

# Briefing Note for the Standing Committee on Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands

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## Risks of evolving anti-gender contestation

Anti-gender mobilisation in Europe has undergone a significant transformation in scale, structure, and strategic intent. What was previously characterised as socially conservative contestation of reproductive rights within democratic systems has increasingly evolved into a coordinated, transnational political phenomenon. Their main 5 target areas are: SRHR, LGBTQI rights, gender, some aspects of children’s rights, and the notion of freedom, particularly religious freedom and freedom of speech.

### Gender as a symbolic glue

At the core of this mobilisation lies a heterogeneous set of actors united by a shared antagonism towards so-called “gender ideology”. Scholars have described this concept as a form of “**symbolic glue**”: by constructing “gender” as a common threat, diverse actors are able to form broad anti-gender coalitions. This dynamic facilitates the formation of unconventional and strategically opportunistic alliances that may constitute vectors of undermining democratic institutions, spreading malign foreign influence, and promoting societal polarisation.

### Common toolkit

The risks come from behaviours, not beliefs: contestation of “gender” provides a framework that enables cooperation across diverse actors and facilitates broader coalitions that extend beyond gender-related issues. This is reflected in coordinated efforts to challenge not only specific policies, but also institutions, regulatory frameworks, and multilateral cooperation. A common toolkit is deployed across these efforts, including strategic litigation, online radicalisation pathways, elite capture, and coordinated campaigns to delegitimise courts, media, and regulatory institutions.

## Converging Ecosystem of Actors

As a both an expression of social conservatism and a security-relevant phenomenon, anti-gender mobilisation spans the democratic to authoritarian spectrum involving religious actors, civil society organisations, ultra-conservative groups, far-right political actors, illiberal political projects, anti-democratic actors, and, in some cases, geopolitical adversaries.

Socially conservative actors	Ultra-conservative groups	Populist hard/far right	Illiberal political aspirations	Neo-fascist/ anti-democratic actors	Geopolitical adversaries
Anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ NGOs	Some anti-gender NGOs	Some hard-right political parties	Think tanks Illiberal political parties	Far-right political parties Extremist non-state actors	Russia

The boundaries between these categories are often blurred. Actors operate across sectors and borders, forming networks that combine ideological advocacy with political strategy and, in some cases, geopolitical objectives.

## Patterns of Coordination

Anti-gender coordination follows several identifiable patterns, illustrating the flexibility and strategic nature of these alliances.

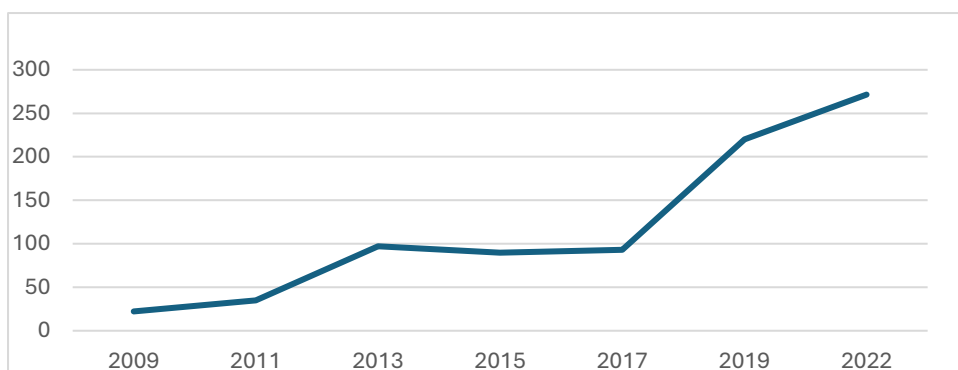
Coordination typology	Examples
Ecumenical conservatism	Catholic, traditionalist Protestant and Eastern Orthodox actors working together against the common enemy of ‘gender’
Unholy alliance	Alliances between United Nations Member States against gender issues, usually involving the Holy See with predominantly Muslim countries such as Egypt and Iran, along with predominantly Christian countries, such as Malta, Hungary, the Russian Federation or the USA depending on the administration
The ‘boy band’ logic	Religious conservatives, far-right actors and tech billionaires jointly raising the issue of ‘grooming gangs’ in the UK, or the convergence of various actors against the EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA) or the UK’s Online Safety Act (OSA) (see below)
Tango noir	Russian efforts to court Western political, economic and cultural elites around the notion of Europe as a Christian continent and the need to defend common Christian heritage through ‘influence factories’
Gender as neo-colonialism	Gender and related human rights are portrayed as colonial impositions—for example, in ratification of the EU–ACP Trade Agreement <sup>1</sup> and the Istanbul Convention

## The Scale and Significance of Financial Flows

One of the clearest indicators of the fundamental evolution of the movement is its funding the anti-gender movements in geographic Europe declared a combined income equivalent of around:

- \$20 million in 2009
- \$80 million in 2018
- \$270 million in 2022<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1. Anti-gender funding in Europe 2009–2022 in US\$ millions



<sup>1</sup> IPAS. Anti-Rights Groups Take Aim at Transnational Trade Agreement. 2022. <https://www.ipas.org/resource/anti-rights-groups-take-aim-at-transnational-agreement/>.

<sup>2</sup> According to EPF reports *The Tip of the Iceberg* (2021) and *the Next Wave* (2025).

Funding originates from multiple sources, notably within Europe, the United States, and Russia, each contributing to different aspects of the movement's infrastructure.

