

How to build a feminist Europe?



The challenges posed by the far right

in the wake of the European elections

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ORG

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Executive Summary

For several years, Equipop has been part of the collective action of feminist researchers and networks that document the strategies of anti-rights movements, and warn of their impact in France, Europe and around the world. In May 2024, a month before the European elections, the association published a report entitled "Quand l'extrême droite avance, les droits des femmes reculent". ("When the far right advances, womens' rights decline"). The aim: to raise awareness about the dangers of the far right, particularly for gender equality and women's fundamental rights, and to call on political parties and the media to take responsibility in stimulating public debate around these issues. Despite these warnings, **women's rights were virtually absent from the political debate, and the election results confirmed the analysis of many experts in civil society, academia and politics: far-right political parties made historic advances, particularly in Western Europe, including within the founding countries of the European Union.**

This new report aims to **identify levers for action to build a feminist Europe in the context of the rise of the far right.** It begins by taking stock of the post-election landscape in the EU, and analysing the political and electoral strategies of far-right parties, the media coverage of these elections, the composition of the new European Parliament and the new power relations at play within it. It then offers an in-depth analysis of the far-right parties themselves and highlights the dangers they represent, notably through their convergence around reactionary, racist and sexist ideologies. Finally, the report suggests ways forward for gender equality within the European Union by identifying the specific levers that must be used by progressive forces in the institutions and among the EU's elected representatives and decision-makers.

— The historic rise of the far right in the European Parliament and the challenges for womens' rights

As the 2024 elections came to a close, it was easy to think that the principal balance within the European Parliament had been preserved: the European People's Party and the Socialists and Democrats maintained their positions as the first and second largest political groups. However, **the reality is far more complex when these results are analysed in terms of women's rights and gender equality.**

Several political parties that are traditionally in favour of gender equality have lost a large number of seats in the European Parliament, notably the Greens and the centrist Renew Europe. The European People's Party, whose positions are often unfavourable to women's rights, remains the largest party in the parliament. **The far-right parties, which represent the main opposition to the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people, strengthened their presence and alliances.** A month after the results were announced, Jordan Bardella announced the creation of a new party with the misogynist and homophobic Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán. The Fratelli d'Italia party came first in the Italian elections, and its leader and President of the Italian Council of Ministers, Giorgia Meloni, is becoming

an increasingly influential member of the far-right European Conservatives and Reformists. Other far-right parties, founded only a few years ago, have also won their first seats, such as Eric Zemmour's Reconquête party in France. What this reconfiguration means for the parliament is a rightward shift. **In concrete terms, the right-wing and far-right political groups (European People's Party, European Conservatives and Reformists, Patriots for Europe, Europe of Sovereign Nations) can now form an absolute majority in the European Parliament on the issues that unite them, which notably includes anti-feminism.**

In addition to these gains within the European Parliament, it is important to note that the far right emerged victorious in five countries - France, Italy, Austria, Belgium and Hungary - and that political red lines were crossed. In France, Marine le Pen's far-right party and list leader Jordan Bardella won with a historic score. In the legislative campaign following the European elections, the leader of France's right-wing Les Républicains party, Eric Ciotti, formed an alliance with the Rassemblement National. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland recorded an unprecedented score. In the Netherlands, the far right came second, behind the Dutch Left Alliance list. Despite significantly lower scores in countries such as Spain, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, and a notable victory for the pro-Europe party in Poland, the far right clearly emerged stronger from these elections.

The stakes for women's rights are immense: what place will be given to funding for gender equality when the next European budget is negotiated? How will issues such as the inclusion of abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights be taken forward? How will the approach to legislating and political negotiation evolve? What effect will the far right have on the consensus-building required for Parliament to function? How will the EPP, whose numerical strength gives it a pivotal role in the Parliament, position itself in relation to the far right? Will the cordon sanitaire that has partially marginalised the far right in the European Parliament be maintained?

Finally, **the media coverage of these European elections was characterised in several countries by an overexposure of far-right parties and racist discourse.** A number of media outlets acted as sounding boards, helping to anchor issues traditionally favoured by the far right (security, immigration) in the public discourse, and adopting some of their rhetoric. These elections demonstrated a worrisome drift in the media landscape of several of the EU's founding countries, such as France and Italy, where the influence of the far right is increasingly felt in the editorial lines of the mainstream media.

As this report is being published, we may well even wonder how the fight for gender equality will continue. Ursula Von der Leyen's new European Commission begins its mandate without gender parity and without a Commissioner specifically dedicated to Equality, a post which has been abolished. In his inaugural speech to the new European Parliament, Viktor Orbán set the tone for the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, reiterating the primary characteristics of the European far right: nationalism, climate scepticism and opposition to immigration. The fact that the Hungarian leader, known for his openly misogynist and anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, attempted to link immigration to violence against women and homophobia in his speech says a lot about the weaponisation of these issues by the far right in Europe today. It is **a striking illustration of the extreme right's reappropriation and misappropriation of the feminist cause in the service of racist ends.**

— Amidst backlash against womens' rights, building a feminist Europe is still possible and more necessary than ever.

This rise of the far right is one of the manifestations of the ongoing backlash against the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people in Europe. Over the last ten years, civil society movements have made significant progress on issues such as the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, access to abortion and the adoption of feminist foreign policies. Unfortunately, conservative and anti-rights movements are organising to undermine this progress, maintain the patriarchal status quo and even roll back hard-won rights.

But this reactionary offensive is not unstoppable. Wherever it is on the march, feminist organisations and social and political movements are organising to resist it. In France, for example, a number of levers were activated during the recent parliamentary election campaign: feminist associations launched a major public mobilisation campaign under the slogan #AlertesFéministes; the independent media investigated far-right candidates; and political forces on the left, centre and, in part, the right, joined forces in the second round to form a "republican front" against the RN. These combined efforts helped to keep Jordan Bardella's far-right list out of power. In Slovenia, a feminist group launched the European citizens' initiative "My voice, my choice" to create "a financial mechanism to help EU Member States provide safe abortion to all those who do not have access to it" (the creators of the campaign estimate that lack of access affects more than 20 million women in Europe today).

Faced with the challenges posed by the rise of the far right, how can we build a feminist Europe? What are the possible avenues for progressive forces in the EU? What role can the media play in reducing far-right rhetoric in public discourse?

There are many **levers of action**. Equipop has identified around thirty, concentrated around five strategic axes:

- 1. Promoting a gender perspective in all of the European Commission portfolios**
- 2. Securing funding for gender equality**
- 3. Building upon the tools and progress of the European Union**
- 4. Maintaining a progressive European voice within multilateral bodies**
- 5. Changing how the European far right is treated in the media**

The first four levers of action concern **members of the European institutions, MEPs and the political decision-makers of EU Member States. All of these have a responsibility to promote European public policies that favour gender equality**, in accordance with the founding texts of the EU. The fifth lever concerns the **media, which has a responsibility to deconstruct the hate speech and disinformation of the far right, and to equip EU citizens** so that they can hold their elected representatives accountable for their commitments and obligations.

What do we mean by "far right"?

The far right is traditionally defined as the aggregate of political parties, organisations and media outlets that share a political agenda centred on the rejection of immigration, or even overt xenophobia; authoritarian domestic policies; and anti-establishment rhetoric hostile to traditional parties. In the view of Equipop and a number of feminist researchers and experts, there is also a profound anti-feminism and "anti-gender" agenda at work, which opposes the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people, and aims to maintain patriarchal gender norms.

Contents

Executive Summary..... 3

European elections: the historic rise of the far right in the media and the ballot box..... 7

- 1 Women's rights in the campaign: between absence and far-right weaponisation.....8
- 2 A media landscape that is drifting to the right and amplifying far right ideas.....10
- 3 The far right takeover of social media.....12
- 4 A European Parliament that is further to the right and further away from gender parity.....13

The far right in the European Parliament: an organised, misogynist and racist coalition..... 17

- 1 Europe's *cordon sanitaire* under threat.....18
- 2 A patriarchal and racist ideological foundation and a common agenda.....19
 - A strongly racist and anti-immigration orientation.....20
 - An anti-gender agenda opposed to sexual and reproductive health and rights.....21
 - Synthesis: femonationalism.....22
- 3 The far right unites to do its worst.....23

Avenues for advancing gender equality..... 25

- 1 Promoting a gender perspective in all the European Commission's portfolios.....26
- 2 Securing funding for gender equality.....28
- 3 Building upon European tools and advances.....29
- 4 Maintaining a progressive European voice within multilateral bodies.....32
- 5 Changing how the media treats the European far right.....33

Acronyms..... 35

Glossary..... 36

Footnotes and references..... 38

The European Elections: the historic rise of the far right in the media and the ballot box



1 Women's rights in the campaign: between absence and far-right weaponisation

To analyse the European election campaign, it has to be treated as 27 individual national elections. The dynamics of the campaign must be understood at the level of EU Member States. In many countries, the ballot was decided on national issues, and the elections were presented by opposition parties, particularly the far right, as a kind of referendum for or against the majorities in power. This enabled the far right to "capitalise" on the unpopularity of sitting governments and present itself as an alternative. Citizens' concerns about purchasing power, the impoverishment of the middle classes and the deterioration of public services were weaponised by the far right, through simplistic rhetoric and the identification of scapegoats. According to Jacob Ross, there is a correlation between the decline of public services and the popularity of the far right¹. This thesis has also been adopted by researcher Félicien Faury, who explains that "the far right puts the blame on social fraud and immigration for problems with our public services"².

