process – you will get to that point." She summed up the attitude of the UN body towards Hungary: "We're always supposed to feel ashamed. But we shouldn't be constantly lectured."

"Has care [as an issue] *already* arrived to Hungary?" – I overheard this sentence in an international workshop in 2017, by a German to a Hungarian feminist activist, who responded: "Yes, it already even left it … towards Germany" – pointing sarcastically to the pretentious character of the question (i.e. every idea comes *from* the West) and to one of the main causes of the care deficit in the East-Central European (ECE) region: care drain, and to the fact that the emancipation of women (understood as labour market participation) of Western European countries is connected to the outsourcing of household and care work to lower class and migrant women, oftentimes from the EU's periphery.

These two anecdotes reflect and highlight the topicality of power relations, both East-West and in the context of supranational bodies like the EU and the UN. The first case is an illustration of how the illiberal right-wing Fidesz, ruling since 2010, instrumentalizes the rhetoric of subjugation for mobilization and to legitimate their own actions. The second is a regular and widely documented experience of feminists and gender scholars from post-socialist countries coming in contact with their Western counterparts since the 1989–1991 political transformations. In the present article, I try to connect these two sets of experiences and phenomena through an analysis of the anti-gender rhetoric of the right-wing actors (parties, social movements, religious authorities, intellectuals) in East-Central Europe. I attempt doing this by contrasting their "key discursive strategy" (Graff/Korolczuk 2018), the claim of 'ideological colonization' with existing power structures in the global and European gender architecture. I offer a theoretical explanation, based on available empirical studies on the anti-gender phenomenon of the four Visegrád countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and on empirical and theoretical studies on the East-West inequalities of the past decades.

As I seek to understand post-socialist specificities of this transnational phenomenon, I am taking the risk of glossing over contextual differences and rather go beyond a one country case study, taking the four countries as one case study for the region. They share certain core characteristics: their satellite status to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the legacy of state feminism, their economic and political starting positions at the regime changes in 1989/1991, their path to EU accession in 2004, their room for manoeuvring and dilemmas around adopting Gender Studies and Western type of feminism and LGBT politics, and the ongoing Visegrád co-operation (V4) make them suitable for joint analysis. These countries treated as one case study might shed light on some common features of the former 'Second World'. While the rise of neither anti-gender nor of illiberal forces is an ECE phenomenon *per se* and should not be treated as such, the relevance of the geopolitical embeddedness of gender equality policies, of gender studies and feminist and LGBT politics in this region cannot be underestimated. For this we need to go beyond analysing the anti-gender actors' discourse. I contend: these existing material and symbolic East-West inequalities are the anchors the illiberal right-wing forces use for their political ends, and these partly explain the particular ECE drivers of anti-gender mobilization.

1 Anti-gender and anti-EU arguments in the Visegrád countries

1.1 Anti-gender politics

Anti-gender politics is a global phenomenon of the 2010s, with roots in the 1990s and 2000s (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017). Reproductive rights, violence against women, sexual education, LGBT issues, gender mainstreaming, gender studies, supranational organisations (like UN, EU or WHO) and treaties (like the Istanbul Convention[1]) are targeted by social movements and right-wing populist parties. Some of these are old issues (like abortion), others are new (like attacking gender studies). What connects them, is, that they are now contested for being representative of 'gender ideology', 'genderism', and represent a global conspiracy to destroy the human civilisation. The phenomenon goes beyond anti-feminism and homophobia and we are facing a new phenomenon which has some continuities with old struggles but cannot be reduced to them.

Applying the terms anti-gender politics has several pitfalls, e.g. using the terms of the opponents, or reproducing the false binary that we would be *for* gender, they are *against*[2], but for its relative merits compared to anti-feminism, e.g. highlighting the novelty of the phenomenon and the centrality of the term gender itself, I opt to use it, while emphasizing that there are *not* only two camps (progressives vs conservatives, post-essentialists vs essentialists) in the discussion of the related issues.

