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# EU urged to halt flow of 'dark money' into groups opposing equal rights

Sunday 13 March 2022, by [ARCHER Nandini](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2022).

## **openDemocracy told the European Parliament how cash from the US Christian Right is funding movements against women's and LGBTQ rights**

Those seeking to block or roll back women's and LGBTIQ rights are transnational, coordinated, organised and incredibly wealthy, openDemocracy today told the European Parliament.

Tatevik Hovhannisyanyan, who leads the Europe and Eurasia work on openDemocracy's [Tracking the Backlash](#) project, was [invited to give evidence](#) at a special hearing by the committee on women's rights and gender equality.

"I always felt Europe was the best place in the world to live as a woman," said Hovhannisyanyan.

"Given this, I was truly startled when last year our team of feminist investigative journalists discovered that, in at least eight European countries, women were provided with an unproven, unethical treatment to 'reverse' medical abortions." She added: "These activities were pushed by US religious extremists."

openDemocracy's global [investigation](#) into so-called 'abortion pill reversal' (APR) led Canada's national society of gynaecologists and obstetricians to issue a formal statement, for the first time, against this 'treatment'.

Additionally, the doctor who offered APR to our undercover reporter in the UK is now under investigation by the General Medical Council (GMC), the main regulatory authority for British doctors. She is currently barred from practising medicine without supervision.

But no action has yet been taken in any European country. The eight European countries featured in our investigation are: Armenia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Spain, the UK and Ukraine.

"This is just one example of many, showing how the old continent is failing to ensure people's sexual and reproductive health and rights," said Hovhannisyanyan.

openDemocracy's team of feminist journalists set out in 2017 to track the backlash against women's and LGBTIQ rights. "Over the last 15 years, anti-democratic actors have been using anti-democratic tactics to pursue anti-democratic goals," said Hovhannisyanyan. "They shut huge numbers of people out of human rights."

## **'Dark money' from the US**

Last year, openDemocracy investigated [28 US Christian right-wing groups](#) that oppose sexual and reproductive rights, and found Europe was the region where most money was spent in total.

“Anti-gender funding has increased dramatically over the last decade,” said Hovhannisyan. “Between 2007 and 2019, US Christian Right organisations allocated more than \$98m to spend in the continent, mainly fuelling campaigns against women’s and LGBT rights, sex education and abortion.

“This number is an underestimation because some of these groups do not register as NGOs, but as churches, and they are therefore under no obligation to disclose their financial data.”

She explained that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and the Federalist Society were the four biggest spenders in Europe.

“We’ve followed some of this ‘dark money’ around the world for many years and have revealed that key targets of this funding include European courts,” Hovhannisyan said.

The European offices of ACLJ and ADF have [intervened](#) in dozens of European court cases – for instance, wading into the constitutional court debate about abortion in Poland. ADF also intervened in Italy’s case against same-sex marriage.

These groups do not disclose where they get their money from in the US. But in late 2021, openDemocracy [revealed](#) two major sources: the National Christian Foundation and the Fidelity Charitable Foundation.

### **‘They fear the light of day’**

Neil Datta, secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, also spoke at today’s hearing.

He said of these groups opposing gender equality: “We know who they are and how they’re funded and how they’re organised. We know they are most impactful when they are able to strike in ambush, when people are unaware of them – that’s when they have the most success.

“We also know that they fear the light of day. They don’t like public scrutiny of their leaders, their associations with undemocratic actors, sources of funding and overall agenda.”

He added: “We know that they are transnationally organised.”

In other words, local initiatives against abortion rights, same-sex marriage or sex education, from Croatia to Hungary to France, are not actually local. “They’re part of the local expressions of a transnational anti-gender network,” said Datta.

He pointed to the need to raise awareness of the groups that were driving resistance to women’s and LGBTIQ rights on a local level.

He also urged European parliamentarians to remove anti-women and anti-LGBTIQ groups from decision-making spaces, halt their public funding and require more transparency around spending in Europe.

### **‘We let that happen on our watch’**

The vast majority of MEPs spoke in favour of doing more to counter anti-rights movements in Europe.

German MEP Maria Noichl told the committee: “There are women who are participating in these anti-gender movements, and that is a pity. They’re often a protective shield. In other words, if women are involved in anti-abortion movements, then it’s assumed to be right for women.”

Dutch MEP Samira Rafaela said: “I’m extremely worried about this anti-gender movement raging around Europe and beyond. We know this ultra-conservative agenda doesn’t discriminate against who it targets – women, transgender people, the queer community and anybody else that does not fit in the category of ‘male and pale’.”

She added: “We also know they’ve managed to tap into public funding, EU funding – and we should be ashamed that this has happened, and it’s outrageous that our funding mechanisms can be abused in this manner. We let that happen on our watch.”

But Margarita de la Pisa Carrión, an MEP from the Spanish right-wing party Vox, said: “I am, under Europe’s criteria, apparently considered to be anti-gender.” She added: “Human life is a gift on earth” and accused the hearing of “curtailing human liberties”.

“I’d like to say this hearing is based on the official positions of the European Parliament,” the session chair and Polish MEP Robert Biedroń responded.

“I think that the answer is in Europe,” Hovhannisyan concluded. “There are institutions and governments that could demand greater transparency of transnational actors.

“But will they take action, and will they prove that the old continent has the highest regard for human rights, gender equality and safety? I don’t know.”

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