This campaign was characterised by the almost total absence of women's rights. Not only was this subject not proactively defended by the more progressive parties, but on the rare occasions when women's rights were addressed, it was in the form of the far right's weaponisation, as part of its strategic targeting of immigration.

Thus, the campaign became marked by the omnipresence of the subject of immigration, and, more importantly, in terms defined by the far right. According to researcher Marie-Laure Basilien-Gainche, far-right parties insist on a narrative in which migrants are only ever figured as a "problem", and immigration is presented by governments and far-right parties as a danger to be controlled³. In the Netherlands, the far-right *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) focused on opposition to immigration and Islam, basing its platform on a drastic reduction in immigration and the exit of the Netherlands from the European Union ("*Nexit*").

Finally, this campaign was characterised by the almost total absence of women's rights. Not only was this subject not proactively defended by the more progressive parties, but on the rare occasions when women's rights were addressed, it was in the form of the far right's weaponisation, as part of its strategic targeting of immigration. In France, for example, the far-right leaders Marion Maréchal and Jordan Bardella presented immigration as one of the main threats to women's rights in France, accusing migrants of being primarily responsible for sexual and gender-based violence. Not only are these claims unfounded (in 91 percent of cases, the attacker is someone close to the victim, often a spouse or ex-spouse⁴), they are also especially dangerous because they imply that rapists have a "typical profile", a myth that feminists have been working to deconstruct for decades. Looking at sexual and gender-based violence solely through the prism of men's origins is not only profoundly racist, it also obscures the first common denominator of aggressors: they are above all, and overwhelmingly, men. It is therefore first and foremost male violence, made possible and tolerated by patriarchy and rape culture. By omitting this, the far-right parties are helping to exonerate all other men responsible for sexual and gender-based violence. These discourses are part of the reason why women's voices are still too often doubted and minimised when they lodge a complaint against a husband, father or neighbour who does not fit this profile of the imaginary "foreigner".

Three case studies: the electoral communications of the Rassemblement National (RN, France), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Germany) and Fratelli d'Italia (Italy)

A cursory analysis of the programmes of the RN, AfD and Fratelli d'Italia, the top three far-right parties in France, Germany and Italy respectively, reveals a number of ideological markers. Whatever tactics these parties use, however openly they oppose women's rights, it is important to understand that once in power, the far right always attacks women's rights and gender equality. This is true of Giorgia Meloni, whose party has passed several LGBT-phobic and anti-abortion measures since she came to power in 2022. And it is also true of the RN, AfD and Fratelli d'Italia MEPs, who systematically oppose or abstain when it comes to voting on texts relating to women's rights.

In Italy, Giorgia Meloni headed her Fratelli d'Italia party's list for the 2024 European elections. Capitalising on her popularity, Meloni won 29 percent of the vote and 24 seats in the new European Parliament⁵. Her party's programme emphasises pro-natalist measures, a characteristic element of far-right rhetoric. Proposals that are at least superficially interesting, such as establishing support funds for mothers in vulnerable situations, are in fact used as demographic instruments to deal with a supposed "civilisational decline" against which Europe must compensate. The programme relegates women to a procreative role, placing the national interest above their personal choices. The President of the Italian Council of Ministers defends a conservative vision of the family, while promoting an anti-abortion and anti-immigration agenda. In 2019, she introduced herself as follows: "I am Giorgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian", thereby deploying the cliché of the Italian mother figure in a speech about national identity⁶. In 2022, she expressed her wish to defend the freedom of women "to make another choice, if they don't want to have an abortion"⁷. In May 2024, her party proposed an amendment allowing anti-choice campaigners inside family planning centres⁸.

In Germany, the AfD programme has a very strong anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim component. On gender issues, it is close to Fratelli d'Italia. It places strong emphasis on the "traditional family structure" of one man and one woman (other family structures are tolerated but not considered equal). The AfD claims to defend gender equality, but its vision of equality only applies when men and women assume traditional gender roles. The AfD deploys the "right to life" in order to restrict the right to abortion, which the party believes should become an absolute exception. The AfD is also opposed to gender studies, which it describes as "pseudo science", and calls on the EU to "immediately stop promoting this ideology". With this position, the party is attempting to discredit a solid multidisciplinary field of research in the humanities and social sciences, which has largely proved its worth in the academic world.

In France, the RN used different tactics during the European election campaign and during the subsequent general election campaign. Jordan Bardella's European campaign was marked by the virtual absence of women's rights. In fact, the RN's programme for the European elections does not mention the word "women" once. At first glance, this may seem to confirm that the RN does not consider women's rights to be a political issue worthy of interest. But this omission is in fact part of a more pernicious strategy on the part of this far-right party, which does indeed have an anti-women's rights and anti-gender agenda, but which proceeds in masked fashion, as evidenced by the RN's systematic opposition and abstentions on texts relating to women's rights in the European Parliament⁹. During the French legislative elections in July 2024, Jordan Bardella, president of the Rassemblement national party and aspiring prime minister, adopted a different electoral strategy. In a video intended "for all the women of France", he declared that "in France, women are free and will remain so", and

declared himself in favour of the "fundamental right to control one's own body". He also tried to link immigration with insecurity and violence against women by stating that he would regain "control of migration policy" in France by deporting foreign delinquents and criminals, and that he would increase penalties for violence against women, in the name of "the freedom of every woman to move freely in the public space". This strategy is doubly dangerous: as well as being racist, it weaponises a legitimate feminist struggle, without providing any sincere or credible solution, given that the vast majority of perpetrators of violence are relatives of the victims.

2 A media landscape that is shifting to the right and amplifying far-right ideas

To understand the results of the European elections, it is also important to analyse how the media help to put far-right discourse on the agenda, and how they help to marginalise feminist issues.

On the first point, the presence of the far right in the media is nothing new. Depending on the country, it is the result of different factors and takes different forms. In Hungary, for example, it is the result of a policy of media control by the country's leader Viktor Orbán. The Hungarian leader himself deploys the concept of "illiberal democracy", as a means to dissociate political liberalism, which he rejects, from democracy. Since his return to power in 2010, Orbán has constantly undermined media pluralism and independence, turning public broadcasting into a propaganda tool. According to Reporters Without Borders, "thanks to political and economic manoeuvres and the buyout of media outlets by oligarchs with close ties to Fidesz, the ruling party, the latter now controls 80 percent of the country's media."¹⁰

In Italy, press freedom and media independence are also under pressure, as highlighted by the Council of Europe's annual report on the rule of law, and even more so with far-right leader Giorgia Meloni in power. Journalists expressed their alarm, for example, after the Italian parliament's supervisory committee for Rai (the main public broadcasting group) approved a measure authorising Rai's news channel to broadcast political rallies in their entirety and without any journalistic mediation in the run-up to the elections at the beginning of June¹¹.

In a separate context, France stands out from other European democracies "for the mediocrity of its media system and the comfortable position of the extreme right within the country's mass media", according to the Free Press Fund. It therefore merits a more in-depth analysis in this report. A number of factors come into play, such as media concentration, the precarious status of journalists, legal attacks on independent media and the protection of sources, as well as uncertainties surrounding the funding of public broadcasting. France is "unique in that 90 percent of national daily newspapers (meaning the percentage of overall audience share) and all private television channels are now owned by seven major industrialists and financiers whose interests lie outside the news business"¹². Among these, Vincent Bolloré is pursuing a strategy that is emblematic of the excesses of the French media landscape: buying up major media outlets, pushing out and firing journalists, and adopting an editorial line that meets a number of far-right criteria, all in the service of a "fight for civilisation" that the billionaire intends to wage¹³. Several outlets owned by the Bolloré Group regularly broadcast openly

misogynist, anti-feminist and racist discourse, and fail to meet their obligations to pluralism. Following an appeal by Reporters Sans Frontières, Bolloré's CNews channel was warned by Arcom (the French audiovisual and digital communications regulator) in July 2024 that its subjects were being "treated in a univocal manner, with divergent points of view being only occasional"¹⁴.

The normalisation of far-right ideas can also be seen in the more general-interest media outlets, including public broadcasting, which tend not to be identified as reactionary. As Pauline Perrenot, co-host of the media watchdog Acrimed, points out in an interview with La Déferlante, "there is no watertight seal between far-right media and the rest of the media landscape". This is borne out by the work of sociologist Abdellali Hajjat, who has highlighted the strong presence of journalists and columnists from Valeurs Actuelles (a prominent right-wing publication) as guests on general-interest broadcasts.

Jordan Bardella's refusal to debate Marine Tondelier, spokesperson for the Nouveau Front Populaire, and the way in which this refusal was handled by BFM TV, is also in some ways symptomatic of the influence exerted by the far right on the media landscape. During the campaign for the French parliamentary elections in June 2024, a debate between the first and second rounds was to be held on BFM TV, bringing together the representatives of the three leading political forces: Prime Minister Gabriel Attal (for the presidential majority), RN president Jordan Bardella (for the RN), and Marine Tondelier, national secretary of Europe Écologie Les Verts (for the left-wing Nouveau Front Populaire coalition). However, Jordan Bardella decided he would only participate if the 24-hour news channel replaced Tondelier with Jean-Luc Mélenchon as the representative of the Nouveau Front Populaire. Bardella's decision was denounced by a group of feminists who, in addition to suspecting misogyny, saw it as a tactic to avoid a confrontation with Marine Tondelier, elected to the municipal council of a town controlled by the RN¹⁵. In the end, BFM TV abandoned the debate, partly giving in to the demands of the RN candidate, and opted for a format of three one-hour interviews with each of the original figures.

