

The Istanbul Convention, Gender Politics and Beyond: Poland and Turkey

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FOREWORD

Hafiza Merkezi Berlin (HMB) was founded within a global context of rising authoritarian governments, increasing nationalism, racism, anti-gender politics/discourse and right-wing extremist movements. This increasingly alarming trend of the erosion of the rule of law and a setback in human rights of all kinds at a global scale is accompanied by the criminalization of different political and social movements and the targeting of human rights defenders and activists.

HMB was established with the aim to fight this global trend in alliance with other international actors, with the goal of fostering change at a global level. We wanted to engage more directly with the international human rights system, grapple with the common human rights issues in different countries and build bridges between different countries, groups and activists through internationalization, knowledge production and civil engagement.

To this end, we started our first activities in the summer of 2020. Within our first year, we focused on capacity building activities for international advocacy and workshops, where civil society actors from Turkey, Poland and Hungary came together.

In our first meeting with feminist and LGBTI+ organizations from Turkey and Poland, we, among other topics, highlighted the rise in anti-gender politics and the tangible effects of this rise on the safety and lives of women and the LGBTI+ community and their respective political movements in both countries. At the time of the exchange, a pressing topic in Poland was the changes in abortion rights and the complete de facto ban on abortions in the country. The civic uprising and international solidarity that ensued in October 2020 after the announcement of the constitutional court ruling have been reported all around the world. The final implementation of the new law in January 2021 can now be seen as a foreboding of the infringement on women's rights that were made possible by the strengthened anti-gender narratives influencing policy worldwide.

Women's and LGBTI+ rights in Turkey suffered a massive hit, when, on the 20th of March 2021, the President declared the country's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. This decision is detrimental to the safety of women,

especially in a country where gender-based violence is rising steadily and the structures protecting women in need are already diminishing. Unsurprisingly, the justification for the withdrawal shows parallels to the anti-gender rhetoric that could be observed in Poland. While a large part of the statement of the Turkish government includes scapegoating the LGBTI+ community, the need to restore “traditional” family values is cited as a primary reason of the decision. Considering that anti-gender policies gaining power in both countries, close attention should be paid to potential spillovers of the Turkish government’s action.

These developments and their predecessors had convinced us to talk about contexts of both countries and beyond, with a transnational approach. We, at Hafiza Merkezi Berlin know that women and LGBTI+ organizations all around the world are already fighting against these threats. We believe that their transnational solidarity will make them even stronger and that is why we hope to support actors from both countries by facilitating their exchange in different forms. We appreciate the contribution of all the participants of our workshop and Cemre Baytok for her facilitation and drafting this report. We hope this report will provide information that can turn into knowledge and finally into power to resistance against the pushback of progress and protect women’s and LGBTI+ rights, and thus the foundation of the civil society, political movements, and equality under attack.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey and Poland have recently come to the fore in European politics and attracted international attention with their striking parallels in terms of authoritarian, populist, and undemocratic regimes. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland have adopted similar policies targeting the rights of minorities and women, fostering religious and conservative values, attacking the media, and discrediting the rule of law. Both countries also share a tradition of strong women's movements taking to the streets to protest government measures that disadvantage women.

This report will first provide a comprehensive mapping of the political landscape surrounding women's rights in both countries with an emphasis on current issues and secondly explore women's struggles and mobilization in response to the backlash in order to identify common strategies for civil society actors. The Istanbul Convention, male violence, abortion, religion, pro-family policies, anti-LGBTI+ politics are inevitably some of the main themes occupying the political agenda in recent years and therefore comprise the main body of this report. Following that, the report underlines how feminist and LGBTI+ organizations immediately respond to challenges, both on the streets, and through lobbying and forming international alliances. The last section of the report highlights commonalities between the struggles as well as differences, making certain suggestions for ways forward and articulating possible recommendations in a conclusion. The data informing this report has been drawn from a workshop by Hafiza Merkezi Berlin held in December 2020. The workshop brought together feminist and LGBTI+ activists from Poland and Turkey in an online setting. Additionally, the report is informed by a partial survey of media outlets to complement the workshop findings and incorporate recent developments.

THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION AND MALE VIOLENCE: HISTORY AND CURRENT STRUGGLES

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, was opened for signature on May 11, 2011, in Istanbul as the first legally binding international set of principles on the issue. The Convention was a product of the necessity for “comprehensive standards to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence”.¹ It first and foremost assigns responsibility to and requires a commitment from states in combating violence, which it takes a thorough perspective on with its emphasis on preventive as well as punitive mechanisms. In March 2012, Turkey became the first country to ratify the Convention and put it into force in 2014.² The entire procedure was completed under the AKP's rule. Poland signed the Convention in 2012, and ratified and put it into force in 2015. The convention was ratified just a few months before the PiS came to power.

The Convention was a positive measure, especially in Turkey where the rate of women's killings by men has been significantly high³ and feminist activists have long criticized the government

1 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/historical-background>

2 <https://en.catlakzemin.com/1-august-2014-istanbul-convention-entered-into-force/>

3 The Ministry of Justice declared that women's killings had increased 1400 percent between 2002 and 2009. See: <https://bianet.org/english/gender/132753-number-of-women-murders-increased-by-1400-percent>. No reliable official data has been made available since then. For a news portal's monthly tally of killings, see: <https://bianet.org/konu/male-violence-monitoring-report>

for not taking steps to prevent and appropriately punish male violence. A new national law, Law no. 6284, which is the most comprehensive law up to date on preventing domestic violence, was introduced in 2014 in accordance with the Convention. This was also a step forward in terms of holding state officials accountable to their duties with regards to violence, i.e., the police force and courts were actively required to take immediate action in preventing and punishing violence. The government introduced education and training materials especially for students but also for officers in state institutions with the aim of achieving gender equality, as the Convention called on the state as well as civil society actors to work towards this goal. In Poland, higher legislative standards regarding the crime of rape, as well as restraining orders, and a comprehensive definition of violence were brought onto the agenda (mostly by opposition parties) in light of the Convention. The Convention also served to raise community awareness on the issue in both countries, especially during periods when it came under attack by the Catholic Church (Poland), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Turkey), and various conservative groups.

According to the GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence)⁴ report monitoring the implementation of the Convention⁵, Turkey mainly falls short in upholding and promoting gender equality as the core principle for combating violence, in recognizing and eradicating intersectional discrimination (e.g. when it comes to women with disabilities, Kurds, immigrants, LGBTI+ facing male violence), as well as fulfilling the state's obligations to preserve women's safety and thus combat gender-based violence in an effective manner. In its shadow report⁶, the Istanbul Convention Monitoring Platform (comprising 81 women's and LGBTI+ organizations) declares that the government's approach to violence does not involve a gender sensitive perspective, which acknowledges that the source of the problem is gender inequality, and that this gives rise to various shortcomings in the implementation of the Convention and results in the recurring victimization of those who have already been subjected to violence.