1.2 Anti-gender politics in the Visegrád countries

Poland and Slovakia were among the first countries in the European Union where anti-gender politics appeared (Kováts/Põim 2015), likely due to the strong role of the Catholic Church in domestic politics – as it was at the forefront of constructing discourse and mobilizing in the first years of the phenomenon (Grzebalska 2015). In Poland the anti-gender campaigns began to unfold in 2012 and 2013, triggered by the World Health Organisation's recommendations regarding sex education in schools; a handbook *Equality Kindergarden* written by feminist educators; and the signature of the Istanbul Convention by the then-ruling centre right party PO (*Platforma Obywatelska*, Civic Platform). After PiS (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, Law and Justice) took power in 2015, reproductive rights and most recently, potential withdrawing of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and state propaganda against LGBT people came among the issues. In Poland the Church and Church-related think tanks (like *Ordo Iuris*) used to be the main actors, since 2015 joined by the governing coalition. In Slovakia the anti-gender debate revolved around same-sex partnerships and adoption in 2014–2015, later the Istanbul Convention, and most recently reproductive rights, carried out by Church-related actors and recently by the governing coalition under the leadership of the pop-

1 The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, opened for signature on 11 May 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey, came into force on 1 August 2014.

2 Although strictly speaking the feminists are the ones fighting against gender, i.e. against the fact that our sexed bodies result in social and socially hierarchical consequences.

ulist party OĽaNO (*Obyčajní Ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities). Hungary is a latecomer: while there were scattered anti-gender incidences from 2009 on (Félix 2015), anti-gender campaigns began to unfold only in 2017 around the Istanbul Convention and the de-accreditation of Gender Studies MA programs in October 2018 (Gagyi 2018; Kováts 2019), and most recently, in spring 2020 around trans rights. This latecoming may be explained by the fact that the conservative Fidesz-KDNP government, in power since 2010, did not plan any legislation to trigger an anti-gender protest, to the contrary: the discourse intensified when it was of use for the polarizing goals of the government itself (Kováts/Pető 2017). Hence, in Hungary the main actor is the government and its corollaries: fake think tanks, propaganda media and the NGOs which share its ideology (Kováts 2019). In the Czech Republic so far there has not been a large-scale mobilization or political usage of the term 'gender ideology', only occasional media debates were identified (Nyklová/Fárová 2018) alongside Russian anti-EU propaganda websites in Czech (and Slovak) (Jarkovská 2019). This may be attributed to the fact that Czech society is one of the least religious in the EU and that no political force has so far seen advantages in polarizing society along these cultural lines. This might change in the future, as the controversy on the Istanbul Convention suggests; also, the discourse is moderately present– as it was in Hungary for years before it was fully mobilized. For this reason, and due to the presence of anti-EU and anti-West elements in the discourse the Czech Republic fits into the scope of the following analysis.

Additionally to common elements with the transnational anti-gender discourse, scholars from all four Visegrád countries highlight one specific element that is a defining feature and the main carrier of the anti-gender discourse in these four countries: presenting the EU and the West as cultural colonisers (Gagyi 2018; Graff/Korolczuk 2018; Grzebalska 2015; Jarkovská 2019; Kováts 2019; Maďarová/Valkovičová 2019; Rawłuszko 2019).

The anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric within anti-gender politics is not entirely homegrown: it has been propagated for long by the main anti-gender ideologues (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017), for instance by the German Gabriele Kuby and the Belgian-American Marguerite Peeters, the books of the former translated in all four languages,[3] and Peeters' into Hungarian and Polish.

In the next section I attempt to put together those puzzles from theoretical and empirical literatures that can be helpful to situate the discursive Euroscepticism in the anti-gender discourse in the Visegrád countries, and may shed light on why these tropes resonate.

2 "European but not quite"

Ivan Krastev, the point of reference to Eastern Europe for many Western scholars, and Stephen Holmes have dedicated a whole book to their observation that the symbolic inequality within the EU is what drove PiS' and Fidesz' rise in Poland and Hungary. They call it a "reckoning" with the "modernization through imitation", with lecturing from

3 In Hungarian it is available even on the website of the smaller coalition party KDNP.

the West and with the strategy and discourse of imitation of the West on behalf of the domestic liberal elites (Krastev/Holmes 2019). While their analysis strikingly misses the economic dimension, their observation takes up one of the main points regularly addressed in the critical scholarly literature from the region for the past 30 years – a literature largely unknown to Western audiences. Proving the usefulness of this critical scholarship for explaining the recent anti-gender phenomenon is the main goal of this paper.