As a corollary of this rightward drift of the media landscape, issues relating to gender equality and women's rights were virtually absent from the European election campaign. In France, for example, during the ten debates broadcast between 14 March and 4 June 2024 on the various French television and radio channels, not a single question was asked about women's rights¹⁶.

On the rare occasions when gender inequality was discussed in the media, it was weaponised by far-right candidates such as Marion Maréchal and Jordan Bardella, who linked the issue of violence against women to their anti-immigration programme. Several media outlets played into the hands of the far right: in France, broadcasters and outlets such as *CNews*, *BFM TV*, *Europe 1* and *Valeurs Actuelles* gave special coverage to assaults, offences or crimes perpetrated by people with migrant backgrounds, providing information on their status (for example, whether they were under an obligation to leave the country), thereby ignoring the Council of Europe's January 2024 resolution calling on the media to be particularly vigilant on the issue of migration during election periods¹⁷. On 8 March 2024, on the occasion of International Women's Day, and in the middle of the European election campaign, a letter entitled "Touche pas à ma fille" (Hands off my daughter) signed by 1,000 women, including Marion Maréchal, was published by *Le Journal du Dimanche* (*JDD*), owned by Vincent Bolloré. In the letter, the signatories

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criticize non-European immigration for threatening the safety of French women. Apart from xenophobically weaponising the fight to stop violence against women, this rhetoric also abused a well-known anti-racist slogan: "Touche pas à mon pote" (Hands off my mate).

3 The far right takeover of social media

While all the European political parties took their campaign to social media for the 2024 European elections, the example of the far right is particularly striking. In an article published in June 2023, *Le Monde* revealed that the French delegation of the European Parliament's ID group (now split into two groups, Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations) paid more than €600,000 in public money since 2019 to sponsor its publications on Facebook¹⁸.

The presence of the ID group on TikTok is striking. According to a study by Politico, the far-right group stands out for its reach, number of likes and activity¹⁹. Combined, these MEPs are the most followed political group on the platform, just ahead of The Left²⁰. To attract the TikTok electorate, the MEPs in the ID group adopt the codes of the platform's influencers, using music, memes and sharing aspects of the daily life of an MEP, often perceived as inaccessible to the general public, while avoiding explicitly political content. Jordan Bardella, for example, has 2 million subscribers on TikTok. Bardella's lightning-fast rise to TikTok stardom even raised questions about the possible use of bots (there was no firm confirmation based on the available information). The strategy here is to raise his profile by appearing friendly and accessible. A study conducted in 2021²¹ by American researchers Diana Zulli and Terri L. Towner revealed that showing themselves to be "authentic and sincere" in everyday situations helps politicians to convey the message "look, I'm just like you"²². The aim of this increased presence on TikTok is to reach relatively "apolitical" audiences, a favourite target of the far right, in order to bring in a new generation of young voters²³. Marie Neihouser, a lecturer at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, shows that the absence of political content in Jordan Bardella's videos is intended to dissociate his image from that of the Rassemblement National and make it less threatening²⁴. However, these techniques do not always translate into votes, especially given that many of Jordan Bardella's subscribers are still too young to vote.

In Slovakia, the populist ruling party SMER-SD promoted candidate Erik Kaliňák by adopting strategies similar to those used for Jordan Bardella. With nearly 61,000 subscribers and more than a million "likes" on his videos, Kaliňák was able to capture attention and position his party ahead of opposing parties on the platform²⁵. The party came 2nd in the European elections in Slovakia, with 24.76 percent of the votes cast.

In Germany, a similar trend can be observed, with the AfD being the most successful German party in terms of attention and reach on social media, particularly with their short videos on TikTok²⁶. In the run-up to the European elections specifically, dozens of videos were uploaded by AfD social media accounts, members of parliament and civil servants, mainly targeting the younger generation²⁷. The accounts of Maximilian Krah, now a member of the European Parliament, attracted the most attention, with a substantial increase in the number of followers. In the run-up to the European elections, Krah used his social-media platforms to give so-called relationship advice to young men, declaring: "Don't let anyone tell you that you have to be nice, sweet, weak and left-wing! Real men are right-wing! Real men have ideals! Real men are patriots! Once you are like this, you'll have a girlfriend too!" The video has been viewed 1.4 million times²⁸. Krah's social-media strategy consists of offering pseudo-advice on dating and male-female relationships, mixed with extreme right-wing messages. He

encourages young men to adopt the stereotypical image of the "strong man". The video content often depicts strenuous outdoor activities and promotes a return to traditional "masculine" values, accompanied by an anti-establishment message. This porosity between far-right ideology and masculinism has been documented in a [report](#) by Equipop and the IGG published in 2023²⁹.

The X platform, another major social network, has become an instrument of the European and global far right. Since he bought Twitter, Elon Musk has stepped up his efforts to intimidate progressive voices on the platform (by exposing them to violence or firing moderation teams), to sideline the media and discredit ethical journalistic practices (by refusing all interaction with the media), and to favour far-right ideas and leaders (by clearly siding with the Italian far-right on immigration issues, for example). Recently, Musk took things a step further by applauding Argentina's populist leader Javier Milei for his stewardship of the country, and openly declaring his support for Donald Trump. At the end of October, the Tesla and SpaceX boss announced that he would be giving away a million dollars a day to a randomly selected voter, provided he or she was registered to vote in one of the seven key swing states. The prize was awarded in exchange for signing a conservative petition in favour of the right to bear arms and "freedom of expression", a principle that Musk regularly hijacks to limit the regulation of hateful content on his social-media platform³⁰.

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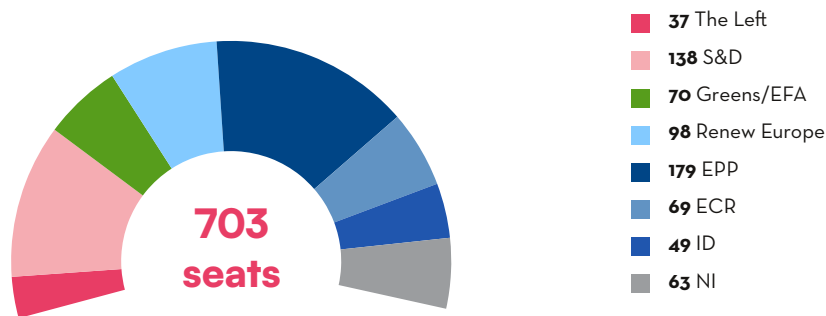
4 A European Parliament that is further to the right and further away from gender parity

One of the main outcomes of the most recent European elections is the rise of the far right in EU Member States, especially in the founding Member States, which are also the most populous. In the European Parliament, this is reflected in a notable shift to the right. Much of the post-election analysis has played down this rise, with the support of two main arguments: firstly, that the parliament's balance of forces has not been fundamentally upset, with the EPP maintaining its position as the leading European party; secondly, that the European far right is too divided and fragmented to speak with a strong, unified voice within the hemicycle. By analysing the results not only at European level, but also at national level, and by analysing the far-right parties' gender agenda, Equipop draws different, more worrying conclusions.

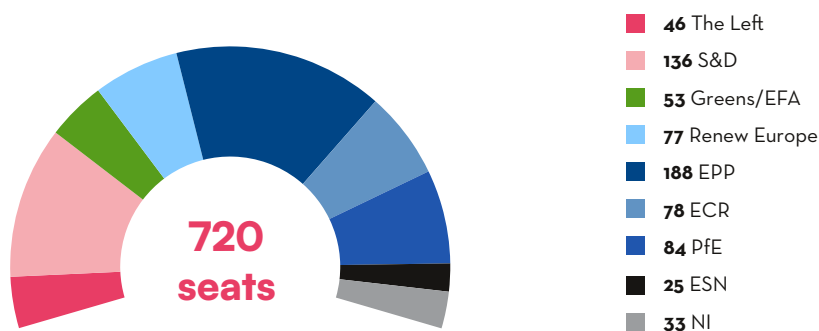
The European People's Party (EPP) came out on top in the elections with 188 MEPs, maintaining its position as the largest European political party. It is followed by the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) with 136 MEPs. In this sense, the Parliament's two main political groups remain relatively stable. On the other hand, there have

been significant changes in the other groups, which are likely to alter the balance in the Parliament. Renew Europe, which includes the Renaissance group in France, is the party that has seen the biggest decline, with 77 MEPs after the 2024 elections, compared with 98 in the outgoing Parliament³¹. The Greens fell sharply, with 53 MEPs, 17 fewer than after the previous election³². The radical left, meanwhile, has seen its contingent swell, with 9 more MEPs joining its ranks .

— European Parliament 2019-2024 (Outgoing Parliament)



— European Parliament 2024-2029 (Constitutive Session)



Source: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/fr/resultats-des-elections/2024-2029/>, visited on 4 November 4th 2024

In addition, a new left-wing alliance is also being formed in the European Parliament: The European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet (ELA), which brings together La France Insoumise (France), Podemos (Spain), Bloco de Esquerda (Portugal), Enhedslisten (the Danish Red-Green Alliance) Vasemmistoliitto (Finnish Left Alliance) and Vänsterpartiet (Swedish Left Party)³³. The alliance's stated aim is to reshape the European left and strengthen the fight against the far right by uniting the feminist and green parties of the left. It is also the result of a split with the Party of the European Left (PEL): La France Insoumise (LFI) and its allies are creating a separate structure, breaking away from a transnational party that has historically been dominated by traditional communist parties³⁴. It is still too early to assess the effect of this split, and of this new, relatively informal alliance³⁵.

One of the main results of these European elections is the rise of the far right in the Member States, particularly the founding Member States, which are also the most populous. In the European Parliament, this is reflected in a shift to the right.