It has been announced that the GREVIO report on Poland is to be published in the upcoming months in 2021, yet both the Polish state and NGOs have already submitted their reports and shadow reports on the implementation of the Convention to GREVIO in 2020. The Association for Legal Intervention's report⁷ states that the state fails to protect migrant women and asylum seekers who are subjected to violence as required in the Convention and instead enhances family-oriented regulations in the prevention of violence. Amnesty International's report⁸, on the other hand, emphasizes that economic violence goes largely unrecognized falling at odds with the inclusive definition of domestic violence in the Convention. It also adds that the laws on rape are not in compliance with the Convention and that protective measures and support services are lacking, which in turn leads to further violence for victims. The Polish government has also submitted its report to GREVIO, as a result of which experts conclude that a systematic gender sensitive approach to violence is non-existent and that the official strategy is family mainstreaming rather than recognizing and adequately addressing the gendered dimension of violence.⁹ In addition to the shortcomings in its implementation, these countries have also, at times, directly contravened the principles of the Convention. A significant example is Turkey's introduction of family mediation in legal disputes in 2012 despite the Convention's ban on mandatory mediation in cases of violence.

4 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio>

5 <https://rm.coe.int/eng-grevio-report-turquie/16808e5283>

6 <https://rm.coe.int/turkey-shadow-report-2/16807441a1>

7 <https://rm.coe.int/alternative-report-stambul-convention-association-for-legal-interventi/16809f8d9a>

8 <https://rm.coe.int/poland-shadow-report-amnesty-international-grevio/16809efdd1>

9 <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2021-posts/2021/2/16/implementation-of-the-istanbul-convention-in-the-shadow-of-populism-the-case-of-poland-6y6x3>

One of the major targets of the attacks against the Convention is the term “gender” itself – which gained popularity in the 1990s and became an important political and academic concept afterwards, but started facing increasing pushback across the world in the 2010s. This is not a matter of contention in these two countries alone, but echoes in similar concerns raised in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe following the global trend of backlash against gender equality and feminism. Anti-gender movements, influenced especially by the Catholic Church in Europe, argue that what they call “gender ideology” threatens “traditional” societal values, targets the family and causes moral deterioration. The Church wields immense power over government in Poland, and the government both backs and is backed by conservative groups such as Ordo Iuris, a far-right legal think tank. The definition of gender states that roles and attributes associated with the sexes are socially constructed and so may be transformed in order to achieve equality, which is precisely what the Church opposes. The Church argues that challenging gender norms and roles, in other words striving to eliminate the inequalities among different gender identities, undermines its understanding of biology and thus promotes LGBTI+ identities – an argument that has culminated in the creation of the term “LGBT ideology”. The same essentialist interpretation of biology manifests itself in claiming control over women’s bodies as well, relegating women to a reproductive role as defined within the family, thus condemning the right to abortion and putting the heterosexual family unit based on procreation above every other choice and different way of life. This “ideology” card is therefore also played when abortion and reproductive rights are in concern, inextricably interlinking abortion, LGBTI+ rights and the Istanbul Convention. Another way in which conservatives claim the Convention threatens traditions and customs is through its recommendations to include gender equality in school curricula and prepare training materials to this end. In this line of argument, education on gender is also considered a promotion of “LGBT ideology”.

While these points are repeated profusely, violence, which is the main focus of the Convention, is only ever mentioned when the government and conservative groups, such as Ordo Iuris, claim that the reasons for domestic violence are “pathological”, i.e., pornography, alcohol, the commodification of women, social atomization, and the breakdown of the family, slamming the Convention for not addressing these issues.¹⁰ In Turkey, a similar argument holds that the way to eradicate domestic violence is to unify the family and reduce divorce rates instead of imposing so-called Western standards of life. Both governments argue that their domestic law is sufficient and comprehensive enough to combat violence.

In July 2020, Poland’s Minister for Justice announced that the government had started taking steps to withdraw from the Convention and initiated diplomatic action for the adoption of an international treaty for “protecting the rights of families” to replace the Istanbul Convention – seeking, in other words, to replace gender mainstreaming with family mainstreaming¹¹. The government declared that it had already established a coalition with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary to prepare “the International Convention on the Rights of the Family”.¹² Thousands took to the streets not only in Warsaw but across the country while the withdrawal debate took place, and as anti-abortion discussions have taken precedence over withdrawing from the Convention, women’s groups have continued their street protests in Poland. The protests in question were against attempts to withdraw from the Convention at first and the abortion ban from October onwards. It is, however, important to remember that these issues are intertwined, as protesters come out in opposition to the overall regime itself, as will be explained

10 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/06/family-rights-treaty/>

11 <https://blog-iacl-aids.org/2021-posts/2021/2/16/implementation-of-the-istanbul-convention-in-the-shadow-of-populism-the-case-of-poland-6y6x3>

12 Countries that have not ratified the convention are Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and there are also those such as Croatia and Poland which are States Parties yet continue to debate the legitimacy of the Convention.

later in this report. Following the Minister's announcement, around 2,000 protesters gathered outside both the Labor Ministry and the office of Ordo Iuris, as this conservative pressure group was a leading voice in the campaign against the Istanbul Convention. In March 2021, the Ministry of Justice sent a letter to various governments asking for their support for the alternative family rights convention that marked a concrete step towards the government's goal.¹³

That very same month, that is July 2020, the deputy chair of the AKP declared it "wrong" for Turkey to have ratified the Convention. The AKP and various conservative groups followed a line of argument much like those in Poland, saying that the Convention was against Turkish family values (citing "gender" and "sexual orientation" as the culprit), and that it even led to an increase in violence and therefore had to be annulled. The government subsequently announced that they were working on an alternative ("domestic and national") to the Convention. Islamist groups were among the supporters of the Turkish government in this move, which was interpreted as a sign of the government's need for votes in the face of its rapidly shrinking support base. Women took to the streets in several cities and raised their objections, which put the issue to rest in August, until March 20, 2021 when at 2.00 am the Office of the President declared that Turkey had withdrawn from the Convention. As the Council of Europe has been notified of this denunciation, it appears that Turkey, who once took pride in being the first signatory and name-sake of the Istanbul Convention, will become the first country to officially withdraw from it. The day after the President's announcement, women flooded the streets yet again insisting that they did not accept this "decree".

It must be noted here that GONGOs have proliferated in Turkey in recent years and are appropriating the strategies of the women's movement. KADEM (Women and Democracy Association),¹⁴ the first and most prominent women's GONGO in the country, initially supported the Istanbul Convention (having also, for example, used arguments almost identical to those of feminists in response to the government's attempt to amend an article on child abuse in order to provide amnesty to sexual offenders).¹⁵ As an Islamist, pro-government women's organization they openly state that "they do not accept LGBT" and have publications in which they push back against feminism and its ideals for the future, whilst also affirming their intention to struggle against male violence and the unequal treatment of women in different spheres of life. Their position has even resulted in KADEM being targeted by Islamist men. Yet with its most recent declaration following the President's withdrawal from the Convention, KADEM seems to have abandoned its defense of the Convention as may be gleaned from its statement on how the Convention "has now sadly become a matter of societal polarization".