'Return to Europe', 'catching up with the West', 'becoming a European country' – these were characteristic imaginaries around the regime changes in East-Central Europe that accompanied the transformation process from state socialism to democracy, from state capitalism to neoliberal capitalism, and the path towards the EU accession in 2004. The economic and social costs, i.e. the devastating (also gendered) economic effects of the transformations have been widely documented, but also how the reunification of Europe after the end of the Cold War was asymmetrical and why catching up was economically to a large extent a false promise, and culturally a hierarchical process (Bohle/Greskovits 2012; Gagyi 2016). In this section, I try to set out the usefulness of the East-West differentiation on the basis of theoretical and historical literature, describe how the East-West inequalities played and continue to play out within the EU in gender issues, and show how this manifests itself in gender studies and in feminist and LGBT activism in the region.

2.1 East-West

The usual binary conceptualization of transnationality as a relationship between Global North and Global South in the scholarship operates with the omission of the former socialist countries: although this binary counts as a critical intervention, it either lumps Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)[4] with Western Europe and North America together, or it just makes CEE invisible (Garstenauer 2018; Grabowska 2012; Müller 2020; Suchland 2011), an "epistemic flyover zone" (Kremmler 2020: 146): "the East does not fit the frame through which we think the global" (Müller 2018: 740f.).

The term Europe itself entails several problems. Firstly, it is commonly used, both in journalistic and academic accounts, to refer to the European Union, omitting the non-EU-members from the continent. This "reverse synecdoche exclusion" (Böröcz 2001, 2006) is far from being innocent: "The name of the whole is appropriated for use as a signifier for the part, and the rest is transformed into a blank spot on the mental map of the whole" (Böröcz 2006: 124f.). Secondly, when it comes to a postcolonial critique of Europe, what is meant is a critique of the overseas colonial past of several Western European countries and of the superiority of the West according to the universalist thinking of the Enlightenment – which CEE (hence ECE either) is not part of. Thirdly, when critical literature thematizes Europe and Europe's ongoing global dominance, what is meant by Europe is Western Europe and North America (Wallerstein 1997), particularly the US. As such, the term is falsely inclusive of CEE in terms of colonialism, and falsely exclusive in terms of the Western dominance (Böröcz 2001: 6f.).

4 Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is the larger region that contains East-Central Europe too.

Temporality also plays an important role in the symbolic undervaluation of the East. The member states of the EU before the Eastern Enlargement treated Eastern Europe as their "past self" (Slootmaeckers 2019: 7). This form of hierarchical Othering, suggesting a linear historical trajectory that is going towards the West, is widely criticized by scholars (e.g. Böröcz 2006; Melegh 2006; Barna et al. 2017; Kiossev 2010; Holmes/Krastev 2019). Randeria and Römhild call the EU Eastern Enlargement a "crypto-colonial inclusion" of the Eastern regions of Europe which are interpreted through "a lack of modernity and Europeanness" (Randeria/Römhild 2013: 21)[5]; they also highlight that through calling the parties Old and New Europe cultural hierarchies are produced and reproduced, and emphasize that these "crypto-colonial inner hierarchies in Europe" (Randeria/Römhild 2013: 23f.) are still in place.

This superiority claim has its mirror image in the discourse of the elites of the CEE countries: 'we are not there yet'. Europe (i.e. Western Europe) has been counting as "telos of human progress" (Böröcz 2006: 6) in the narrative of the elites of these countries for centuries (Böröcz 2006; Gagyi 2016; Kiossev 2010; Stölting 2000). The problem with this temporality is not its belief in universal values against which progress can be measured, but rather that framing it as a value issue of progress vs backwardness, in a culturalist-civilisationist understanding, conceals structural inequalities this difference depends on, i.e. that the progress of some is dependent on the subordination of others (Böröcz 2006: 117).