It is to the right of the EPP that we see the greatest reconfiguration. The ECR group gained 9 more seats, bringing the total to 78 MEPs. Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Giorgia Meloni's party, and the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) are the major forces in this group, which now leads Renew by one seat. The ID group has disappeared and two new groups have been formed in its place. Firstly, the Patriots for Europe (PFE) group, chaired by Jordan Bardella and Viktor Orbán, has 84 seats (including 30 RN seats), and has become the third largest political group in the Parliament. Secondly, the Europe of Sovereign Nations group (ESN), which has 25 seats, including 14 held by the German AfD³⁶. These MEPs, particularly those from the PFE and ESN groups, were elected on the basis of deeply Eurosceptic discourse and programmes. While it may seem paradoxical, it is in fact a deliberate strategy on the part of the far right to destroy the European project from within. Even more hypocritical is the fact that the RN is the political party that is sending France's largest contingent of elected representatives to the parliament, at a time when Marine Le Pen and her party are implicated in two cases of suspected misappropriation of European public funds³⁷.

The far right therefore holds 187 seats out of 720. This means that the right-wing and far-right political groups (EPP, ECR, PFE, ESN) can now form an absolute majority in the European Parliament, and all the more easily if they manage to obtain the votes of the 33 unaffiliated MEPs, who are traditionally close to the far right.

These gains in the European Parliament are made possible by particularly high scores in a large number of EU countries, where the far right emerged stronger from the elections. The far right came out on top in five countries: France, Italy, Austria, Belgium and Hungary. It came second in Germany, with the AfD receiving over 15 percent of the vote.

In Spain and Nordic countries such as Finland, Sweden and Denmark, the far right fared much worse. The defeat of the far-right Sverigedemokraterna (SD) party in Sweden was especially striking. Although the far right has governed in coalition there since the 2022 general election, the Sweden Democrats came fourth with 13 percent of the votes³⁸ cast at the European elections, allowing them to retain just 3 seats, while the left-wing Socialdemokraterna (S) party took first place with 24 percent of the vote. In Denmark, the Social Democrats also came out on top, with 17 percent of the vote³⁹, ahead of the country's far-right parties. In less spectacular fashion, the far-right PVV, a member of the Netherlands' governing coalition, was beaten by a coalition of the Labour Party and the Green Left. Finally, in Poland, Donald Tusk's pro-European party (a member of the EPP), in power since December 2023, came out on top for the first time in a decade, and ended a series of eight consecutive victories by Jaroslaw Kaczynski's nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS), which had held power between 2015 and 2023. PiS came second by just one point, dropping from 26 seats in 2019 to 20 seats in 2024⁴⁰.

The new European Parliament is also moving further away from gender parity. This is despite the fact that such parity is a democratic imperative, and that the equal participation of women and men in politics is enshrined in European treaties and laws. In the outgoing Parliament, 277 of the 719 MEPs were women (39 percent)⁴¹. Although the proportion of women has only fallen by one point, this is in fact the first decline in parity after a steady

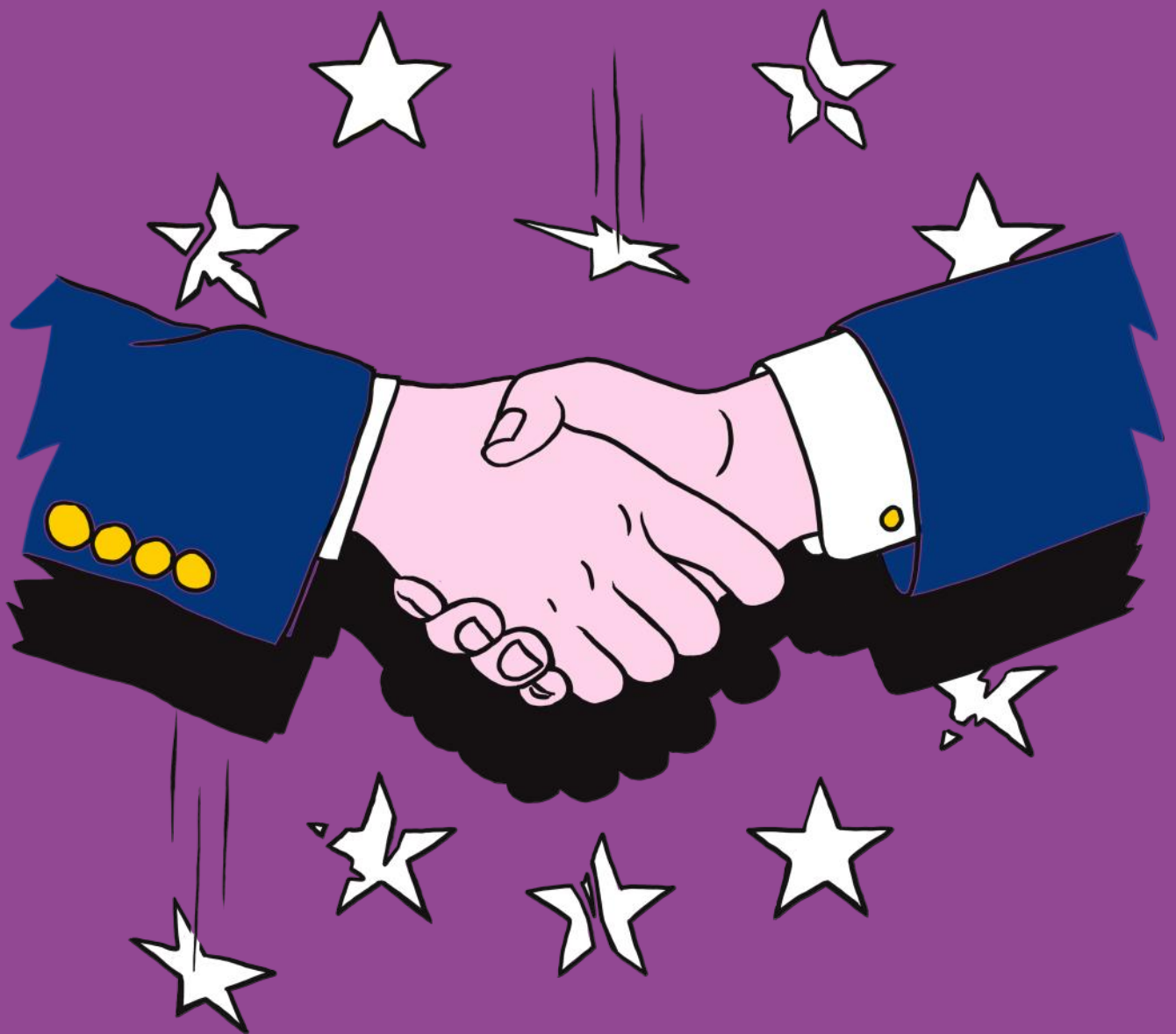
increase since 1979⁴². The Green group retains its position as the only gender-balanced group, with 50 percent of its members being women, followed by the S&D group with 42 percent female MEPs. In the Renew group, the proportion of women is 44 percent, with 34 women to 43 men. As for the EPP, 37 percent of its representatives are women. The ECR group, which had a woman at the top of its list, has seen its proportion of women MEPs fall from 30 percent in the previous legislature to less than 22 percent in 2024, with only 17 women MEPs⁴³. The ESN group has 32% women among its members, with 8 women and 17 men. The new far-right Patriots for Europe group, led by Jordan Bardella, has a ratio in line with the Parliament's average, with 40 percent women. Whichever way you look at these figures, one thing is certain: having a woman at the top of the list or increasing the proportion of female representatives does not mean that the far right will be more supportive of gender equality. It is clear that far-right parties will undermine the progress made in these areas. Debates and proposed legislation to promote gender equality will be hotly contested. Moreover, given the close links between masculinist, anti-feminist movements and the far right⁴⁴, an increased presence of MEPs promoting these ideas is likely to exacerbate the setback to women's rights, threatening both gender parity and the integration of equality into public policy.

Another illustration of the political parties' lack of willpower concerning gender parity: according to *Euractiv*, Manfred Weber, President of the EPP, lobbied to obtain a derogation from the Parliament's rules of procedure on gender equality in the context of parliamentary committee chairmanship. "According to one witness, this derogation was adopted without any majority opposing it"⁴⁵.

In conclusion, although the far right did not exactly win the European elections, given that the EPP and S&D remain the two leading political forces, it did emerge with more power. At the national level, the far right largely dominated the campaigns in terms of both framing and media coverage. It gained significant leverage, as demonstrated by the reshuffling of French politics, whereby the new government can only hold together if Marine Le Pen's party does not censure it. Secondly, the far right has risen sharply in the founding countries of the EU, which are also those with the most weight, numerically and diplomatically, in the European Parliament. In the European Parliament, far-right parties have a strong capacity to unite on specific issues, particularly in opposition to women's rights and gender equality. Their weight in both European and national bodies gives them a powerful influence over the EPP and poses a direct threat to the Parliament's traditional *cordon sanitaire*.