To summarize, state officials, religious authorities, and conservative groups have supported each other in the drive for the denunciation of the Convention in both countries, and women have likewise immediately responded in its defense. The Convention, being an international legal document, has become widely and globally known and appreciated throughout this process and has clearly emerged as one of the major instruments in combating violence.

13 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/15/polands-replacement-for-istanbul-convention-would-ban-abortion-and-gay-marriage/>

14 The term GONGO means "Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization"; it denotes organizations that receive government funding and ideological support. KADEM is one of the most active and influential GONGOs in Turkey. Since its foundation in 2013, it has been known for championing "gender justice" (i.e., "equity") as opposed to "gender equality", a conceptual shift promoted by the ruling AKP as well. It must be noted that, as one of the NGOs working in the field, KADEM has also submitted a shadow report to GREVIO.

15 <https://m.bianet.org/english/women/210554-conservatives-campaign-against-istanbul-convention-push-akp-for-withdrawal>

OTHER CHALLENGES: PRO-FAMILY POLICIES, THE RULE OF LAW, RELIGION, ABORTION AND LGBTI+ RIGHTS

Pro-family policies

The AKP has been in government in Turkey since 2002. A lot has changed in the meantime, most notably the Constitution and the political system. The first years of AKP rule saw the taking of diplomatic steps in line with the EU harmonization process, as the AKP adapted to the political landscape and power dynamics in Turkey. The Gezi protests in 2013, as well as the corruption scandal, the end of the peace talks concerning the Kurdish conflict, and the general elections in 2015 may, however, be considered milestones in the consolidation of authoritarianism. The AKP saw the Gezi protests as an act of disobedience to the government and subsequently banned demonstrations in Taksim square and has gradually come to crackdown on all kinds of oppositional views from different parts of society by bringing court charges against them. This situation deteriorated after the 2015 general elections, which revealed a decline in the AKP's votes and brought the HDP, a new pro-Kurdish party that established a larger progressive coalition at the time, into parliament as the country's third largest party. The prevailing political atmosphere has since become sharply hostile to any kind of "differing" lifestyle (any deviation from the Turkish, male, heterosexual, Muslim, and conservative norm) and to all opinions critical of the government.

Reinforcing the family as the constitutive entity of society and family values as a hegemonic discourse has been a priority for the AKP ever since it came to power. The prevailing discourse is "preserving the traditional family in Turkey" and its practice is an absence of social policy, which means placing the burden of domestic care labor (caring for men, children, and the elderly) exclusively on women. Women are therefore only recognized in relation to their role within the family, and their first and foremost identity is motherhood. This entails both social and economic gains for the government. Women have had limited access to public care services, and facilities for working mothers have been lacking since the beginning of the AKP's rule. Women's employment figures are low (the employment rate of women is 29.62%)¹⁶ and those who are employed cannot access adequate public care services. The fact that women are defined exclusively within the family by the state also means that single, non-heterosexual, and/or divorced women either face extreme difficulties within the social system or are largely unrecognized.

With the upsurge in neoconservative and neoliberal policies from 2010 onwards, the government started placing an increasing emphasis on its family-oriented discourse and policies. In 2011, the year the Istanbul Convention was signed, the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs was replaced by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, which then became the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services in 2018. Erasing women from the ministry's name was not only a symbolic gesture, but a marker of the ascendance of family-oriented policies. The then-prime minister now president Erdoğan declared in 2010 that he did not believe in equality between men and women due to their dispositions but in equity – a statement he came to repeat often later on. In 2014, he used the term *fitrat* (meaning the essence and purpose of creation), taking a step further to legitimize gender stereotypes based on Islamic references. KADEM was established as a GONGO in 2013, adopting the rhetoric of promoting equity and complementarity instead of gender equality. This rhetoric argues that women and men are not equal, for they have not been created equal, but must be treated fairly and justly in line with their "natural" differences. In accordance with this ideology, the AKP established a parliamentary commission to prevent

¹⁶ <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm#indicator-chart>

divorce and protect the family in 2015. Over the years, there has been a deterioration in the already inadequate implementation of the Law no. 6284 and the Istanbul Convention as this rhetoric prioritizing the family has grown stronger. The government's approach to combating domestic violence is based on preserving the family as it is instead of empowering women to escape the violence they face within the family unit. Far right groups have recently launched an attack on women's alimony rights, the age of consent in the law on child sexual abuse, and the Law no. 6284 alongside their opposition to the Istanbul Convention.

The Kurdish region and Kurdish women in Turkey have been experiencing an additional layer of oppression on top of male violence especially after the 2015 elections and the end of the peace talks. State retaliation against their organizations and institutions escalated, as the HDP's elected MPs and hundreds of members and supporters have been arrested. Elected mayors and municipality councils have been replaced with appointed trustees, following accusations that they had committed "acts of terrorism". One of the first steps trustees appointed to local municipalities took was to shut down women's organizations supporting women facing domestic violence in the region. The co-chair system (whereby a man and woman share power in governing the municipality) in place in Kurdish municipalities was also targeted and effectively brought to an end as all the trustees were men, which signifies a marked fall in the already flimsy representation of women in local government. Social services that were available to women before the appointment of trustees are rapidly disappearing and being overwhelmingly replaced by Quran courses. This context severely affects women's daily lives.

Anti-communist propaganda has been a common theme ever since the fall of communism in Poland, but both rhetoric and policies in this vein were intensified by the PiS (established in 2001) as of the 2015 elections, along with campaigns against LGBTI+ and liberalism, which were all painted as ideologies pitted against "the benefits of the nation". The PiS came into office in 2015 after campaigning for the Family 500+ program that provides a monthly sum of 500 złoty per child to low-income families. In other words, the ruling party ascended to power with its political capital based on the ideal of the married, heterosexual couple with many children. It espoused a nationalist, populist discourse aiming for a faster-growing population in the European context where the dominant demographic trend is population aging. Opponents of the PiS state that the real need is for public services such as child care, schools and hospitals as well as better conditions for working mothers. This program has also led to a decrease in the rate of women's participation in the labor force, while not necessarily increasing fertility rates in the country. In the meantime, the Catholic Church boosts "traditional" gender roles, whereby men are considered the providers for the family and women are subordinated to men as domestic and motherly figures. It is important to point out that the Church has a significant impact on the Polish people, even though recently this confidence has started to erode.

