



“What makes them dangerous is that they have a real chance of rolling back human rights for actual people”

Interview with Neil Datta about far-right networks in Europe

In vielen Staaten gewinnen derzeit rechtspopulistische Parteien an Macht. Gleichzeitig werde hart erkämpfte Menschenrechte für Frauen und LGBT infrage gestellt. Dahinter stecken ultrakonservative internationale Netzwerke, die das politische Geschehen in einzelnen Ländern beeinflussen wollen. Amosinternational sprach darüber mit Neil Datta, Sekretär des Europäischen Parlamentarischen Forums für sexuelle und reproduktive Rechte (EPF) in Brüssel. Im Interview analysiert er die Anliegen dieser Gruppen, spricht über seine Arbeit im EPF und beleuchtet, wie sich die Zivilgesellschaft angesichts der gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen verhalten kann.



Neil Datta

Amosinternational: In the recent years, we can see a rise in far-right parties in different European countries. At the same time, anti-feminist propaganda is spreading, endangering women's protection from gender-specific violence, e.g. regarding domestic violence or the right of abortion. What is the connection of these two developments? A common "enemy"?

Neil Datta: There is a connection between the rise of far-right populist political parties and anti-feminism and anti-gender. We have the problem of anti-feminism or contestation around women's rights and specifically all

rights around sexuality and reproduction, access to contraception and abortion, but also LGBT rights; they are part of the same parcel. That topic has always been around, due to social conservatism, because it goes against the social doctrine of most Christian churches. But we had fought that these issues had been settled, back in the 1960s and 70s or maybe a bit more recently. They became part of a common human right framework.

Separately, there has been an increase in far-right populist political parties. Those have always been around in many countries. In Europe,

we all have a history of far-right political activism, especially in the 20th century. It happened everywhere. We thought it was a more or less contained part of the political system, but a marginal part. But then, they started getting more and more power. Over less than a decade, we have seen that the political epicenter of anti-sexual reproductive rights activism shifted from the world of Christian democracy to the populist far-right. This happened for several reasons: For one, the world of Christian democracy realized that even though they may be against abortion or want to limit LGBT



rights, they are fundamentally mainstream political parties, and that society has moved on past that. While they could be relied upon to block certain initiatives, they were not very innovative at proposing new issues to roll back these human rights. This is where the populist far-right comes in. They have had the ambition to propose different things. So what we see is that the populist far-right movement in different countries all have different kinds of origin. They have either from a position of ambiguity come out being strongly against sexual and reproductive health and rights – this is the case with old far-right political parties like *Rassemblement National* or *Lega* in Italy. Then we have new far-right populist parties who have taken on anti-gender positions from the start, as part of their founding DNA. This we see with the *AfD* and also with the *Vox* in Spain. We see that now they are the ones taking up this issue. Interestingly, for some of these political parties it is a very important issue, for others it is simply something they use if they feel it is useful for them. Also, the way it is important for them may be different. Some are inspired by religious doctrine, others are ethnonationalist and concerned about declining demographic birth rates in many European countries. They see the solution to this as limiting women's access to abortion because x abortions that do not take place mean x babies of the desired ethnic group will be born. In addition, they want to discourage LGBT because LGBT does not produce children, so they want to encourage heterosexual marriage. *Fidesz* in Hungary is a very good example of this approach. So we see a convergence of different factors about why this is happening at the moment.

An ultraconservative transnational political alliance is in the making, connecting religious and civil society groups, activists, academics etc. Their agenda: Restoring "Natural Order" and "traditional family"

against human rights of women, children, LGBT. What awaits us? Are reproductive organs now the battlefields of cultural wars?

It started in 2012/2013 when different socially conservative religious actors thought that unless they organize, society was going to evolve to a point where for them it would be unrecognizable and it would lose all anchoring in religious traditions that they felt were important. So they decided to organize by creating a transnational network called *Agenda Europe*. This transnational network grew to include approximately 300 individuals and organizations, mainly from civil society, academia, institutions, the world of politics as well as media. They had a few number of key features and an annual summit. They had a blog and a common manifest of about a 140 pages called "Restoring the natural order". They say themselves that they have about 20 years to stop this progress and otherwise "will lose everything".