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|| The far right in the European Parliament: an organised, misogynist and racist coalition



1 Europe's *cordon sanitaire* under threat

The *cordon sanitaire* traditionally maintained by the main forces of the left, centre and conservative right against the far right is now in danger. A number of dynamics are at work: at the national level, the far right is gaining ground and has established itself as one of the main "opposition" forces in several countries. In some cases it is even participating in government coalitions, giving it significant influence over governments and leaders. As a result, the conservative right is tending more and more to adopt the rhetoric and positions of the far right, as is the case in France, where Les Républicains (LR) have in recent years taken a very conservative turn on gender and immigration issues. This is also the case in Germany, where representatives of the right wing of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) have joined forces with the AfD to form a network working towards so-called "remigration", i.e. the expulsion of more than 2 million people of foreign origin from the country⁴⁶. Their clandestine meeting, condemned by Olaf Sholz, led to the secession of this WerteUnion (Values Union) from the CDU. At the national level, the leader of the CDU and candidate for the Chancellorship, Friedrich Merz, announced in 2021: "With me, there will be a *cordon sanitaire* against the AfD"⁴⁷. This is still the case today⁴⁸, but in view of the AfD's electoral results in local and Länder elections, there are nevertheless debates within CDU federations, particularly in the former East Germany, on the definition of the *cordon sanitaire*: does it mean never voting with AfD or refusing to work with the party ?

In the European Parliament, the far right is increasingly influential and has managed to overcome the risk of fragmentation by creating alliances within the new PFE and ESN groups. In addition, the ECR group continues to evade the *cordon sanitaire*, despite the fact that it harbours far-right parties opposed to women's rights and gender equality. It has also won appointments to strategic parliamentary committees, including the chairmanship of the parliamentary budget committee. Within groups traditionally supportive of women's rights, the logic of the *cordon sanitaire* also appears to be losing its grip. For example, contrary to what was announced by leaders of the centrist Renew before the European elections, the majority of the group decided not to sanction its Dutch member VVD, even though it is now part of the governing coalition in the Netherlands alongside Geert Wilders' far-right PVV party.

In this reconfigured landscape, the EPP plays a central role as the majority group in the Parliament. Given the compromises that the European hemicycle imposes on MEPs, the EPP's position on gender issues has always been ambiguous. It is a highly heterogeneous group, which regularly abstains or even opposes texts on women's rights and gender equality. For example, the majority of the EPP opposed the inclusion of the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁴⁹. Thus, alliances of circumstance and conviction with the far-right parliamentary groups cannot be ruled out.

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Despite the EPP's announcements in July, these alliances have already begun to take shape. When Parliament resumed in September 2024, the EPP signed a joint motion for a resolution with the CRE and PFE on Venezuela. The same form of alliance led to the adoption of an amendment to a resolution on the European budget (with no legislative value) which called on the EU to finance the construction of walls on its external borders in order to "protect" them from immigration⁵⁰. This clearly shows that the EPP can very easily favour an alliance with the far right instead of seeking difficult compromises with the centre and left of the European Parliament.

Finally, the *cordon sanitaire* is not applied with the same rigour in the European Council and the Council of the European Union. Within these institutions, where Member States are represented by their governments, the far right can exert influence at national level. The PFE group, for example, is in power in Hungary via *Fidesz* and now in the Netherlands, where the PVV is the largest party in the coalition. Three other PFE parties – *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), *Akce nespokojených občanů* (ANO) and Vox – also aspire to become governing parties after the next national elections. The growing influence of these far-right parties could help Viktor Orbán emerge from isolation within the European institutions.

2 A patriarchal and racist ideological foundation and a common agenda

The European far right is often presented as a fragmented political movement whose internal divisions limit its capacity to cause harm, particularly in the European Parliament. For Equipop and many other experts and organisations concerned with gender, this lack of cohesion must be put into perspective and, above all, must not lead to a minimisation of the danger represented by the arrival of an unprecedented number of far-right MEPs in Brussels. The various far-right parties represented in the Parliament do indeed have differences of opinion on important economic and geopolitical issues, such as Russia and support for Ukraine. But these parties comfortably agree on the most retrograde positions on immigration, women's rights and LGBTQIA+ people.

It is not the intention of this report to identify the differences between variations of the far right. Rather, this report highlights the danger posed by these movements, emphasising their unity around reactionary ideologies. Whatever their nuances may be, all of the European far-right parties share a deeply conservative and reactionary common agenda.

It is not the intention of this report to identify the differences between the different variations of the far right. Rather, this report highlights the danger posed by these movements, emphasising their unity around reactionary ideologies. Whatever their nuances may be, all of the European far-right parties share a deeply conservative and reactionary common agenda, based on a traditional and rigid vision of the family, an absolute rejection of

immigration, and a systematic opposition to any progress on gender equality and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. As the Equipop report published in May 2024 explains, "in far-right discourses and policies, women's rights always lose. They are alternately ignored, insidiously called into question, or openly attacked. The rest of the time, women's rights are weaponised to the benefit of a pro-natalist, xenophobic and anti-immigration agenda"⁵¹. This is the ideological foundation that unites them in their obstruction of social progress and individual freedoms.

— A strongly racist and anti-immigration orientation

One of the main shared features of European far-right parties is the profoundly racist dimension of their discourse, their political programmes and, more generally, their vision of society. According to Nicolas Lebourg, a historian specialising in the far right, all these movements share a growing obsession with ethnicity. This is manifested in a racist conspiracy theory commonly referred to as the "Great Replacement", according to which immigration has created a new demographic order in which white European populations will become a minority. The far right's Europe-wide plan is to expel men, women and children of foreign origin from Europe⁵². For example, Marine Le Pen's programme for the 2022 presidential elections was centred on themes such as calling into question the right to acquire the French citizenship by virtue of birth in France, a strict immigration policy with the introduction of a "double border"⁵³, restrictions on access to certain jobs for people with dual nationality, a strong emphasis on national identity and a lack of meaningful social reforms. In Germany, the AfD presents migration and globalisation as phenomena that would threaten "European civilisation". Additionally, in a reversal of values that is in line with its racist project, the European far right is weaponising the Israel-Palestinian conflict in order to construct an image and narrative that is supposedly in favour of the rights of Jewish people.

Attempts to "normalise" the far right have been underway in several European countries for several years. In France, for example, the RN has been seeking to distance itself from its far-right label. In March 2024, Jordan Bardella and Marine Le Pen appealed to the French Conseil d'Etat, the highest administrative court, to reassess the RN's status as a far-right party, only for the Conseil d'Etat to decide and reaffirm that the RN is indeed a far-right party⁵⁴.

However, behind this attempt to change the framing of the far right, the ideas have lost none of their brutality. In an interview for an Arte documentary in 2024, Björn Höcke, a key figure in the AfD, expressed his admiration for a speech by Viktor Orbán and the fact that Hungary had blocked 270,000 "illegal" migrants⁵⁵. In Belgium, the far-right Flemish party Vlaams Blok, renamed Vlaams Belang following a court conviction for racism⁵⁶, has not changed its stripes. The party continues to openly promote xenophobia. According to the same Arte documentary, although Vlaams Belang is not directly involved in violence as a party, some of its supporters or activists do have links with groups that engage in violence.

A number of investigations and studies have documented more or less direct links between several far-right parties and identitarian, fascist-inspired and violent groups⁵⁷. The latter are founded on racist, conspiratorial and masculinist concepts inspired by American white supremacist movements⁵⁸. They are often fragmented, ranging from revolutionary nationalists to neo-Nazis. These groups are gaining in terms of organisation⁵⁹, have strong roots in the European Union, and represent a danger to racial minorities, women and LGBTQIA+ people.

The reappropriation of dangerous concepts and reactionary, xenophobic and sexist ideologies by far-right movements is not limited to mere rhetoric: it leads directly to violence. In Germany, according to domestic intelligence, acts of racist violence peaked in 2015, with an increase of over 30 percent in racist and far-right crimes compared to the previous year,

and a 42 percent rise in assaults⁶⁰. In a UN-CTED (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate) report published in April 2020, the UN warns of an explosion in far-right⁶¹ terrorist attacks between 2019 and 2024.

— An anti-gender agenda opposed to sexual and reproductive health and rights

In Europe and around the world, the far right is one of the main players in the "backlash" against women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality. Far-right political parties and figures are in certain ways the institutional manifestation of this "backlash", which was analysed by Equipop and the Jean Jaurès Foundation in the 2023 report "**Women's rights: fighting the backlash**".

The control of bodies and sexuality is at the heart of the far right's political agenda. Beyond the issues of abortion and the control of women's bodies, far-right parties and their allies oppose the rights of anyone who does not fit the heteronormative, cisgender model. Their attacks take a variety of forms, within a continuum of sexual and institutional violence: systematic reduction of women's bodies to their reproductive function, denial of trans identities and criminalisation of the sexuality of homosexuals.

In the European Parliament, this "backlash" is particularly evident in the votes cast by MEPs from far-right political parties, which are the main forces opposing women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights. Far-right MEPs systematically oppose, or abstain from, votes on texts concerning women's rights and gender equality. They deploy a number of arguments to justify their positions, such as the European Union's principle of subsidiarity, or that of national sovereignty, but these do not stand up to careful analysis of their votes.

The ECR group's 2024 program for the European elections is an eloquent example of far-right rhetoric on women's rights. In the "Family and Life" section of its website, one can read that the party opposes gender studies, calling it "gender ideology", in an attempt to discredit this field of social science. The group claims to "defend life, from conception to its natural end", in line with the rhetoric of anti-choice religious movements. Finally, the party states that "we want to defend women against any form of manipulation. We want women to be free to seek fulfilment of their aspirations, according to their own desires and their own nature. This includes respecting motherhood. Only this gives women true dignity. At the same time, we want to return the value of the role of men, including their fatherhood." In other words, if CRE members promotes the idea of independent women making their own decisions, it is only insofar as motherhood and traditional female roles are the correct path to be taken.