The government's approach to the family is, at present, intertwined with and shaped by its anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric. As exemplified in the explanations provided for withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, this includes the emphasis on the necessity for an international convention on "the rights of the family". The government argues that there is an ideology disguised in some of the Convention's articles and this hidden agenda is a "foreign, dangerous ideology undermining Polish values and the family". The draft proposed as an alternative to the Istanbul Convention bans homosexual marriages and includes protecting children from "moral corruption" as part of its measures for "preserving the family".¹⁷

17 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/15/polands-replacement-for-istanbul-convention-would-ban-abortion-and-gay-marriage/>

The rule of law and freedom of expression

In Poland, opposition to the Istanbul Convention stems from political arguments but leading groups attempt to present it as a legal discussion. Ordo Iuris, for instance, is a pressure group consisting of lawyers, and it espouses a program to ban abortion, contraception, sexual education, and divorce by means of lawsuits (including against activists) as well as drafting bills and conventions, that is, using the law and legal arguments to achieve its ends. Its full name is the “Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture”, and it systematically hijacks the language of human rights, arguing that the Convention is unlawful and against the constitution. The rule of law has been under attack in Poland since 2015, with judiciary independence in shambles and judges themselves subjected to public pressure. The police have become more and more aggressive in their crackdown on demonstrations, arresting people who are peacefully expressing their opinions. As early as 2017, the European Commission had stated that “judicial reforms in Poland have brought the country’s judiciary under the political control of the ruling majority”. In the absence of judicial independence¹⁸ the Commission launched the Article 7¹⁹ sanctions procedure against the country, though this has had ambiguous results in terms of improvement.²⁰ In 2020, after several setbacks in terms of the rule of law in Poland, it seems that Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU is not enough to stop the government. When the EU eventually attempted to cut funding from Poland as well as Hungary citing the rule of law condition in relation to fundamental human rights and the rampant anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric, the countries blocked this spending plan arguing that the proposal was “a violation of their national sovereignty and a threat to their political projects”.²¹

In Turkey, debates on the rule of law appear to be never ending. Under AKP rule, mass trials such as the Ergenekon, Balyoz and KCK court cases taking place from 2008 onwards became significant examples calling into question the matter of adherence to the rule of law.²² The situation took a turn for the worse when the coup attempt in 2016 was followed by a state of emergency which lasted for two years, causing an immense deterioration in the rule of law in Turkey, marked by an increasing lack of judicial independence and impartiality. Issues such as violations of the right to a fair trial, procedural rights, freedom of assembly, claims of ill treatment and torture particularly in prisons surfaced and came to occupy the national agenda, drawing international attention as well. The weakening of the judiciary has had a direct impact on the struggle against domestic violence and the effectiveness of state mechanisms. This decline has been noted by the international community as well. The ECtHR condemned Turkey for failing to effectively protect women from violence within its own legal framework, with the case of *Opuz v. Turkey* in 2009²³ serving as a prominent example that paved the way to the Istanbul Convention. It is worth reminding here that the Ministry of Justice stated in 2009 that the rate of women’s killings had increased by 1400 percent since the AKP had come to power in 2002. The killing of women by men has not lost its place on the agenda ever since, as the ECtHR has condemned Turkey in other cases as well. In addition to this, there have been other rulings by the ECtHR in the AKP’s recent period determining that Turkey has acted in violation of human rights and unjustly imprisoned politicians and civil society actors, resulting in a decline in trust in the rule of law. This overall picture regarding a decline in the rule of law is inherently linked to the ineffective

18 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5367

19 Poland is the first EU member state to be subjected to the ‘Article 7 procedure’, which is initiated in cases of “clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2”, i.e., the common values (including the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights) of the European Union.

20 https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/_trashed/

21 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-06/why-hungary-and-poland-are-blocking-the-eu-s-budget-quicktake>

22 http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/GTE_WP_02.pdf

23 <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/tur?i=001-92945>

and inadequate implementation of the Convention, which is exacerbated by the fact that there is not enough data, monitoring of state institutions, and support for women's organizations – a significant problem, since women's organizations are the ones to enforce implementation in the absence of legal checks and balances.

The right to obtain information and the role of mainstream media is another important factor in understanding how current regimes operate. According to reports in 2020, the freedom of press and journalism are under severe attack in Turkey with countless journalists either imprisoned or facing charges,²⁴ and in Poland the freedom of press has been deteriorating since 2015 as new media laws have been introduced and several journalists have lost their jobs for being critical of the government.²⁵ Both Poland and Turkey are currently debating laws that will allow greater interference in the use of social media. Yet opposition to the government is still able to find a voice on mainstream media in Poland, whereas in Turkey the only way the opposition features in the mainstream is by being targeted or misrepresented. Alternative media sources broadcasting via online outlets and social media have, however, become much more diverse in Turkey especially since the Gezi protests in 2013. Journalists working in the alternative media face a constant threat of investigation and prosecution on top of losing their jobs or already having been pushed out of the sector.

In fact, another similar trend experienced under both governments with a significant impact in this area is the contraction of civil society.²⁶ The Polish government is cutting funds from women's organizations working to advocate for or uphold the Convention, while the Turkish government is hitting them with strict review procedures and closures. Women's rights defenders and feminist activists who previously participated in law and policy-making processes have recently been excluded and turned into the targets of popular anti-gender movements. It is important to remember that what is under attack in these countries is, in fact, feminism itself – along with the many other areas of struggle for a more equal, just and democratic existence.

Religion

In Turkey, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which has an increasingly direct impact on policies regarding youth, children and women in recent years, has come to be allocated a significant portion of the state budget, surpassing many ministries. Women, family and Islam are treated in conjunction in state policies; on the discursive level, Erdoğan makes frequent references to *fitrat*, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs plays an important role in putting this ideological framework to practice in relation to gender roles in the family.²⁷ Family and Religious Counseling Bureaus have been established across the country, replacing state mechanisms in this capacity. Women subjected to violence are easily able to access these offices as they are ubiquitous, and the officer (i.e., the religious authority figure) will generally advise women to go back home and make peace with their husband. In other words, these offices are not in the practice of referring women to state mechanisms responsible for supporting them in escaping violence.²⁸ Preserving family unity and preventing divorces is the main priority. Religious schools for the underage, starting from the age of 6, are widespread and readily available across the country, which has an

24 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/turkey-press-freedom-under-attack>

25 <https://eu.boell.org/en/2020/05/08/poland-freedom-press-free-fall>

26 <https://kluwerlawonline.com/JournalArticle/European+Public+Law/26.4/EURO2020072>

27 <https://en.catlakzemin.com/how-are-our-lives-shaped-through-the-protocols-of-the-presidency-of-religious-affairs-diyabet-and-the-absolute-integrity-of-the-family/>

28 <https://www.dw.com/tr/kadına-siddetle-mücadelede-diyabet-tavsiyeleri/a-52510157> <https://www.freiheit.org/turkey/pioneering-change-womens-movement-turkey>

impact on the quality of the education of girls in particular. The Presidency of Religious Affairs provides familial and religious guidance through various channels including training sessions and print and digital materials outlining appropriate manners and roles for men and women, as well as explicitly condoning early (child) marriages. The Presidency of Religious Affairs has operated in collaboration with extreme fundamentalists on various issues including the Istanbul Convention. The head of the presidency openly declared that homosexuality is forbidden in Islam, which was met by opposition from different bar associations that published statements against it.²⁹