Anti-gender issues over the past ten years did not happen because societies were becoming more conservative but because religious conservatives became better organized

Agenda Europe had their first meeting in 2013, which is an important year. When we go back to that period, we see that two major European countries went forward with equal marriage, France and the UK. So in a way their analysis was not wrong, because equal marriage was no longer going to be some specific thing of uber-progressive countries in Nordic Europe or some specificities in Spain. Now two of the main pillars of western democracy were to move in that direction. This was a seismic shift and therefore one of the catalysts for their organization. They started meeting on an annual basis. We can see the evolution of their meetings where they increasingly be-

come more sophisticated: First it was about how to become relevant, next about identifying priority areas, at the third meeting they actually had strategies in place to influence the priority areas of abortion and equal rights. Then they decided to mobilize against gender-based violence, because they do not agree with the idea that gender is a social construct. For them, there is a biological binary between cis-men and cis-women. By the fourth meeting, they were actually sharing information about their victories and experiences. We can see that a number of the anti-gender issues that took place on the continent over the past ten years did not happen because societies were becoming more conservative but because religious conservatives became better organized.

This is important because it represented the first time in decades for us in Europe that those working in Human Rights – and specifically Human Rights for women, LGBT and everything related to sexual and reproductive health and rights – became not only the subject of contestation having to overcome conservatism and reticence to social change but became the subject of an actual counter-campaign. For many people in this area it took them a while to figure this out. In some specific subsectors they had never encountered this before. People working for abortion rights know that they always have a fight on their hands. The ones working for LGBT rights had the fight, but the win was in their sale for many years. But the people working on gender-based violence had no clue what was happening. I remember going to a conference organized by the Finnish EU presidency to discuss the ratification of the *Istanbul Convention* that had encountered some difficulties. It had just failed in Bulgaria. All these nice people, mainly women who run women's shelters that were looking forward to the *Istanbul Convention*, got caught up in the storm that became the contestation around



the Istanbul Convention. And they did not have the skillset to understand or counter it. These are not political people; they run a shelter. This type of thing came as a surprise with certain losses. Since then there is a much better understanding of this movement: It is not just local things happening at a national level. There is something transnational about it. There are international actors with local partners who are able to quickly translate material into their own local context. In Bulgaria it was legal arguments developed by an US legal outfit with officers here in Europe that then shared their legal analysis of the Istanbul Convention with Bulgarian partners who then adapted it into their own context, translated it into Bulgarian and then ran this with their own parliament and courts. Things happened very quickly. There is an increasing number of actors aware of how this works. Now we have to build into the equation that any type of progress will meet a counter-movement not just to resist it but to roll it back. That is something we have to be mindful of. At a political level, we see that some political parties are using some aspects of this as a political football in order to politicize or divide societies. It depends which specific issue is relevant in certain countries and it depends on the context. In some countries, it is women's rights, in other countries, LGBT rights, in others, Trans rights. In some countries, "Gender ideology" has been used for the past decade as a big boogeyman to scare people. That is running out of steam, so we see people picking up on the idea of "anti-woke" as a new thing, even though "woke" does not have any real definition. You can simply throw that label onto anything you do not like.

Your research is about how national anti-abortion organizations are part of an international ultraconservative network called "Tradition, Family and Property" (TFP) who

define themselves as "crusaders for family". What are the aims of this network?

Depending on one's perspective, there are similarities and differences between these different anti-gender religious extremist networks. The best analogy I can give is that of a Fast Food restaurant. If you are at an airport and only have half an hour for lunch, you really don't care if it's McDonalds or Burger King, you just need the calories to fill you up until your next meal. But if you are working in that field, for example as a manager at McDonalds, then the experience you provide at McDonalds is vastly different from Burger King and all the other Fast Food restaurants. Agenda Europa is a transnational network, mainly led by catholic activists, meant to influence specific policies. It is an advocacy network, not an organization.

Tradition, Family and Property has different origins. It is a religious movement that was born in Brazil in the 1960s and meant to hold the Catholic Church true to its traditions. In the 1960s, there was a lot of movement within the Catholic Church, which resulted in the Second Vatican Council. Out of this context, TFP was born, a bit like other religious movements within the world of Catholicism such as Opus Dei, Legionaries of Christ, Communion and Liberation – types of movements where lay people can become more active in the expression of the Catholic faith.