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— Synthesis: femonationalism

While misogyny and anti-feminism are inherent to far-right ideology, in recent years there has been a shift in rhetoric. The new strategy, embodied by a number of European far-right figures, particularly women, consists in weaponising women's rights and feminism. The aim is not only to "normalise" the far right, historically led by men, through the prominence of female party leaders such as Marine le Pen in France, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Alice Weidel in Germany or Sylvi Listhaug in Norway; but also to advance the racist agenda of these parties, by presenting immigration as a danger to white European women. This synthesis of sexism and racism is also present in the notion of a so-called "great replacement", which, in addition to being profoundly racist, connects to a patriarchal vision of society, reducing women to a reproductive role and reducing their bodies to instruments at the service of a white nation that must be repopulated.

This weaponisation is regularly documented and denounced by researchers such as Nonna Mayer and feminist media outlets such as *La Déferlante*, who are doing essential work in deconstructing far-right discourse. According to sociologist Nonna Mayer, feminisation plays a crucial role in the normalisation of far-right ideas. Giorgia Meloni in particular is banking on "maternal politics", emphasising her role as a mother and the importance of the family. For Meloni, as for Marine Le Pen, the promotion of a "feminine identity" is part of the far right's respectibilisation strategy⁶². Emphasising "this femininity or maternity, whether real or symbolic, enables far-right parties to obscure their macho approach to power, as well as their often violent histories"⁶³. In reality, however, most positions of responsibility in these parties are still held by men. What's more, behind the traditional family values promoted by political figures such as Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán, who subscribe to the model of the nuclear family⁶⁴, lie deeply reactionary ideas, particularly on issues of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. These leaders have expressed vehement opposition to sexual and reproductive rights, such as abortion, and to marriage for same-sex couples.

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This strategy has been analysed and conceptualised by researcher Sara R. Farris through the term "femonationalism", which describes the weaponisation of feminism for racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic electoral purposes. This strategy is particularly visible in the discourse of politicians such as Marion Maréchal, who systematically links sexual and gender-based violence with immigration. Farris describes this phenomenon as a "process of culturalisation of violence" that propagates the erroneous idea that "sexism, like LGBT-phobia, is thus the sole responsibility of Muslim men"⁶⁵. Not only is this view false, it also obscures a broader reality: there is no reliable profile for abusers. Sexual and gender-based

violence is systemic, perpetrated by men from all walks of life and all social categories, and a comprehensive response from public authorities is essential. In an interview with Gendercover, Farris argues that France presents the most striking case of femonationalism in Europe⁶⁶. Indeed, Marine Le Pen claims to be a defender of women's rights, in a bid to make her party more acceptable and to attract more female voters.

Such discourse is also adopted by identitarian feminist collectives such as Nemesis and the Antigones. According to an analysis by Magali Della Sudda, a researcher at CNRS, these groups were created as a response to gender equality policies and/or feminist groups. For example, the Antigones collective was set up in opposition to the Femen movement in 2013, while the Caryatides was formed to reject justice minister Christiane Taubira's bill to allow same-sex couples to marry. These nationalist and identitarian women have organised and carried out publicity stunts, as in 2019 when the Nemesis collective gatecrashed a demonstration organised by the feminist collective #NousToutes, brandishing placards targeting people of foreign origin⁶⁷. Femonationalists exploit violence against women and seize on the tragedy of femicide to spread their xenophobic and racist discourse. Such politicisations illustrate how the far right has managed to make femicides invisible, turning them into a symbol of so-called "foreign violence".

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3 The far right unites to do its worst

Europe's far-right parties all share an anti-gender agenda, around which they forge alliances, within Parliament but also in more or less formal networks, summits and think tanks, in Europe and across the Atlantic. A number of far-right figures are involved in anti-rights movements, which bring together politicians, anti-choice civil society organisations and religious fundamentalist organisations opposed to women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality. This is the case, for example, with the "Agenda Europe" network and its manifesto, "Restoring the Natural Order", which is deeply rooted in anti-gender and xenophobic rhetoric. The Italian presidency of the G7 this year also saw the emergence of new anti-gender groups, including the the "Family 7" group, which brings together Catholic family associations opposed to sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. The final communiqué adopted at the summit that was chaired by Giorgia Meloni makes no mention of sexual and reproductive rights.

Viktor Orbán is a central figure in these reactionary alliances. The Hungarian leader has, for example, organised the "Demographic Summits" in Budapest since 2015, which bring together Europe's far right and ultraconservative leaders. Orbán is also strengthening ties with Donald Trump and the most right-wing fringe of the Republican Party. In April 2024, he hosted the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, bringing together

a number of leading figures from the Trumpist ultraconservative right and the European far right, with the slogan "no to wokism, no to gender ideology and migration"⁶⁸. Just a few days after the start of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2024, Viktor Orbán met Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. These politically oriented choices, which run counter to the EU's foreign policy line, illustrate the Hungarian leader's desire to bring together Europe's far right and the heads of ultraconservative and authoritarian states.

||| Avenues for advancing gender equality



Against this backdrop of the far right's ascendancy, progressive forces in all the European institutions and EU Member States must act both to mobilise allies at their respective levels (within the Parliament, the Commission, the Council of the EU, etc.), and to ensure that the European project is neither abandoned nor hijacked.

1 Promoting a gender perspective in all the European Commission portfolios

The new European Commission, chaired by Ursula Von der Leyen, has a particularly important role to play in defining the direction of the EU and ensuring that its fundamental values, particularly that of equality, are respected. However, its composition is cause for concern for the place that women's rights and gender equality will occupy in this legislature. Firstly, its composition does not fulfil gender parity, even though this principle is enshrined in several EU texts, including Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, and the Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025. Despite the pressure exerted by Von der Leyen on the Member States, only 40 percent of the new Commission's members are women (compared with 22 percent in the Member States' initial proposals). Many Member States, including France, clearly preferred to nominate only one male candidate rather than submit a pair of candidates that included a woman. This lack of parity is only partly compensated for by the appointment of four women to the six Vice-Presidencies of the European Commission.

Secondly, the majority of the new Commission's members come from conservative, right-wing parties that have traditionally held positions unfavourable to women's rights. Of its 27 members, 12 are affiliated with the conservative European People's Party (EPP). One commissioner belongs to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and five are classified as independents. Five commissioners are members of liberal parties associated with Renew Europe, and four are associated with the Party of European Socialists (PES).

The European Commission's new portfolios also reveal a political agenda that has little to do with human rights, giving priority to the EU's economic objectives, competitiveness and geopolitical interests. The approach to gender equality must be both specific and mainstream. On the first point, the absence of a Commission dedicated to equality is a major step backwards compared to the previous mandate. On the second point, an analysis of the "key" portfolios, and even more importantly the mission statements of the commissioners, reveals a failure to integrate gender across all sectors.

The first notable change is the unceremonious disappearance of the Commissioner for Equality, previously held by Commissioner Helena Dalli. This decision is a worrying signal of the new Commission's deprioritisation of this issue. Hadja Lahbib, Belgium's new commissioner-designate, will be responsible for Humanitarian Aid, Crisis Preparedness and Management, Civil Protection, and Equality. While there are links between gender inequality and crisis situations, these only cover part of the problem. The risk is that gender equality will disappear or be relegated to humanitarian issues. The Belgian commissioner's mission statement mentions the renewal of the Gender Equality Strategy, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, and other European strategies to combat discrimination and promote equality (the Anti-racism Action Plan, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, etc.), and announces a new roadmap for women's rights. These points will need to be monitored closely.

As far as the Commission's other portfolios are concerned, gender issues are generally absent or poorly integrated. The Hungarian commissioner Olivér Várhelyi has been appointed to Health and Animal Welfare. As a member of Viktor Orbán's party, it is certain that he will be opposed to any approach that includes gender and sexual and reproductive health. This is all

the more worrying given that he will be responsible for implementing the EU's Global Health strategy. Moreover, his mission statement makes no mention of gender inequalities as determinants of health, or sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). More broadly, it makes no mention of sexual health, sexually transmitted diseases or HIV prevention.

Another important portfolio for women's rights is that of the commissioner for Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law. Although the mission statement calls on Commissioner Michael McGrath to intensify engagement with civil society, it makes no mention of gender. This is despite the fact that feminist advocacy is crucial to a country's democratic vitality, and feminists have often been at the forefront of defending human rights and preserving the rule of law, as was the case with the feminist strikes in Poland, for example.

Finally, in terms of EU foreign policy, two portfolios that have a particularly strong connection to women's rights make virtually no reference to them. The first is the "international partnerships" directorate, which focuses on trade, the EU's competitiveness and its economic and geopolitical interests. Commissioner Jozef Sikela's mission statement mentions Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and the importance of gender equality, but it leaves no room for civil society, and human development issues are absent. Finally, the roadmap for Kaja Kallas, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, does not provide any information on what the EU intends to do in its foreign policy to promote women's rights. This is problematic for several reasons, not least because her position makes her jointly responsible for implementing GAP III and because she will have to play a coordinating role between the various European foreign affairs ministries to define the EU's position. It is therefore essential that she take a clear stance to promote gender equality.

Levers for action

- **Make gender equality a non-negotiable issue** within the EU, in line with the various European treaties which have consecrated equality as a founding value of the EU⁶⁹ and because it is a key component of rule of law.
- **Integrate a gender perspective across all sectors**, within the portfolios of all the commissioners, and ensure that all the human and financial means are made available to it in each commission.
- **Ensure that mission statements which include gender objectives are, at the very least, respected by their respective commissioners.**
- **Pay special attention to the protection and promotion of human rights, especially sexual health and reproductive rights**, which are the most contested (abortion rights, sex education, LGBTQIA+ rights).