In Poland, the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church grew stronger when the PiS came to power. They are openly supportive of each other, if not financially, then in terms of ideological concerns such as abortion, LGBTI+, and the family. Bishops and the Church called for a withdrawal from the Convention, the banning of pride parades and same sex adoption, engaging in anti-LGBTI+ rhetoric to the degree of equating homosexuality with pedophilia.³⁰ The younger generation, however, shows resistance to the Church not only in protests on the streets, but also by contesting what it imposes on them in their daily lives. This is evident in polls as well, as there is a greater decline in confidence and trust in the Church in comparison to other institutions in Poland.³¹ One major reason for this is the fact that child abuse in the Church has still not been resolved, with priests in prison and bishops accused of hiding crimes. Another reason seems to be the Church's role in the heated debate on abortion.

Abortion

Abortion has been legal up to 10 weeks of pregnancy in Turkey since 1983. Spousal consent is required if the woman is married and parental authorization if underage. The time limit doesn't apply if the pregnancy is a threat to the woman's life. If the pregnancy is a result of rape, abortion is permissible up to 20 weeks, though doctors have been known to ask for proof of legal proceedings in the form of a court document even though this is not a legal requirement. At present, abortion is legal but inaccessible in public hospitals in Turkey. In 2016, only 7.8% of the 431 public hospitals with obstetrics and gynecology departments in Turkey provided elective abortion services.³² 53 of the 81 provinces in the country do not have a public hospital that provides elective abortion care. In Istanbul, a city with a population of almost 20 million, there is only one public hospital that performs abortions up to 8 weeks, which is below the legal limit. It is common to hear hospitals say "we cannot perform abortions; it isn't legal" without referring the patient to another hospital where the services are available. As the current situation is making it even more difficult for women to exercise their rights, it has come to the point where one needs to have access to a private hospital to be able to get an abortion. The cost of the operation is approximately equal to minimum wage in Turkey. The Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation has been asking relevant ministries about these contradictions between the law and its practice for years, but is yet to receive any valid response.

In 2008, the then-prime minister Erdoğan declared that every woman should have at least three children. This sparked the never-ending discussion on women's reproductivity, which saw him repeat this line many times. In 2012, he said that in his regard "abortion equals murder".³³ Many

29 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/28/turkish-president-supports-top-clerics-homophobic-comments/>

30 <https://www.politico.eu/article/lgbt-poland-politics-pis-ruling-party-wrong-fight/>

31 <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/01/30/poles-trust-eu-the-most-and-government-the-least-among-institutions-finds-poll/>

32 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27634450/>

33 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18297760>

AKP supporters and MPs backed this statement. This was the same year that Kurdish civilians crossing the border were massacred by war planes in Roboski (Uludere), and the prime minister did not hesitate to link it to abortion, saying: “Every abortion is an Uludere.” Thus, equating abortion with ‘massacring the nation’, he fueled the argument that abortion is some kind of ‘weapon’ impeding the growth of populations. This is a clear indication of the demographic concerns behind the approach to abortion, especially when considered alongside his constant advice that women bear at least three children. In light of these developments, women took to the streets, organizing massive demonstrations. This put an end to the debate for a while, as the level of opposition stopped the AKP from enacting any legal change. It is important to note that conservatives too were part of the opposition to an abortion ban, arguing that abortion is a “private matter” that the state should not intervene in. This conservative opposition to the anti-abortion position is one aspect that is peculiar to Turkey, unlike other countries where conservative groups easily join in on state attempts to ban abortion, constituting the anti-abortion bloc together. Also, there have not been any protests in front of hospitals directly targeting women getting an abortion or lobbies working to change the law. What the abortion issue rather boils down to in Turkey is a desire on the part of the state to interfere in women’s lives and choices. After 2012, the anti-abortion argument evolved into malpractice despite failing to reshape the law, yet this still managed to reinforce the common belief that abortion is illegal in Turkey. At times discursive shifts may be so powerful that there is no need for actual legal change. The chasm between the law and its practice in Turkey is a perfect manifestation of this.

In Poland, abortion had been permissible under three conditions only since 1993 – namely, fetal defects, a threat to the mother’s health, and in cases of rape. Even under these circumstances, doctors may still refuse to perform abortions on ethical grounds, which make the situation even more restrictive.³⁴ While Poland’s abortion laws were already among the strictest in Europe, in 2016 anti-abortion groups proposed a bill that would bring a total ban on abortion, and once abortion is up for debate in this way, it becomes not only about banning abortion but also limiting access to sexual and reproductive health care and information. The proposal was backed by the Catholic Church. Yet after the mass protests known as Black Monday, a parliamentary vote took place and the bill was rejected by 352 votes to 58. Jarosław Gowin, the Minister for Science and Higher Education, said the protests “caused us to think and taught us humility”.³⁵ In October 2020, however, with the immense influence of *Ordo Iuris* in the process³⁶, the Constitutional Tribunal handed down a ruling stating that abortion due to fetal defects (which accounts for 98% of terminations carried out in Poland) is unconstitutional, leading to a *de facto* ban on abortion. The law also punishes doctors who illegally perform abortions with a prison sentence up to 5 years. It should also be added in this context that there is very little state support for families of disabled children. The decision led to weeks of mass protests in multiple cities across the country. In January 2021, the government put the Tribunal’s decision into effect. Women’s groups such as the Abortion Dream Team, Women on Waves or Women Help Women have been working to provide women with medical abortion and guidance. It is important to note that whenever there is a ban or severe restrictions, illegal markets proliferate and abortion is pushed underground in Poland, or women are forced to go elsewhere in Europe, which would also be the case in any other country where it is banned.

Among anti-abortion activists in Poland, there are groups that call themselves secular, modern and scientific along with Christian extremists. Some activists of this affiliation use a public display of images of aborted fetuses, and their propaganda is based on showing the “harm”

34 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/22/dispatches-abortion-and-conscience-clause-poland>

35 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/05/polish-government-performs-u-turn-on-total-abortion-ban>

36 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/four-reasons-why-polands-war-on-abortion-should-scare-you/>

done to the “baby” via abortion. This has resulted in a prohibition by the Kraków city council on the public display of dead bodies or body parts on posters, billboards, vehicles and/or trailers. Several lawsuits were brought against Fundacja Pro, the organization responsible for this kind of propaganda.³⁷

LGBTI+ rights

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) Rainbow Map 2020 charting countries based on laws and policies impacting the lives of LGBTI+ people, declared Poland the lowest-ranking EU country on the map. The only legal clause protecting LGBTI+ individuals is to be found in the labor law, as even hate speech is not regulated in the penal code. In recent years, political campaigns have drawn on anti-LGBTI+ propaganda to attract votes, resulting in vans bearing homophobic slogans traveling all over Poland. During his re-election campaign in 2020 president Andrzej Duda published a Family Charter promising to “ban the propagation of LGBT ideology in public institutions”. This move was against the Warsaw declaration in 2019 supporting LGBTI+ rights, which his rival Rafał Trzaskowski had signed on to. In political speech, the “LGBTI ideology” is frequently compared to the communist ideology, and deemed an even more “dangerous” threat to Polish values and culture.³⁸ The targeting is to such an extent that LGBTI+ identities are associated with pedophilia. In this vein, the “Stop Pedophilia Act” was promoted by Ordo Iuris, attacking sex education in schools and claiming to protect children in this manner. Later in 2020, the Life and Family Foundation proposed a “Stop LGBT” bill that sought to ban Pride Parades. The Polish Parliament took both the “Stop Abortion” bill and the “Stop Pedophilia” bill into consideration.