What is specific about TFP?

Specific about TFP is that it appealed to wealthy people, landowners in Latin America. The equivalent of this in Europe were the former aristocratic families. Their view is that economic inequality is divinely ordained: If God did want people to be wealthier, why would he allow this to happen? It really is an anti-egalitarian vision of society. They rose up to defend these points of view in Latin America against

the threat of communism. TFP played a role in combating left-wing-movements present in all Latin American countries. The movement spread to other countries and then to Europe. With the end of communism, they had lost one of their big foes. That is when they became more active in anti-abortion-activism. Therefore, TFP is a network that basically advocates for what they call the counter-revolution. The counter-revolution is meant to undo the negative impact of all the previous revolutions, including the communist revolution, the feminist revolution, the protestant revolution, and most importantly the egalitarian revolution of the French revolution. It wants to go back to an idealized world of medieval Europe where you have the aristocracy and nobility at the top, the clergy doing their job and all of us as happy servants toiling the land in ignorance, with no information, no education. And the world is a happy and divine place for them. This is bizarre.



LGBT free zones, the criminalization of abortion and sexuality education, the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention – Ordo Iuris was the brain behind all of that

Growing out of Brazil, spreading to Latin America, then Europe, the movement had almost died in 1995 with the death of its founder but reappeared again in Poland in 2012 where they vastly modernized. One of the new emanations of TFP became Ordo Iuris, a very influential legal think tank, which is behind many of the bad things happening in Poland: LGBT free zones, the criminalization of abortion, of sexuality education, the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention – Ordo Iuris was the brain behind all of that. This spread out to other countries. We have little TFP/Ordo Iuris offices in the Netherlands, Estonia, Croatia and Slovakia. From there, they are

also starting to spread their medieval ideas. In the Netherlands of all places! That is not a conservative catholic country. But Ordo Iuris from Poland was able to organize a big campaign against comprehensive sexuality education that really scared the Dutch public, the government and the civil society about this type of activism.

Also, TFP is mainly an all-male type of thing. It comes from the world of Catholicism but is legally organized as an NGO. This independence allows TFP to put pressure on the catholic hierarchy, because they are not dependent on the bishops for anything. In addition, over time, they have diverged significantly from the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. All the way back in 1985 there was a warning issued against TFP by the Conference of Bishops of Brazil, saying that TFP should not be considered catholic. According to some, it is a Catholic movement, to others, it is pseudo-catholic, a new type of religious movement that targets mainly Catholics and catholic institutions.

Who is financing organizations like TFP and Agenda Europe?

The answer is a bit complex. We did a study on how the anti-gender-movement is financed. The results were published in 2021 in the report "Tip of the iceberg". We took a look at the finances and annual reports of 50 anti-gender-organizations. The analysis showed that between 2009 and 2018, at least 700 million dollars went into this movement in Europe. If we break it down further, we see that from the start of the decade towards the end, the annual amount has quadrupled, from 20 Million Dollars to 80 Million Dollars a year. In the process of updating these numbers now, since 2018, we are already at more than a doubling of those numbers. It is an incredibly wealthy and increasingly well-resourced movement. If we look at the geographic origin of the funding, we

find that 12% come from the US, 25% from the Russian Federation, and the rest from Europe. It is largely a self-financed movement.

If we look at the different actors, the US have always suspected to be present as a Christian Right but are interestingly not the Big Spender as we had anticipated. But they are concentrated in a few organizations specialized in litigation. They bring the experience from the US, of taking issues before the courts, and trying to find a resolution in their favor. An example is the Dobbs Judgement that overturned Roe vs. Wade. That is what they want to do here in Europe.