- **Hungarian funding**, estimated at over US\$172 million since 2019, has supported the development of think tanks, media platforms, and transnational political networks. This includes the consolidation of far-right actors and the construction of a closed, state-linked influence ecosystem.
- **Russian-linked funding**, estimated at over US\$400 million, has been associated with financial support to political parties, sponsorship of international anti-gender initiatives, and the deployment of think tanks and media platforms targeting Western elites. A significant portion of it was spent inside Russia, reflecting its institutionalisation of promoting “traditional values”.
- **Funding from the United States**, estimated at approximately US\$185 million, has played a key role in expanding a Christian right-aligned litigation infrastructure in Europe.
- In 2019 – 2023, around 14% of all funding counted came from public sources, including national, regional, and local funding schemes. Around 1 million euros in that period came in the form of Erasmus+ grants to anti-abortion advocacy.
- In the **Netherlands**, \$44,8 million could be attributed to organisations involved in anti-gender contestation in 2019 – 2023.

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## Strategic Objectives and Policy Targeting

### Reorienting SRHR funding

A key focus is the **targeting of funding flows**. This includes efforts to weaken financial support for gender equality and human rights through EU's Multiannual Financial Framework and national Official Development Assistance allocations. At the same time, funding of alternative, often religiously legitimised “anti-gender services” is promoted: e.g. crisis pregnancy counselling instead of abortion, natural family planning instead of contraception, chastity training instead of comprehensive sexuality education.

### Anti-gender cases as precedents for challenging digital regulation

Digital regulation has emerged as another central battleground. Frameworks such as the EU Digital Services Act and the UK Online Safety Act are framed as threats to freedom of expression and religion. Coordinated litigation and public campaigns are used to challenge these regulations, often using high-profile cases to mobilise transnational support, such as the prosecution of Finnish MP Päivi Räsänen for anti-LGBT hate speech.

### Strategic litigation against rights

Over the medium to long term, anti-gender strategies increasingly target the **judiciary and legal systems**. This includes strategic litigation before European courts, efforts to expand interpretations of parental rights, and broader attempts to delegitimise judicial institutions.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, anti-gender actors have interfered in judicial processes. In Germany, for instance, an anti-gender campaign in 2025 against judicial candidate

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<sup>3</sup> Datta, Neil. ‘Think of the children! Children's rights as the new frontier in anti-gender contestation’. In: Stein Helland, H., M. Skivenes and S. Gloppen, (eds) *Child Protection and the European Court of Human Rights: Lessons from Norway in the Development and Contestation of Children's Rights*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. 2025.  
<https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447371496>.

Frauke Brosius-Gersdorf stoked public outrage around her alleged stance on abortion, forcing her to withdraw.<sup>4</sup>

## Geopolitical reengineering to undermine multilateral cooperation

At a broader level, anti-gender mobilisation forms part of **geopolitical strategies aimed at reconfiguring international norms and alliances**. By framing gender equality and SRHR as externally imposed or ideologically biased, actors seek to undermine multilateral frameworks and promote alternative normative models centred on sovereignty and traditional values. The strategic advocacy for anti-LGBTQI+ legislation, as well as contestation of the Istanbul convention, have been used across the globe as a tool to extract countries from the jurisdiction of multilateral institutions such as the Council of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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## Conclusions

- Anti-gender mobilisation has evolved into a **complex transnational phenomenon**. Its capacity to mobilise diverse actors, financial resources, and operate across political, legal, and informational domains indicates a profound evolution of its capabilities and ambitions.
- **Existing frameworks often struggle to capture the security dimension** of anti-gender mobilisation due to its overlap with legitimate democratic debate, the diversity of actors involved, and the opacity of transnational coordination.
- **Contesting gender serves as a cover for undermining democratic norms**. The historical contestation of SRHR and gender, as well as their religious roots, are increasingly used by anti-gender actors to camouflage anti-democratic objectives and normative agendas.
- Apart from overall democratic resilience, anti-gender-adjacent movements are targeting **public funding, digital regulation, judicial precedents and processes, as well as geopolitical alignment** of countries.

## Recommendations

- Gender equality and SRHR should be understood not only as social policy issues, but as components of **democratic resilience and security**. Democratic backsliding, hybrid threats, FIMI and societal polarisation should be examined through a gendered lens, ensuring that SRHR and gender equality are recognised as integral to security and resilience. Given their transnational character, these threats should be addressed in coordination with allies.
- **Strengthen allied coordinated engagement in multilateral arenas**, systematically tracking domestic actors and their transnational linkages, and develop targeted responses to influence originating from key anti-gender state actors, notably Russia and Hungary.
- **Leverage regulatory and legal tools**. Frameworks such as the EU's DSA, and responses to FIMI provide mechanisms to counter online disinformation campaigns used by anti-gender actors. These instruments should be fully integrated into broader monitoring and mitigation strategies.

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<sup>4</sup> Orbán, Tamás. *Justice Served: Controversial German Judge Nominee Withdraws Over Plagiarism*. 2025.

<https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/brosius-gersdorf-spd-constitutional-justice-candidate-withdraws-plagiarism-conservative-protest/>.

<sup>5</sup> Recent examples include anti-LGBTQI+ laws adopted in Georgia in 2024, Kazakhstan, Uganda and Ghana in 2025. The contestation of the Istanbul convention, against the backdrop of Russian-linked FIMI, has led to the Latvian Parliament voting to leave the Istanbul convention.