For these economic inequalities and the scholarly and public discourses about Europe, the European Union and European identity I propose to use the term West-Eurocentrism[6]. The symbolic undervaluation is not the *cause* of the 'wretchedness' of the subordinated, but the ideology of the economic exploitation. The term West-Eurocentrism corrects the term Eurocentrism for its ECE-blindness, and draws attention to the specifically ECE problematic in the issue: while the (crumbling) US hegemony necessitates its inclusion in the term West, in the case of East-Central Europe, the relationship to the West is an issue in the vein of 'return to Europe', the conditionalities of the EU accession, and the ongoing asymmetrical relations within the EU. This West-Eurocentric bias, invisibilizing or undervaluing East-Central Europe is also a clue to understand the popularity of the anti-gender discourses in this region: it may be interpreted as a revolt against the view that East-Central Europe is "European but not quite" (Kiossev 2010: o. S.). Why this can be articulated through the concept of gender, is the theme of the next subsection.

5 I thank for German literatures in European Ethnology to Katrin Kremmler.

6 The term Westcentrism (Westzentrismus) has recently been used by Katharina Eisch-Angus (2019) to criticize the focus of her discipline European ethnology. The term Eurocentrism was elaborated by Samir Amin (2009 [1989]) for the superiority of Europe *within* the context of capitalism, an aspect often missing in the postcolonialist accounts today, mostly at home in postmodernist humanities.

2.2 Europeanisation[7] and gender

Bohle and Greskovits emphasize that joining capitalism from a subordinate position brought about a race to the bottom for foreign direct investment (FDI) within the region and an "unusual degree of one-sided reliance on external resources and dependence on foreign control" (Bohle/Greskovits 2019). The transformation meant a "dependent integration with internalizations of symbolic hierarchies" (Gagyi 2016: 351; Böröcz 2001, 2006). Also, the prescribed policies – cuts to social programs and public health care and privatization of state enterprises – disproportionately affected women.

The EU accession meant yet another asymmetrical relationship: in the candidate countries the EU's agenda went far beyond the requirements of membership for the existing member states and gave the EU more coercive routes of influence in the applicants' domestic policy-making processes than in the existing EU (Grabbe 2003). Jarkovská interprets the current implications of this in her analysis in the same vein as Krastev and Holmes, albeit expanding it with the economic part: "The idealised West has lost its political and economic Messianic aura" (Jarkovská 2019: 11) and the fading of the catch-up enthusiasm meant a fertile soil for anti-EU arguments. The transformation, the EU accession and the past 17 years since then were all marked by deep economic and symbolic East-West inequalities. The gender dimension can be best grasped by three processes.

The first is the issue of care work. The care deficit of the Western European countries is growingly stemmed by migrant women from the peripheries or from outside of the EU. The emancipation of women in these countries becomes possible partly through the relegation of the domestic labour to women from the semi-peripheries and the peripheries, therefore "intrinsically connected to the structures of global inequalities" (Uhde 2016: 6). This is what Uhde calls distorted emancipation. Only in Germany an estimated 300 000 to 400 000 Eastern European women care in domestic care (not to mention elderly care homes and the health care system) (Bahna/Sekulová 2019). In light of this, one must re-evaluate the discourse on 'Eastern European women lagging behind', shared both by many Western feminists and policy actors, as well as liberal elites of the respective countries succumbing to a self-colonizing narrative (Kiossev 2010). So while Western European still carry out the majority of the care work, their labour market participation or free time (hence their measured equality) are to a large extent possible *because* they can outsource care work to Eastern or Southern women.[8] To put it simply: The progress in the West is possible because of the subordination of the peripheries.[9]

7 A more precise term would be "EU-ization" (Zimmermann 2007: 149), but why the term Europeanisation could settle, is exactly because of the West-Eurocentrism of the whole debates about European and EU identity.

8 This care migration is not only from the Eastern/Southern peripheries to the West. The East is served of carers by countries from even further East, e.g. Czech Republic or Poland from Ukraine, Hungary from Romania. This is what Hochschild calls the *care chains*.