2 Securing funding for gender equality

The MEPs of this mandate assume their responsibilities right when negotiations begin on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF). Given the dynamics at national level and the new composition of the European Parliament, funding for women's rights, both within the EU and internationally, is far from a foregone conclusion.

At the national level, several EU countries that are traditionally major donors of international aid are now making deep cuts to their official development assistance budgets. This is particularly true of Sweden, Germany, France and the Netherlands. A few years ago, these four EU Member States spearheaded Europe's feminist foreign policies. Although the mobilisation of civil society, in France especially, has made it possible to safeguard some of the funding earmarked for feminist organisations and those focused on gender, these cuts have inevitably harmed the overall budgetary effort for gender equality. In the Netherlands, these cuts are the direct result of the coalition of the right and far right that is in power. The current Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Aid, Reinette Klever, who had previously proposed the complete abolition of the development cooperation budget, is now charged with cutting the original €3.9 billion planned for 2024 by 2.5 billion⁷⁰.

At the EU Parliament level, the strong presence of the far right and the possibility of a convergence with the conservative right of the EPP on issues of official development assistance are a threat to funding for gender equality and feminist associations, at a time when the EU has set itself ambitious objectives in this area in its foreign policy.

The existing networks of organisations with expertise in gender funding, particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights, which document the EU's commitments and expenditures, are crucial allies during these budgetary periods. (For example: **IPPF** and the **Countdown 2030 Europe** consortium, of which Equipop is a member.

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Levers for action

- **Increase funds allocated to feminist organisations and movements in the EU and abroad.** In particular, bilateral official development assistance allocated to women's rights organisations and feminist movements should be significantly increased.
- **Adopt a gender-budgeting approach** as part of the next MFF cycle in order to analyse the differentiated impact of public budget expenditure and revenue on women and men and ensure that gender is integrated transversally and specifically in all relevant budgets and programmes. (For example, include gender budget lines in the CERV, EU4Health, EU Social Fund and NDICI programmes).
- **Radically transform funding practices for associations, particularly feminist ones, notably by streamlining administrative procedures** to make European funding more accessible to new feminist associations; and by **fostering a culture of trust in EU administrations towards civil-society organisations** that defend human rights and feminist perspectives. This could involve the creation of support funds dedicated to feminist associations, along the lines of what exists in the Netherlands (Leading from the South) and France (Support Fund for Feminist Organisations).
- **Ensure the implementation of policy and budgetary measures to strengthen the protection of women human-rights defenders**, especially feminist activists who are at higher risk of repression and violence.
- **Make every effort to achieve the current NDICI targets for gender equality and human development, and renew them in the next MFF.**
- **Increase funding dedicated to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including through funding to UN agencies such as UNFPA as well as European initiatives such as the Team Europe initiative for SRHR in sub-Saharan Africa**, in line with the commitments made by the EU in this area.
- **In the case of EU Member States that are part of the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus (FFP+) coalition, mobilise internal stakeholders, other states, donors and UN agencies to increase the total funds available for feminist movements and women's rights organisations and funds.**

3 Building upon the tools and progress of the European Union

Over the years, the EU has adopted a number of texts and tools to advance women's rights and gender equality. Among the most notable are the Gender Equality strategy (2020-2025), Gender Action Plan III (adopted in 2020 and due to be extended until 2028), accession to the Istanbul Convention (2023) and the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (2024). These texts have led to a number of significant advances in gender equality within the EU Member States, via domestic policies, and at the international level, via EU external actions.

The **Gender Equality Strategy** (2020-2025) lays a number of important foundations for the defence of women's rights and the promotion of gender equality within the EU. These include the fight against stereotypes and gender-based violence, equal pay and equal political participation. The strategy explicitly identifies inequality between women and men as a "global problem" to be tackled as a "central objective of the EU's external action". It also stresses the importance of cohesion and mutual reinforcement between the EU's internal and external action in this field. In practical terms, this means supporting progressive public

policies within the EU and around the world, in particular by strengthening transnational feminist solidarity, and funding feminist associations both within the EU and internationally.

The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence is the first EU directive on violence. The text does not include rape, as there was no consensus between the European Parliament and the Council of the EU on a definition at community level. The directive requires Member States to conduct awareness-raising campaigns on consent, and criminalises a number of acts in a harmonised way across the EU. These include cyberbullying, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and sterilisation, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, a phenomenon recently highlighted by the issue of revenge porn. As for victim protection, the text will establish free legal and social assistance, as well as a helpline available 24/7 in all EU Member States.

On 1 June 2023, the Council of the European Union approved the EU's accession to the **Istanbul Convention**. Despite the limited scope of this accession, it is a historic step forward and an important lever for improving current provisions at the European level and in individual Member States to combat gender-based and sexual violence. It also encourages the remaining EU Member States that have not yet ratified the Convention to do so. The EU is now bound by ambitious standards by which to prevent and combat gender-based violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation and forced marriage. The Convention also includes measures to protect women migrants and asylum seekers.

The Gender Action Plan (GAP III) adopted in 2020 is the European Union's flagship tool for integrating gender into its foreign policy. It strengthens collaboration with civil society organisations. Calling on the EU to "lead by example", GAP III makes ambitious commitments such as increasing funding for women's rights organisations and feminist movements. More specifically, it sets several targets for the EU, which includes ensuring that 85 percent of all new EU actions must be gender-sensitive or gender-targeted (gender marker G1) by 2025.

The GAP III evaluation report published by CONCORD Europe in 2023⁷¹ highlights a number of limitations. These include the lack of human resources, the difficulty of applying an intersectional and transformative gender approach, and the low budgetary prioritisation of gender-equality issues. Regarding the latter point, direct support to women's rights organizations and gender equality institutions represents less than 0.5% of EU total Official Development Assistance focusing on gender equality, according to OECD⁷². Furthermore, GAP III has not won unanimous political support from the European institutions. While the Parliament has welcomed GAP III and passed resolutions to strengthen its evaluation and implementation, the same cannot be said of the Council of the EU. The Council was unable to reach a consensus on the text due to the refusal of Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland to endorse it. These political stumbling blocks show that the mainstreaming of gender in European policy is far from a foregone conclusion.

Other texts that are less specifically dedicated to women's rights and gender equality, but which nevertheless have a significant impact on these issues, have also been adopted recently. One example is the **Digital Services Act** (DSA). This legislation is aimed at digital service providers, particularly Big Tech companies. It requires such companies to set up a system for reporting problematic content and to act "promptly" to remove any illegal content or prevent access to it as soon as they become aware of it. It is this text specifically that now obliges platforms such as X to publish transparency reports on the resources devoted to moderating illegal, hateful or fraudulent content. The resignation of Thierry Breton, the former European Commissioner and initiator of the DSA, against a backdrop of clear disagreement with Ursula Von der Leyen⁷³, suggests the need for redoubled vigilance in the coming months and years to ensure that this issue is not de-prioritised by the EU. Thierry Breton took an extremely proactive approach to these issues, and it is important that the European Commission does not waver, and that it ensures that the texts voted by the EU are implemented.

In a 2023 report⁷⁴, Equipop and the IGG analysed sexist and LGBT-phobic violence online, and listed a number of recommendations for the European Union that reinforce or complement the DSA. In particular, they include a section on prevention, which involves, for example, ensuring universal access to comprehensive sexuality education and digital-literacy lessons for all.

Levers for action

- **Ensure the participation of women's organisations in the implementation, evaluation and design and/or renewal of gender equality strategies** (Gender Equality Strategy, GAP III) in particular, and strengthen such participation in other areas of EU activity. This must be designed in such a way as to enable genuine co-construction with activists and experts (financial compensation, interpretation, incorporating feedback and provide reasons when it is not), in all their diversity (international solidarity associations, local associations in the Global South, local European associations), and paying particular attention to the inclusion of associations with intersectional approaches and expertise (rights of women living with disabilities, rights of migrant women, LGBTQIA+ people, etc.). See also the recommendations on this topic from the [Walking the Talk](#) consortium, of which Equipop is a member.
- **Add ambitious new commitments to the Gender Equality Strategy 2025-2030**, including sexual and reproductive health and rights. Provide substantial human and financial resources and a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating progress. (Example: exchange of best practices, and publication of European Commission recommendations on comprehensive sexuality education).
- **Implement the Istanbul Convention and the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence**, including its preventive aspect, in particular by allocating the necessary resources to provide comprehensive sexuality education and support for victims of gender-based and sexual violence.
- **Support and follow through on feminist initiatives that favour gender equality**. For example, if the "My voice, my choice" initiative is accepted, take immediate steps to create and fund a European mechanism to guarantee access to safe abortion throughout the EU.
- **As requested by the European Parliament, initiate work on the inclusion of SRHR in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**.
- **Keep up the pressure on Big Tech** to apply the provisions of the DSA and the Directive against gender-based violence, especially when it comes to combating gender-based violence online.
- **Ensure that the EU's international solidarity policy remains aligned with sustainable development goals**, the fight against poverty and the reduction of inequality, in accordance with the EU Treaties and the European Consensus on Development.

4 Maintaining a progressive European voice within multilateral bodies

In multilateral bodies, the European Union traditionally acts as a progressive voice on women's rights and gender equality. As a European entity, and through the individual voices of its Member States, the EU carries weight on the international stage, and has significant diplomatic leverage to promote women's rights.

It is important to maintain this progressive European voice and to ensure that the rise of the far right within the Member States does not lead to a shrinking of the EU's ambition on women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. The Commission on the Status of Women, the World Health Assembly and the Human Rights Council are all forums where anti-rights movements are increasingly active, and where the European Union needs to redouble its efforts to advance a feminist agenda. This agenda must be consistently promoted by the EU in all multilateral bodies and in all contexts, with no economic or geopolitical interests taking precedence over human rights.