The Russians have few different ways of spending their money. First of all, most of the money is outsourced; it does not come from the Kremlin but from Oligarchs who are close to the Kremlin. The dirty stuff Russia did militarily was not done by the Russian Army, but by the Wagner paramilitary group. Here we have a bit the same system of outsourcing to semi-private entities, which are aligned with the objectives of the Kremlin. Two oligarchs specifically, Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev, stand out. They have done three types of things: one is to provide a conduit for financial resources and legitimacy to far-right political parties across Europe. So there are well-attested financial links between Russian actors, Rassemblement National in France and La Lega in Italy. It is harder to prove in other countries, but we know that there is a contact between the far-right in different countries. Separately, these Russian oligarchs created what academics call "influence factories". Different entities, such as media, foundations, endowment funds, platforms for dialogue etc. serve to discuss issues. They are basically talking shops. But the subjects will always have a pro-russian perspective. For example: Is the West losing its Christian identity? How is Russia a true defender of morality and values? These types of influence fac-

tory entities had the purpose of involving with the aim of socializing western political economic leads onto and eventually pro Russian positions. One who is very involved in this, is Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis. She has been close to a certain number of these Russian oligarchs as well as to Steve Bannon in the US and a number of anti-gender entities in Germany. She ticks all the boxes of all right links within this whole network.

What about the European funding?

There are several sources for European funding for anti-gender: one is state funding by either accident or negligence, or intentional. Accidental or negligent is funding from municipal, regional or even state authorities towards local pro-life organizations to offer an alternative to abortion. We see this happening in for example Austria, Slovakia, Spain or Italy. We see also negligence, when the EU funds anti-gender organizations for fake Women's Health programs. Then we have the intentional funding by illiberal governments, knowing what they are doing by funding their own organizations, effectively creating echo chambers. We have a lot of Hungarian money and also a lot of Polish money from the state going into private entities, think tanks, NGO's, religious bodies, in order to then adopt a pro-family or anti-LGBT agenda. There have already been a few reports from the new government in Poland about all the millions of Złoty going into this type of infrastructure. A lot of Hungarian money goes into entities promoting the Hungarian family model which is basically anti-LGBT, trying to dissuade to opt abortion, not encouraging contraception and challenging women's right to equal pay.

Apart from the public money, another source has been Grassroots fundraising. A number of organizations set up an infrastructure in order to then generate petitions, for example to sign

a petition to tell Netflix to stop supporting an LGBT-Agenda. Or a petition to tell the UN to stop promoting abortion. Once you sign it, they try to influence public policies with that. Your name ends up in their database and you are hit up for small contributions here and then. One such outfit is CitizenGo based in Madrid. We know that they are able to generate 3 to 4 million Euro a year with this system

Another source of funding are our own economic and social elites. We have wealthy people in Europe as much as in the United States. A number of them have deep pockets and want to support these issues. Here we are talking about the billionaire but also the local millionaire class. In every country where there has been a growing far-right populist movement, they have been able to benefit from the billionaire and millionaire class – in the Netherlands, in France, in Portugal, in Italy and also in Germany and Austria. In addition, we see a number of anti-gender actors happing into this millionaire class where they invite and platform for example the Secretary General of the European Family Businesses organization. The European Family Businesses are the local millionaires, the little bourgeoisie in the provinces. Then you have the big fortunes, some corporate funding, for example by the founder and former president of El Corte Inglés in Spain (they have a known funding association with CitizenGo). One subgroup of the economic elites that we find in many of these circles are the former aristocratic families, mainly in Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Austria and Czech Republic. These families are interconnected with each other. That is why we find a lot of Habsburgs, Gutenbergs, Graf or Gräfin, Prinzessin etc., all these aristocratic names and titles, behind this. One very good example is the “Stiftung Ja zum Leben” in Germany. The Stiftung was founded by Johanna Gräfin von Westphalen, now deceased. She was very well connected


and also had a working group within the Christian Democrats called “Christdemokraten für das Leben”. Now her granddaughter Elisabeth Hohenberg, one of the branches of the Habsburg, is leading the foundation. In Germany and Austria, these aristocratic families lost political power at the end of the First World War but they did not lose their wealth. They were able to keep their residencies, castles, forests and real estate. In some cases, they remain among the wealthiest families in Germany and other countries.