9 This is not exclusive to gender relations: The pandemic has clearly shown how agriculture, meat industry, construction etc. in the West are impossible without the work of Eastern European migrants with exploitative salaries and working conditions.

"If the achievement of the 'advanced' social forms is acknowledged to be due to benefits derived from somebody else's wretchedness, or if the suffering of the wretched is recognized as having been caused by the 'advancement' of the developed, the teleological blueprint becomes morally unacceptable and even nonsensical." (Böröcz 2006: 117)

The second gender aspect of the unequal East-West relations within the EU, is the asymmetrical character of the so-called Europeanisation. This was nothing specific to gender issues, but it affected that domain too: not only during the accession period when the required gender equality and anti-discrimination laws were adopted, but later on when gender mainstreaming became a conditionality of ESF projects – without any consultation and democratic participation. That also triggered the anti-gender opposition: "opponents of gender ideology in Poland are at ease in making a comparison between communism and the introduction of 'gender ideology' to Poland" (Rawłuszko 2019: 17), and accusing Brussels of colonialism.

The third gender aspect of the unequal East-West relations within the EU is related to the EU as a 'community of values'. For instance, subscribing to LGBT rights became a marker of being European, as critically assessed by many scholars (e.g. Kulpa 2014; Mészáros 2017; Slootmaeckers 2019; Valkovičová 2018). Kulpa and Slootmaeckers describe in their studies how LGBT became an othering mechanism by Western European countries to redraw internal borders within the EU: namely to Eastern European member states that are constructed as 'not European enough': "it is sexuality that provides a new arena for the revival of the West/EUropean orientalism towards the CEE. […] I argue that gay (human) rights became ostensibly marked as a litmus test of CEE progress towards the West/Europe" (Kulpa 2014: 440) and redrawing this boundary meant designating CEE counties as "a kind of second-tier member state[s]" (Slootmaeckers 2019: 9).

It is clear: we must stick to clear criteria of gender inequality or homophobia: there are not only 'othering' discourses about these inequalities but material realities behind, hence we are able to measure places where women's and gays'/lesbians' well-being is better or less ensured. However, firstly, we need to revisit some of the established criteria (like the one on women's employment), and secondly, we must distinguish between real actions to better the situation of affected people *and* symbolic gestures that indeed only serve to set apart morally superior from inferior. This connection of LGBT rights to 'European identity' that served as a border delineating the not-so-enlightened from the East who still need to catch up in civilisational terms, triggered opposition – it became politically articulated in a polarizing language by the right-wing anti-gender actors (Slootmaeckers 2019; Valkovičová 2018).

There is another aspect which must be discussed with regards to EU values. On paper, article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) outlines these values: "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". Mos, on the basis of an analysis of Hungarian PM Orbán's speeches, establishes that the EU's fundamental values are "ambiguous and unenforceable" (Mos 2020: 268), and that is the reason why Orbán could interpret them as he wishes: for instance, that instead of breaching the EU's values, he would be the one truly representing them. One can go one step further: Orbán, besides making use of this under-definition of values, is making use also of the space

the postmodernism has created: that there is no true or false, but interpretations from different subject positions (Latour 2004; McIntyer 2018).

Also, not only are the EU's fundamental values undefined and ambiguous (therefore easily pliable by authoritarian leaders to their advantage in a "strategic form of interpretive politics", Mos 2020: 269) but one can observe first, a double standard: these values are upheld only when they are breached in the peripheries of the EU, and second, a hypocrisy in the cases when economic interests outweigh them. Thus, the unenforceability of these values does not result of a lack of clear definitions and institutional mechanisms but out of a lack of political will – that is connected both to political and economic advantages. Bohle and Greskovits put it this way:

"While the EU did talk the talk of normative power, it has walked a somewhat different walk. […] And that precisely this, the EU's self-stylization as a normative power that talks the talk and walks the walk has had an impact on political actors in eastern Europe; […] the EU's self-stylization as normative power also contributes to the reinforcement of the East-West cleavage." (Bohle/Greskovits 2019)

To summarize it: If we frame questions of gender and LGBT equality in civilizational terms of progress/backlash and look only at the discursive and representation levels, we miss the very important power relations they are embedded in. We need tools to be able to perceive and describe them, as they feed anti-gender and anti-EU sentiments on the EU's peripheries.