Speaking with a progressive and coherent voice is all the more necessary in view of the US presidential election results. Donald Trump's re-election will have devastating consequences for sexual and reproductive rights and gender equality, both in the United States and internationally. During his first term in office, Donald Trump attacked essential provisions for contraceptive coverage, equal pay, the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, and legal protections for LGBTQIA+ people. He reinstated the Global Gag Rule, which suspends US funding for access to abortion abroad. Trump's second term in office will take an even harder line, with a strong likelihood that his administration will implement "Project 2025"⁷⁵.

This ultraconservative project aims to tighten anti-gender laws and undermine sexual and reproductive rights. Presented as a roadmap, it sets out a series of policy recommendations that go far beyond restricting abortion, including limiting access to contraception. If implemented, this project will have consequences for maternal health and gender equality more broadly. Its authors plan to redefine human rights in an ultraconservative direction, deviating from the standards established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions. They also advocate a US withdrawal from international organisations and traditional diplomatic alliances. In practical terms, this would lead the United States, which is currently the largest donor of official development assistance, to drastically cut its funding for gender equality and healthcare access. To give just one example: according to a report by the Swedish association RFSU¹, US government funding currently accounts for 74 percent of all government funding allocated to the fight against HIV worldwide.

Levers for action

- Put an end to double standards in EU diplomacy and that of certain Member States, and adopt a coherent gender perspective in all sections of the EU's external action.
- Increase EU funding to multilateral funds for gender equality (UN Women) and sexual and reproductive health and rights (UNFPA, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria).
- Advocate at the European level for gender mainstreaming in multilateral policy and strategy frameworks, and provide increased financial resources for this purpose, with particular attention paid to gender-based violence (Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; WHO; UNESCO; etc.).
- Strengthen dialogue with feminist associations and movements in order to co-construct the EU's positions in multilateral bodies, particularly with a view to CSW70 and Beijing+30 in 2025 and the milestones that will follow as part of the post-2030 Agenda.
- Rethink EU-US bilateral relations in light of the results of Donald Trump's re-election, particularly in the context of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which has identified strengthening cooperation with the United States as one of its priorities.
- Strengthen and multiply bonds and alliances between EU and like-minded States, in order to maintain a strong European ambition for gender equality and not dilute the EU's positions in UN proceedings, including on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Maintain and extend the current dynamics around the development of feminist foreign policy within the Member States, support the adoption of an EU feminist foreign policy, and strengthen the financial and human resources dedicated to it. For example, increase resources for the systematic training of EU diplomats on gender issues and feminist perspectives.

5 Changing how the media treats the European far right

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Some outlets, straying from any ethics and hijacking the notion of journalistic neutrality, serve as relays for the spread of far-right ideas. The rise of the far right on a global scale has been facilitated by the disproportionate coverage of its views by certain media outlets. This exposure has helped to normalise and legitimise ideas that are a threat to human rights and gender equality.

The media can also play a decisive role in the fight against the far right by exposing its excesses, deconstructing its misogynist, racist and LGBTQIA+-phobic populist rhetoric, and informing the public about the risk to democracy posed by discriminatory ideologies.

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The recent French election campaign demonstrated the importance of feminist movements and politically-committed media outlets (especially the independent and regional daily press) in alerting the general public to the dangers of the far right and encouraging social mobilisation. The combined efforts of civil society and these media outlets undoubtedly had an impact on the outcome of the July 2024 general election, and helped avoid a far-right majority. It can and must also help to build a discourse and society founded on equality and solidarity. Other media outlets, such as the French-speaking branch of Belgium's RTBF, have applied a political and mediatic cordon sanitaire by banning the live presence of far-right guests on public television broadcasts since 1992, and they are sticking to this policy. With the rise of the far right, action is required at several levels: at the level of journalistic practices, by promoting ethical journalism that does not contribute to the reinforcement of conservatism and discrimination; and at the political level, by repairing a malfunctioning media system in several European countries in order to guarantee press freedom and media pluralism.

Levers for action

- **Systematically integrate gender equality issues into media coverage of European issues** (e.g. how is gender taken into account in the policy on Ukraine? At climate conferences?).
- **Produce, publish and relay analyses and decodings of the far right in the European Parliament:** analyse how MEPs vote; document the links between far-right politicians; generalise fact-checking practices to uncover the disinformation used by the far right, deconstruct its discourse and systematically remind people of the racist and sexist social project pursued by the far right, which is often disguised; generalise investigative practices on masculinist, anti-gender and anti-immigration groups and their discourse.
- **Regularly question political parties and leaders about their actions on gender equality** and remind them of their commitments in this area.
- **Implement the European Media Freedom Act** to better protect European media and journalists from political and economic pressure.
- **Strengthen the protection of journalists within the EU and internationally**, paying particular attention to women and racial-minority journalists, who are at the intersection of several forms of violence and discrimination.
- **Create action networks that bring together journalists, experts, associations and feminist activists** to identify and encourage good journalistic practice that does not reinforce conservatism, and to devise collective strategies to combat the trivialisation of extreme right-wing ideas in public debate.
- **Avoid reinforcing sexist stereotypes** (do not caricature female politicians or subordinate female journalists and experts; do not systematically assign the analysis of certain subjects considered "masculine" to men, such as defence or artificial intelligence; refer to websites such as [expertes.fr](https://www.expertes.fr) to encourage the participation of female experts); give a voice to women and LGBTQIA+ people, particularly those from marginalised groups.

Acronyms

- Acrimed:** Action critique Médias
- AfD:** Alternative für Deutschland, far-right German political party
- AFD:** Agence Française de développement (French Development Agency)
- ANO:** Akce nespokojených občanů/Yes (Czech Republic)
- CSE:** Comprehensive Sexuality Education
- ECR:** European Conservatives and Reformists Group
- EPP:** European Popular Party
- ESN:** Europe of Sovereign Nations
- FPÖ:** Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/Freedom Party of Austria
- Greens/EFA:** The Greens and European Free Alliance
- GUE/NGL or The Left:** Left-wing political group in the European Parliament
- ID:** Identity and Democracy group
- IGG:** Gender in Geopolitics Institute
- LGBTQIA+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual +
- NDICI:** Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
- ODA:** Official Development Assistance
- PfE:** Patriots for Europe
- PVV:** Partij voor de Vrijheid/Party for Freedom, far-right political party in the Netherlands
- S&D:** The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
- SRHR:** Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- VVD:** Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie/People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Netherlands)

Glossary

Backlash: The term "backlash" – first theorised by the American journalist Susan Faludi – is commonly used to describe the action of conservative and masculinist movements that react violently whenever women's rights are further advanced. They deploy strategies not only to undermine these advances, but also to roll back women's rights more broadly. (Source: Equipop, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, "Droits des femmes: combattre le 'backlash'; Recommandations pour la politique étrangère de la France", p.4, January 2023, available at: https://equipop.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Equipop_Backlash_english_.pdf)

Cordon sanitaire: A practice designed to exclude far-right parties from decision-making and positions of power within the European Union.

Femonationalism: The term "femonationalism" was conceptualised by researcher Sara R. Farris. It is a contraction of "feminist and femocratic nationalism", which refers to the weaponisation of feminist struggles and violence against women for racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic electoral purposes. (Source : Arlette Gautier, Article de revue: "Sara R. Farris, Au nom des femmes. "Fémonationalisme". Les instrumentalisation racistes du féminisme". Syllepse, coll. Nouvelles questions féministes, 2021, available at: <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-travail-genre-et-societes-2024-1-page-187?lang=fr>)

Front républicain: A political alliance between the French political parties known as the "Republican arc", created in order to block the far right from holding mandates and decision-making positions. It was deployed in June 2024, for example, when the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP), the outgoing presidential majority and part of the Republican right came together in the second round of elections to present single candidates against the RN and organise a "Republican Front".

Gender Action Plan: (GAP III) adopted in 2020 is the European Union's flagship tool for integrating gender into its foreign policy. It strengthens collaboration with civil society organisations, which have deemed it an improvement on prior action plans.

MFF: The Long-term Budget or Multiannual Financial Framework. Each year a European budget is adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. This sets out a framework for managing the European Union's finances in line with EU policy priorities (gender equality, environment, health, etc.). (Source: Council of the European Union, The EU's long-term budget, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-long-term-budget/#what>)

Principle of subsidiarity: A key concept in the European Union that determines which level of authority is the most appropriate to take a given decision. Under the principle of subsidiarity, the European Union takes decisions only if it is more appropriate to do so at the European level than at the national, regional or local level. In other words, the lower decision-making level is favoured as long as it acts more effectively. The aim is to implement European policies as closely as possible to the citizen. (Source : Toute l'Europe, Principe de subsidiarité, August 2023, accessible via: <https://www.touteurope.eu/le-glossaire-de-l-europe/principe-de-subsidiarite/>)

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Equipop is a feminist organization dedicated to a world where all human beings, regardless of their sex and gender, have their rights respected, including their sexual and reproductive rights. To bring this vision to life, Equipop combines social and political mobilization with financial and technical support for partner organizations and feminist activists. To strengthen its advocacy efforts, Equipop regularly publishes reports and joins the collective action of researchers documenting the strategies of anti-rights movements. As a member of several networks (Countdown 2030 Europe, Walking the Talk, AWID), Equipop actively participates in feminist movements and mobilizations at the French, European, and global levels.

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