The Stiftung Ja zum Leben does not provide any financial information. Nevertheless, they do have a page on their website where they list about 40 projects that they say they are supporting. Taking a closer look, you see that one of these projects, the “Alliance Defending Freedom”, is a US hate group that supports gay conversion therapy and overturned Roe vs. Wade. Another organization they are supporting is “teenstar”, an abstinence-only sexuality education, which has been rejected in Austria, because it is homophobic and extremist in its approach. Another one is “World Youth Alliance”, a fake youth group that is meant to be working on reproductive health but the way they work on it is to oppose the international consensus on reproductive health. When we look at who is behind this youth group, we find that it is the sons and daughters of the same aristocratic families who are financing these different things. Looking at the board, you will find Elisabeth Hohenberg of the Stiftung Ja zum Leben. You will also find Jean-Baptiste de Franssu, who is the president of the Vatican bank. Once you recognize these names, you are able to see who is really behind these organizations. In Europe, we have a loosely coordinated informal network of very wealthy individuals that financially support causes that are important for them like rolling back human rights for women or LGBT people. A similar network has existed in the United States for a long time. It

was created by the Koch donors network, where you have wealthy Americans getting together in different retreats deciding upon how to stop gay marriage.

What makes these networks problematic, or even dangerous? Can we not just ignore them or say: “These are not my opinions but they have the freedom of opinion and speech to have these opinions”?

What makes them dangerous is that they have a real chance of rolling back human rights for actual people. They not only have opinions but also want to translate these opinions into legal realities in their countries. And they have the financial means to influence the levers of power to reach that aim. If they were to be successful, then women’s access to abortion or contraception would

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be severely compromised, sexual minorities might even be more marginalized than now, young people may not have access to sexual education that they need in order to grow up as a fully functional adult. In Poland, at least six women died as a result of the ban of abortion. That did not need to happen.

When the anti-gender opinions are applied, it affects many different people unintentionally. With the heavily restricted access to abortion in Poland, also people who help the person who is trying to get an abortion are penalized. For example, a young man who was trying to take his partner to a hospital found himself before a judge. What does this do inside a couple if you have this kind of a possible dynamic?

How does the network act locally, e.g. Ordo Iuris, the anti-abortion organization in Poland and one of the biggest NGOs in the country? Why is it too easy to say: “Poland is conservative and catholic. That’s it.”?



I recognize that sentiment. I was invited by the European Parliament to testify at a hearing on the situation in Poland in February 2021, a couple of months after the ban of abortion. My statement to the European Parliament was: What is happening in Poland is not because Poland is being Poland, conservative and catholic. There is something else happening there, namely an organization called Ordo Iuris. The development in the country is being driven by an organization with an extremist religious agenda and has been able to infiltrate the workings of the Polish state. In Poland, their agenda is about abortion. But the same organization in other countries came up with the idea of LGBT free zones, of withdrawing from the Istanbul convention and of criminalizing sexuality education. Ordo Iuris in Poland has spread tentacles to other countries. So, what happens in Poland, will not stay in Poland, it will spread to other countries.

In Spain, the ultra-Catholic and far-right international network "CitizenGO" was founded in 2013 to "defend and promote life, family and liberty". Who is behind this?

CitizenGo is the modernization of the anti-gender movement into the 21st century where they take a lot of the grassroots support that they build on, manufacture and weaponize in order to influence policies. So, whereas a number of these anti-gender movements prior to this decade count on people who go to church every Sunday, to sign a letter or something like this, they took that same approach and modernized it by an online petition system. They were designed as a version of MoveOn or Avaaz who have petitions like "Save the dolphins" or "Save the rainforests" and have done the same thing for ultraconservative causes. But this initiative needed quite a bit of starter capital to get its platform online. They needed about half a million Euro to get the infrastructure

going. For that, they approached Spanish billionaires, US Christian right organizations, the Vatican and Russian oligarchs. But they present themselves as a grassroots led organization, saying they do not take public financing, that it is all financed through donations of people who sign their petitions. This is called Astroturfing; AstroTurf is fake grass you put on sports fields when you do not have real grass. The interests they represent are not the same as those they actually represent. It is as if the petrol industry was funding some fake environmental movement that is skeptical of climate change.

These alliances form the ideology for right-winged extremism. How do these far-right groups try to influence the European Parliament?

One way is that they engage in advocacy initiatives in the parliament like everybody else. This is legitimate; even though I am 100 percent against their ideas, I recognize their right to engage in this type of advocacy like everybody else.