2.3 East-West power relations in gender studies and in feminist and LGBT activism

Debates about decolonizing social sciences, including gender studies have been going on for decades – Eastern Europe seems to be invisible in this regard too. Wallerstein's theory about the relationship between the regions in the capitalist world system has been applied to social sciences by Syed Farid Alatas (2003), and this to the East-West relationships within gender studies in Slovakia and Czech Republic by Veronika Wöhrer (2016) and to Russia by Therese Garstenauer (2018). In this subsection I reconstruct their argument and its relevance for the right-wing resistance.

Alatas argues that the imperialistic relations in social sciences parallel those in international political economy: "exploitation, tutelage, conformity, secondary role of dominated intellectuals and scholars, rationalization of the civilizing mission, and the inferior talent of scholars from the home country specializing in studies of the colony" (Alatas 2003: 601), and that the West's monopolistic control is not determined by colonial power but rather by dependent relationships. Applying Wallerstein's division of the world system in relation to each other into centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries to the social science, he identifies the US, Great Britain as France as so-called Social Science Powers (Alatas 2003: 602); among others Germany is a semi-periphery (with a relative autonomy and a certain radiation towards the peripheries), the countries of the Global South – and, while he does not mention it, but also of CEE – can be seen as periphery.

"According to academic dependency theory, the social sciences in intellectually dependent societies are dependent on institutions and ideas of western social science such that research agendas, the definition

of problems areas, methods of research and standards of excellence are determined by or borrowed from the West." (Alatas 2003: 603)

This asymmetry plays out in a division of labour, for instance the division between theoretical and empirical intellectual labour: "social scientists in the social science powers engaging in both theoretical as well as empirical research while their counterparts in the Third World do mainly empirical research" (Alatas 2003: 607).

Wöhrer (2016) and Garstenauer (2018) use Alatas' concepts and empirical findings to study Eastern Europe and gender studies, and the authors' empirical findings confirm the same asymmetrical dynamics concerning the determination of the research questions, applied theories and methods, and the dependencies and the division of labour between co-operating researchers.

Wöhrer confirms the peripheral position of the region in terms of knowledge production in gender studies. Central and Eastern European scholars and theories figure in zero to two per cent of the researched textbooks and encyclopedias in US and Germany and the studied international journals – even when they explicitly state that they invited "feminists from the globe" (Wöhrer 2016: 330) to contribute. She concludes: "I doubt that we have achieved multi-centrality. It is mainly theories and critique based and acknowledged in the USA that then travel to Germany, Slovakia or India via readers, textbooks and journals" (Wöhrer 2016: 338).

Besides the invisibility of CEE scholars and theories one can observe the import of theories too: both Westerners judge CEE circumstances and societies by their own tools while missing the context, and CEE scholars adopt theories that were developed in a Western context. Suchland observes that "application of Western feminist theory to the postcommunist context led to the false assumption that Eastern European women are 'backward, apolitical, full of apathy'" (Suchland 2011: 850). A striking example is the individualist focus on rights and wage labour as the road to emancipation. Several scholars problematize this conception in light of both the socialist past and the neoliberal capitalist present (Suchland 2011; Temkina/Zdravomyslova 2003). Another one is the power dynamics in play in receiving the theories of the Social Science Powers that are presented and understood as universal. While poststructuralism/deconstructivism as any other social theories are products of and conditioned by the material and geopolitical circumstances they were born in (Soiland 2017), they became markers of progress in gender studies. This strand has occupied a hegemonic position within gender studies in the West, while in CEE it is only an achievement of the past years (cf. Garstenauer 2018). The late or reluctant adherence to this theoretical approach is interpreted as essentialism or backwardness (Garstenauer 2018: 126).