In 2019, over 30 towns and villages comprising around 100 Polish municipalities announced a resolution declaring themselves “LGBT-free zones” meaning “free of LGBT ideology”. This was therefore entitled the “Atlas of Hate” by activists.³⁹ The president of the European Commission called these zones “humanity-free”, and the EU cut funding from six municipalities due to their homophobic rhetoric while various partner cities across Europe ended their partnerships with these towns. The central government in Poland announced that it would step in to provide the financial support that had been lost.⁴⁰ Activists lobbied the EU to start an infringement procedure against Poland based on LGBT-free zones being a violation of fundamental rights and the rule of law. Their demand was to make funding dependent on respecting human rights, fundamental values and the rule of law. In August 2020, dozens of LGBTI+ activists were detained for calling for the release of an activist named Margot, who had allegedly damaged Fundacja Pro’s truck as it traveled around bearing anti-abortion and homophobic slogans, spreading misinformation. These mass arrests of LGBTI+ activists were considered a turning point in Polish history.⁴¹ Three activists had previously been arrested for hanging rainbow flags on a prominent monument of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, facing charges based on the blasphemy law. In October 2020, Ordo Iuris declared that it had taken legal action “on behalf of the local authorities” against Atlas of Hate activists because of what it deemed “defamatory information” regarding the LGBT-free zones.⁴²

37 <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/11/22/krakow-council-votes-to-ban-images-of-aborted-foetuses-in-public-space/>

38 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53039864>

39 <https://atlasnienawisci.pl>

40 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-eu-lgbt-idUSKCN25E1QP>

41 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/13/mass-arrest-of-lgbt-people-marks-turning-point-for-poland/>

42 <https://en.ordoiuris.pl/family-and-marriage/manipulation-lgbt-activists-co-author-fake-news-pro-family-local-governments>

In Turkey, the Gezi uprising emerged as a landmark protest against the government in 2013, bringing together a variety of at times conflicting political groups including leftists, feminists, Kurds, Kemalists, Muslims, and the LGBTI+ community. These protests were followed by increasing government pressure on civil society, which grew even more severe after 2015 as mentioned above. Street protests are now at the point of almost being banned, and many NGOs have been shut down especially in the Kurdish region. The most crowded LGBTI+ Pride Parade in the country took place in the immediate aftermath of the Gezi uprising, with 100,000 gathering on Istiklal Street in Taksim (the first pride to draw such a crowd in a country with a majority Muslim population). This also marked the end of pride parades and most other protests taking place on Istiklal, since the government declared Taksim off-limits to protests soon after. In 2017, the governor of Ankara took things a step further by banning all LGBTI+ events including movie screenings, panels, and meetings.⁴³ In 2019, KAOS GL (an Ankara-based organization as well as the first LGBT association in Turkey) won a court case to lift the ban.⁴⁴ Pride parades, however, are still not allowed in Turkey, and pride week events have recently taken place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Back in 2002, the year that the AKP came to power, the then-prime minister Erdoğan had said “the rights of homosexuals will be brought under legal protection” in his only speech in support of the LGBTI+ community. Both KAOS GL (Ankara) and Lambdaistanbul (Istanbul), two prominent LGBTI+ organizations, have since faced closure cases in courts only to eventually be acquitted. While the AKP did not attack or target the LGBTI+ community in its early years, this changed as its grip on power tightened over time. In 2010, the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs stated that “homosexuality is a disease that needs treatment”. The AKP’s rhetoric that “homosexuality is a foreign phenomenon that goes against Turkish family and cultural values” intensified after the Gezi protests, which coincides with the banning of Pride Parades and the consolidation of Erdoğan’s authoritarianism. In 2020, Ali Erbaş, the head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, once again targeted the LGBTI+ community, saying that “homosexuality causes illnesses and corrupts generations”. This speech led to a big public outcry, with many civil society organizations supporting the LGBTI+ cause, including various bar associations across Turkey. Erbaş had his supporters as well, consisting mostly of presidential officials and extremist fundamentalists. The main argument those opposed to the Istanbul Convention resort to is that the Convention “promotes LGBT lifestyles”, which is hoped to turn public sentiment against the Convention as a useful strategy both targeting LGBTI+ identities and putting them to use in undermining the Convention. Citing this as a reason for withdrawing is, however, extremely hypocritical – especially considering that articles relating to LGBTI+ issues have never been implemented in Turkey, nor have there been any propositions for a domestic legal regulation in this regard.

In order to understand the political context in which withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention has been brought up by both governments and their supporters, a comprehensive overview of their steps in the area of gender is absolutely crucial. The AKP and PiS share an authoritarian, conservative, undemocratic and populist orientation that has an inevitable impact on vested rights and women’s political gains. Pro-family policies that define women’s societal roles exclusively within the family and exclude all those who do not enter an official and heterosexual marriage union, banning, restricting access to or condemning abortion, criminalizing LGBTI+ identities, imposing and implying a single, uniform type of religion in all spheres of life, and finally grossly deviating from the rule of law are among recent and dominant political trends in Turkey and Poland. Themes coincide and the ideological motivations of the governments bear similarities, while the duration of their time in office, the sheer scope of their oppressive policies

43 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42043910>

44 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/25/turkey-ankara-wakes-court-lifting-lgbti-events-ban>

and therefore the magnitude of people's experiences of inequalities and rights violations differ between these two countries.

STRUGGLES AND MOBILIZATION IN THESE TWO COUNTRIES

Abortion has always been a very significant issue for the women's movement in Poland ever since the collapse of socialism, that was followed by an increase in the power of the Catholic Church. However, what is the issue of protest today is much more than that, and the same goes for mobilizations around the Istanbul Convention as well. In the summer of 2020, activists declared that they were protesting not only the dismantling of the Convention, which was at the time their reason (right before the Court ruling on abortion) for resuming street protests, but the dismantling of democracy itself. Activists argue that withdrawing from the Convention is tantamount to legalizing domestic violence and will lead to an increase in patriarchal pressure, which involves interfering with people's lives, limiting rights and freedoms. Poland has also been one of the European countries to face criticism for its mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic, with its deficiencies in medical care, yet the government has still been more concerned with withdrawing from the Convention and banning abortion than dealing with the crisis at hand. The pandemic therefore became another factor boosting participation in the abortion demonstrations. On the activists' agenda are a variety of current issues that have been "neglected" or directly targeted by the government including climate change, education, LGBT rights, the rule of law and democracy.