On another level, the leaders of anti-gender movements from civil society have infiltrated the political party systems of many different countries. Some leaders of the VOX political party come from the pro-life-movement in Spain. Another good example is Beatrix von Storch who also comes from that movement and is now fully embedded in the AfD. Some of the anti-gender civil society organizations try to reorganize or register themselves as a political party. This gives them a fiscal and tax advantage. On the EU level, there were two such political parties, and when we alerted MEPs about this, they did some investigation and were able to stop the subsidies from the European Parliament to these political parties.

If they organize successfully, they are able to tackle into public subsidies to operate as a political party. On the European level, we have three such

parties getting funding from the European Parliament, which have anti-gender as core DNA: The biggest one is Patriots for Europe, created by the Hungarians with the Rassemblement National. Their approach is to promote a Hungarian model of the family as explained earlier. Another one is the European Conservatives and Reformists with Fratelli d'Italia as their head. The third one is the ECPM, the European Christian Political Movement. They are not a party in the EP but divided between different parties. They get their own specific grant, composed of many traditionalist protestants, centered around the Netherlands, some from Nordic countries, one from the Familienpartei – isolated people who are traditionalist Christians outside of the mainstream people's party Christian democracy who were left orphans in their own political system but have now found a "new family" to adopt them.

Another way of trying to influence, is to block progressive advances – which is normal and to be expected. But then, they lodge their own initiatives, where very often they know, if they are too overt about this, it will not work. Therefore, we have to deal with a lot of "Trojan horses". We need to identify who they are and where they are coming from. One such Trojan horse was the creation of the position in the European Commission called "A special envoy on freedom of religion and beliefs outside the European Union". This came about as an initiative of the Alliance Defending Freedom and some of their allies in the European Parliament to create a special envoy to protect Christians outside the European Union. In their mindset, Christians are the most persecuted people in the world. This initiative was announced at a meeting in Rome with the pope by the head of the three institutions, European Council, Commission and Parliament. The first person, who was appointed to it, was an anti-gender politician from Slovakia, Ján Figel'. He was



very involved in Agenda Europe and similar movements. So they had been able to put “their guy” inside the European Commission on this issue. Over time, we were able to dilute it, so that now the person holding it, is actually doing a responsible job.

Furthermore, they attempt to access public funding from the European Union. This will be in the new report that we will be releasing. We found that these anti-gender-organizations are not content to simply contest certain progressive issues. In the past ten years they have developed an “anti-gender alternative” that looks very convincing: If you do not like sexuality education, they have something instead, called teenstar. It looks like sexuality education, but will promote abstinence without you knowing it. If you do not like family planning, they provide an alternative that respects the women’s menstrual cycle and is basically catholic-inspired natural family planning, taking your temperature etc. If you do not like abortion, they suggest sup-



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porting organizations that provide an alternative to abortion and are called Christ pregnancy centers – this is what Italy is doing now. All these different alternatives look very convincing in a number of cases; they pass the sniff test. In some cases they have received funding from the European Union or public authorities.

The Stiftung Ja zum Leben has an Instagram Account where they call themselves “Schwangerenberatung”. It is very deceiving.

Exactly. If a religious woman ends up with a pregnancy, she does not want and tries to find advice from a reli-

gious organization, she should be entirely entitled to do so. But she should know what she is getting. However, if she is not religious and does not know what this organization is about, and then this organization manipulates her into a certain way of thinking, that is an entirely different thing altogether.

You are Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) in Brussels. Can you say a bit more about how the EPF came about? How is the EPF defending sexual and reproductive human rights?

We were created in the year 2000 as a platform for parliamentarians all around Europe and all democratic countries to work together to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights. The idea was to facilitate the work of parliamentarians to enact laws, policies and provide the funding that was necessary to meet the UN program of action on population and development that recognizes sexual and reproductive health and rights. At a strategic level, the idea was to bridge political differences between the main political actors so we do not end up in a polarized situation as it has existed in the United States for a long time now. We wanted to avoid a similar development in Europe.

We have three main areas in our work: One is parliamentary activities, which include workshops, delegations, conferences and study tours. The idea behind this is that MPs have a specific role to play. We depend on them to enact laws, policies, and hold governments to account. Also funding needs to be provided for all of this. Once they are elected, they may be well-intentioned but they are also generalists. They are maybe experts in their own field but you cannot expect a MP to have equal expertise on women’s health, agricultures, NATO, pension reform and other things. We try to provide a specific type of evidence-based expertise to parliamentarians

and to provide them with experiences for them to understand. This we do for example through study tours to developing countries, so they can see a family planning program in Uganda. Once they see these things with their own eyes, there is a connection and a credibility.