In all studies researching gender studies from the 90s in the region the respondents highlight the significance of the aspect of the Western funding in shaping the topics, the methods, the modalities of the research, and the ways of the institutionalisation (Garstenauer 2018; Suchland 2011; Temkina/Zdravomyslova 2003). Zimmermann describes the institutionalization of gender studies throughout the region and succinctly states: gender and gender studies were "symbolic markers of compliant westernization" (Zimmermann 2007: 141), hence less a commitment to gaining more knowledge in the field of gender relations than to the values of liberal democracy and the ensuing social-economic order (Zimmermann 2007). Pető has also emphasized the importance of the

fact that "[g]ender as a category of analysis reached Central Europe together with the neoliberal market economy and Anglo-Saxon dominance in science after 1989" and "[t]he fact that gender studies was mostly embedded in the humanities and less in the social sciences contributed to the 'cultural turn' in Eastern European gender studies" (Pető 2019: 1536f.).

To conclude: The institutionalization and the past 30 years of gender studies in the region are embedded in a complicated power structure between the East and West. This power relation shaped theoretical approaches, research questions, interpretations, the relationship of science and society – all these might have influenced that gender studies could become one of the targets of anti-gender forces: presenting them as a Western import that has nothing to do with the societal circumstances of East-Central Europe.

Feminist and LGBT activism has developed similar patterns as gender studies in the region (Gregor/Grzebalska 2016). A critical assessment of the East-West power differentials of the past 30 years has been extensively elaborated by a wide range of scholars. I only highlight two structural aspects that are relevant for the questions of this paper and come up in various studies engaging with feminist and LGBT politics of the ECE countries.

The first is the question of funding that influenced agendas: Given the lack of state funding and a donation-ready middle-class, an important element to consider is the dependency of feminist and LGBT activism on donors, which Ghodsee has described as a major source of vulnerability and lack of legitimacy: "This dependence on external funders redirects accountability upward toward the aid giver and away from the aid recipients of the NGOs' so-called constituency" (Ghodsee 2004: 238). And funding came unsurprisingly also with expectations towards agendas too:

> "Accounts abound of Western INGOs, such as the Global Fund for Women, the Ford Foundation, and the Soros Foundation, imposing their agendas and ideologies on women in Eastern and Central Europe with little regard for local concerns and issues" (Guenther 2011: 872).

Second, the prospective and recent EU accession influenced the discursive opportunity structures for activists. Both feminists and LGBT activists have strategically framed their claims as necessarily European – binding their political claims to the perceived consensus of a European identity (Guenther 2011; Mészáros 2017; Valkovičová 2018), which – with a hindsight – has proven to be a double-edge sword. What seemed to be a good legitimacy strategy at times ("the West as the only logical point of reference for 'provincial' Eastern European feminisms" (Grabowska 2012: 392)), is now used by conservative and illiberal political forces region wide, denouncing EU and gender issues at the same time, along the lines: 'the EU is promoting LGBT/gender ideology'.

3 Conclusion: Resisting gender – Resisting West-Eurocentrism

The right-wing opposition to gender goes partly *beyond* women's and gays' rights and beyond the contents of gender. The Right proposes it as a projection screen for many other issues (Grzebalska/Kováts/Pető 2017) and it can do that because of the complex geopolitical space gender issues are embedded in and shaped by.

For the context of East-Central Europe, 'gender' symbolizes the hierarchical relationship between West and East. And the anti-gender illiberal forces can mobilize it, and frame it, because it taps into the lived experience of the unequal relations with the West, the popular frustration over EU-hierarchies, the structural and symbolic undervaluation of the East. While more empirical studies will be needed to test the concrete statements of this paper and to uncover these connections (like Rawłuszko 2019 and Valkovičová 2017), I contend: Gender symbolizes failures of the transformations, double standards, material experiences and the legitimate claim that not everything what comes from the West is desirable. Gender symbolizes that the EU is hierarchical and hypocritical.

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Author's details

Eszter Kováts, PhD student in political science at University ELTE, Budapest. Research focus: anti-gender movements, East-West inequalities, care crisis.
Email: kovats_eszter@yahoo.fr