Feminist street activism has been on the rise in Poland since 2016. Protesters have mostly been urban youth in both 2016 and 2020, yet it is important to note that banning abortion has sparked real anger in rural areas too. Strajk Kobiet (Women's Strike) organized Black Monday protests in 2016 that took place simultaneously in 174 Polish cities and towns. Most of them were spearheaded by local groups engaged in local activism. Small cities and villages have therefore been actively involved in striking since 2016. In these protests, young people have raised their voices against the current regime and the oppressive morality encouraged by it. Their involvement is particularly significant since trust in the Church is lowest among the youth, and while President Duda is popular among 50+ citizens his rival Rafał Trzaskowski finds greater support among those aged 18+. This implies that the youth are in favor of a different future and have a different understanding of politics. New groups using new technologies have joined the movement, and they have immense power in mobilizing people, educating each other, spreading the news, and organizing online meetings.

Women protesting out on the streets are from informal collectives, grassroots organizations, NGOs, etc. from both the women's and LGBTI+ movement, which are active in spreading information, mobilizing the society, and organizing street protests. New alliances were also formed in the protests of 2020, as teachers, care workers, farmers, and football fans were among those who supported women out on the streets in demonstrations that took place in 80 Polish towns. The movements are diverse and pluralistic rather than univocal, and there is no single "center" to speak of. Activists underline that independence from political parties is what makes this a grassroots movement. Instead of addressing the central political power, activists care about reaching out to women in need of abortion, which determines the language of the protests and organizational strategies. Women in small villages, for instance, seem to be more supportive of abortion rights than they are of LGBTI+ rights, as villages are more conservative yet experience an ever more pronounced need for access to abortion, precisely due to the lack of opportunities available in big cities. Despite this, however, defending the right to abortion, reproductive rights

and women's rights is, on the whole, intertwined with defending LGBTI+ rights in the current activist setting in Poland, meaning that the feminist movement is at once queer.

Activists have most visibly organized street protests, but they have also intended to raise awareness on abortion in the political sphere. Lobbying and advocacy is therefore another vital tool in the struggle. The Beijing+25 summit in 2020 was, in this regard, important for women as an action coalition. Polish activists have been making a point of calling on the EU to intervene in the face of their failing democracy. They also prepared a draft bill for the liberalization and decriminalization of abortion to keep the debate ongoing on several levels. Organizing and mobilizing around a legislative move was also considered a way to challenge fake news on abortion and inform people. Social media is another channel with which to spread information. OKO Press⁴⁵, an independent news site, is an important example of publishing abortion stories in a way that contributes new perspectives to the topic. Sharing experiences in this manner reveals that abortion is not only a matter of health services and legal regulations, but also a common daily experience shared by millions of women all over the world. One political strategy employed by the movement was to make this commonality visible and use it to demonstrate why it is a women's right. In other words, winning the public opinion battle is an important goal. In this vein, protesters today refer to and draw strength from the Black Protests in 2016 that changed a lot of people's minds, demonstrated by the fact that support for the liberalization of abortion has exceeded 60 percent since then.⁴⁶

In Turkey, the women's movement refers to a large coalition that includes various women from different political backgrounds and organizations (mostly leftists, but also those with Kurdish and Muslim affiliations), whereas the feminist movement is a dispersed collective of feminist individuals operating on a grassroots level. After 2013, feminist organizations were impacted by the ascent of authoritarianism in Turkey and most of them fell apart although the movement itself has grown stronger over the years. The younger generation's engagement with feminism has therefore taken place especially through social media. Yet feminist campaigns and street demonstrations organized explicitly by feminist groups only (with the Night March on March 8th as a major exception) have dwindled in Istanbul as well as in other cities, being replaced by protests called by various coalitions within the women's movement. Feminist organizations that have survived into 2021 are NGOs, meaning associations or foundations, most of which receive international funding and focus on lobbying, advocacy, promoting legal rights as well as activism. The women's and LGBTI+ movements are much more in dialogue than they were before 2013, sharing spaces, showing solidarity, and learning from each other. Recently the two movements have also been lumped together by the government, although it merits mention that anything LGBT-related faces much harsher criminalization.

The ongoing pressure in Turkey has also led the Kurdish women's movement to move their meetings and get-togethers to private places. When there are no women's organizations available due to closures, and support mechanisms are disabled by the state itself, oppressive Islamic practices come to further dominate women's everyday lives – which is currently the case in the Kurdish region. Within this framework, violence is treated as something that would only befall women who fail to “obey the rules”, imposing a particular lifestyle on women through the constant threat and fact of violence. It is possible to say that under these circumstances, after women's support centers were shut down by the regime, women have almost entirely lost their means to escape violence or better their deteriorating life conditions, particularly since trust in state mechanisms is lower in the Kurdish region when compared to other parts of Turkey. When

45 <https://oko.press/about-oko-press/>

46 <https://time.com/5905885/poland-abortion-ban-protest/>

the state criminalizes and lashes out against all kinds of organizing, women also tend to find themselves more alone in the face of violence and oppression. Therefore, in the current period marked by a lack of legal, social and/or cultural support from institutions, the Kurdish women's movement has been focusing on visiting women, meeting them in-person, and trying to make them feel that they are not alone. Local solidarity actions take place, but have been relegated to private settings.

In Istanbul, the largest metropolis in Turkey, the Feminist Night March on the 8th of March 2020 became the last mass protest to take place before the coronavirus pandemic broke out. Until 2019, these marches had happened with a participation of up to 40,000 people without any police disturbance. By 2020, it was the only large gathering of its kind left (still organized in the city center), especially after the coup attempt in 2016 which brought street protests under heavy police blockade if they were not outright banned. Feminism and the women's movement have been the most active oppositional force in Turkey in the last years, and not only due to 8th of March protests but with the ongoing struggle to end male violence, defend women's rights, withstand the conservative, authoritarian moves of the ruling party, and stake a claim on the future. On the 8th of March 2021, the 19th Feminist Night March was held in Istanbul with at least 20,000 participants under an intense police blockade of the entire neighborhood and despite the pandemic.

Social media has globally emerged as an important new tool, especially in these times of shrinking political and social space, both bringing together different parts of society and providing a platform to raise voices in opposition to government policies and spread the word. Additionally, women who are subjected to violence and find themselves unable to activate state support mechanisms, are able to use social media to reach broader audiences that either pressure the state into taking action or facilitate the arrival of help. There are, however, also challenges and obstacles brought by the heavy reliance on social media in these authoritarian times. As political gatherings and protests have come under government attack, social gatherings and solidarity has become increasingly restricted to digital platforms, which risks preventing the formation of solid and long-term organizations.