Once the parliamentarians are sensitized on certain issues, we are able to provide technical support to them. One very concrete way happened last year: I was invited to testify in the French Senate and in the National Assembly in the different hearings that they had leading to constitutional enshrinement of the right to abortion in France.

Another area we work in is transnational research in two specific areas. One is the anti-gender-movement. That produces several reports and articles. Our members in different countries were seeing this happening, or alerting us to it. From our office in Brussels, we were able to see very early on that it was not a case of national conservatism, but that the same organizations and individuals were appearing in different places – so something interconnected and strategic happened there.

Another area of research is policy comparisons. We identify a specific area and research what countries should be doing in this area. Based on this research we give each country a grade from 0 to 100; and based on this grade they get a color on the traffic light system. Then we use a map with countries colored from light green to deep red, where immediately it becomes visible how each country is doing compared to other countries. Hereby a complex issue can be boiled down to something very easy to understand. When people see such a map, they zoom in on their country, compare it with others and if it is not doing as well, they ask why. This is a constructive way of tickling the nationalism we all have.


How can European civil society defend itself against such an international ultra-

ABOUT THE INTERVIEW PARTNER

Neil Datta, born 1971, is the founder and executive director of the European Parliamentary Forum for sexual and reproductive rights (EPF) in Brussels. He has conducted in-depth research on anti-choice activity in Europe, publishing a report in 2018 that continues to receive worldwide media attention. Before founding the EPF, he coordinated the Parliamentary Programme of the International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network. Neil Datta holds a Master's Degree in European Public Administration from the College of Europe in Bruges and a Bachelor of Arts in History and Languages from the State University of New York at Binghamton.

conservative network to maintain pluralism and human rights?

There are five things civil society and other actors can do. All of them start with a "d". The first thing is to invest time in *discovery*. Confronted with these kind of challenges, civil society actors need to invest some time in researching their opponents. You organize differently if you are dealing with an organization who has an annual budget of 5000 Euro or 5 million Euro. Once they have done the research, they will be better prepared to

 The rights we think are important are up for being contested nowadays

understand and disarm them. A working way to *disarm*, is to preemptively go to the media and the decision makers, telling them what these organizations are going to do. We cannot stop anti-gender tactics from happening, but we can deal with them better, if everyone is prepared. The next step is to *dislocate*: These groups seek access to positions of power. They do not go by obvious names. They do not call themselves "The International Federation of Archconservatives against human rights" but "Alliance Defending Freedom". They have nice cuddly names. You need to tell people who they are. The fourth step is to *demonetize* them. In a number of cases they are able to get public funding which should be questioned. In addition, private donors should be held accounta-

ble for what they are doing. The fifth step is to *defend*: The rights we think are important are up for being contested nowadays, like women's rights or LGBT rights. Are what we consider rights really legally rights? The issue of abortion in most European countries technically is not a right but remains a crime that is unpunished if done under a certain procedure. Are we satisfied with this?

What are your next projects and steps?

Right now, we are updating the anti-gender-reports. We will be coming out with a new version in April.

We have also been getting a lot of requests from different parliaments around Europe about how they can improve their abortion and contraception legislation, specifically in light of the French putting abortion in their constitution. For example, it was being discussed in the Bundestag before the call for elections last year. We have similar things happening in a number of countries, so we will be providing

that type of technical support on request.

Also, a big thing we are going to look at is the impact of the Trump administration among all of this. We can already anticipate that there will be massive funding cuts to all the international actors. Some diplomatic turbulences will take place in terms of supporting women's reproductive rights at an EU and international level. So we are busy preparing our political leaders for that.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Schwarz, Münster

Das im Interview benannte Recht auf Abtreibung wird in dieser Form in der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (DBK) nicht geteilt. Das Thema wird aber von rechtspopulistischen Netzwerken benutzt, um auch Frauen- und LGBT-Rechte zu beschneiden. Zum näheren Verständnis der Position der DBK sehen Sie hier: <https://kath-buero.de/stellungnahme/anhoerung-entwurf-regelung-schwangerschaftsabbruch>.