In March 2021 in Turkey, women and LGBTI+ individuals mobilized immediately on the morning after the decree announcing Turkey's withdrawal from the Convention was made public, and large street protests took place across the country. Protests continued every week until they were prevented by COVID-19 lockdown measures in April. As in Poland, protesters received support from a variety of groups and institutions, ranging from municipalities to business associations, prominent actors to sports clubs, student groups to bar associations raising their voices against the AKP regime.

On a common note, during the most recent attacks on the Istanbul Convention in Poland and later in Turkey, women's organizations with different affiliations have reached out across divides to many groups both nationally and internationally, even including GONGOs to a certain extent, making an extra effort to convince everybody and keep the Convention in place, a struggle which appears to have attracted international attention.

CONCLUSION

Reaching a quick conclusion that equates every right-wing populist government with each other would be misleading, especially in terms of practices and experiences as demonstrated by this report. With this in mind, some of the main current areas of struggle for women and LGBTI+ communities and civil society in these two contexts emerge as follows:

- **Pursuing relations with the EU as a means to encourage adherence to democratic principles:**

Turkey has been under AKP rule since 2002, while Poland has been governed by the PiS since 2015 (although the PiS was established and active prior to this date). Poland is a member of the EU and Turkey is not. These two points already indicate significant differences in the ordinary life experiences of women and LGBTI+ communities in these countries. First of all, the experience of escalating authoritarianism for almost 20 years in Turkey has led to a variety of human rights violations in numerous fields over an extended period of time. Women, LGBTI+ communities and others in Turkey have suffered through years of repressive, pro-family, religious, and conservative policies as well as undemocratic and unlawful rule. Secondly, although the EU does not make any direct interventions into Polish politics, the possibility of lobbying with EU institutions, the notion of accountability to EU standards on certain issues (especially when funding is in concern), and access to European organizations create a remarkable difference when compared to the Turkish government's rhetoric of "autonomy" in domestic affairs. Simply put, Turkey has grown used to being a country where life-altering decisions may be enacted in the middle of the night. Despite this marked distinction, both governments share in a skeptical approach to the EU as visibly evidenced particularly in both of their dismissals of LGBTI+ rights as "Western", as well as more generally in their interpretation of the EU's criticisms as "interference with their national sovereignty". This argument is voiced with increasing fervor in the current uncertain climate where although undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies are gaining ground, their political futures also seem ever more fragile, as both governments display an increasingly urgent dependency on citing traditional and national values and garnering the support of conservative, right-wing groups in order to achieve their goal of remaining in power.

- **Defending human rights and the rule of law:**

Poland and Turkey have their own particularities when it comes to the human rights situation and corruption undermining the rule of law. Although there are similarities in terms of escalating police attacks, the use of tear gas and violence during and after protests and activist arrests, the proportion of police brutality, the nature of criminal accusations and detention durations differ from each other. Turkey has a long history of violating the freedom of speech of human rights defenders and political activists in several ways, including through lengthy detention periods. In 2020, activists in Poland also faced charges and received threats without any guarantee that their rights would be protected by the state. The remarkable differences that are still palpable between the two countries cannot, however, be reduced to the duration the governments have been in power. The ground on which the independence of the judiciary, the media and freedom of expression is built is just as important. Turkey has already been historically weak in this regard, as the institutionalization of legal independence and the protection of freedom of expression have always been major problem areas in the country's democratization process. The situation in 2021 therefore seems to be the unsurprising culmination of a history of grave setbacks in human rights.

- **Claiming ownership of the Istanbul Convention as one of the major global achievements of women and LGBTI+ communities:**

Withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention is a significant development in the political context described throughout the report. Activists in Turkey have raised their voices for the effective implementation of laws for years (not only the Convention, but Law no. 6284 as well as the Turkish Penal Code), since legal regulations regarding violence have been adequate and on European standards, but implementation has always been a major issue. Drawing attention to the relationship (and gap) between what is prescribed in law and what is happening in women's everyday lives has been an important means of dealing with the post-truth discourse employed by governments. Yet it now seems that this period has come to an end, and the government has actually started reshaping the law according to its own needs, replacing certain articles with undemocratic ones. The Istanbul Convention is a lot more than an international treaty, it is a comprehensive instrument that allows women to combat violence in various manners using a multiplicity of mechanisms and foregrounds an egalitarian approach that is necessary to effectively end discrimination against women in society. Annuling it will, therefore, as stated by activists in both Poland and Turkey, encourage violence, arbitrary treatment, and hate speech towards women and LGBTI+ individuals, as well as making refugees and migrants protected under the Convention in the EU and Turkey more vulnerable. In this sense, the fight against the patriarchy and current regimes has been crystallized in this particular moment of defending the Convention. Activists in both countries are very well aware that such a withdrawal will be followed in kind. Protests taking place since 2020 have raised awareness in both countries about an international convention that was previously not widely known by society, as well as strengthening the belief in the power of women as the only group protesting governments out on the streets. Women's protests have shown to the world that fighting the patriarchy also means struggling against current undemocratic regimes since both depend on each other, and governments learn oppressive tactics from one another. International solidarity is growing especially around the issues of abortion and the Istanbul Convention (i.e., male violence) across the globe, not only in Europe but also in Latin America. Another important feature of these struggles is the increasing support from conservative women in favor of abortion rights, ending male violence, and protecting the Convention. In other words, women with conservative backgrounds who may in general side or at least negotiate with the government, now oppose the banning of abortion and attempts to legalize male violence. Similar crossovers are the case in activist circles as well. Margot, a detained non-binary activist from Poland, explicitly identified as Christian as well as queer, and Muslim feminists in Turkey have been raising their voices against the current regime, all of which challenge the politics of polarization that such governments rely on. In a time when coming together is either dangerous or banned, and activism is clearly hit by the pandemic, women's and LGBTI+ street protests still continue, taking their cue from the slogan "masculinity is more harmful than COVID".

- **Mounting international solidarity:**

Although international solidarity is now on the rise, there is still a need for women and LGBTI+ people from different contexts to come together actively and productively to share experiences, expand support networks and mechanisms, and create strategies to express their opinions and opposition to the current global backlash. The strengthening of international feminist solidarity also has the potential for a more powerful impact on decision-makers on the international level. On a final note, it is important to remember that coming together to create new spaces and bring new ideas to fruition rather than only in response to backlash would also motivate and give hope to activists and people living under oppression. In an age of authoritarianism and post-truth, bringing more women and LGBTI+ people to organize around their shared experiences and vulnerabilities is key to consolidating the masses who are not willing to live under the rule of current regimes and instead seek a different, egalitarian and free future for all.

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