

BOOK REVIEW

***Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention.* By Andrea Krizsán and Conny Roggeband. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2021. 248 pp. \$74.99 (cloth), ISBN: 9783030790691.**

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The Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence has become a major topic of academic discussion, with several books and journal articles published on the subject (e.g., Acar and Popa 2016; De Vido 2016; McQuigg 2017; Niemi, Peroni, and Stoyanova 2020; Ün and Arıkan 2022). Andrea Krizsán and Conny Roggeband's book stands out because it approaches the backlash against the Istanbul Convention as a threat to democracy through a comparative study of four countries in the Central and Eastern European region (CEE): Croatia, Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary. *Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention* demonstrates with convincing arguments that the Istanbul Convention has become a key site for studying contemporary anti-gender movements. Its comparative approach to national cases brings new and important insights to a phenomenon that represents global trends. This book contributes to the field by engaging with several debates that are undeniably relevant to gender and politics. While gender and politics scholars previously focused on theorizing the expansion and politicization of gender equality norms, they now also focus on the processes responsible for their stagnation and regression.

Various academic publications have warned against the dangers of anti-gender trends, which are particularly alarming for democracy. In this book, the authors posit that because anti-gender attacks are core to democratic erosion, the status of democracy must be assessed using concepts that are sensitive to gender-equal democracies. This book is a valuable contribution as it contextualizes anti-gender politics with local examples of policy backsliding and dismantling in the CEE. Further, the book makes explicit the similarities and differences among the anti-gender movements in the four countries under analysis. For instance, the well-known rhetoric of “gender ideology”—used extensively by anti-gender actors to define the Istanbul Convention “as a tool to promote ‘gender ideology’ and foreign imposition of norms” (v)—takes different shapes in the four countries (see Chapter 3). In this way, the book

makes an original contribution to current understandings of anti-gender movements and their strategies, which ultimately advance possibilities for counteractions.

Throughout the book, democracy is the connecting thread that is used to analyze the attacks against the Istanbul Convention, policy backsliding, and the direct impact for women. A clear objective is to theoretically link anti-gender politics, feminist resilience, and policy changes with the broader concept of democracy. In relation to that, the book makes important advancements. First, it places the politics of violence against women at the center of the analysis of anti-gender politics. Moving this policy area from the margins to the center is novel and matters because, although it used to be viewed as one of the least controversial issues (unlike, e.g., reproductive rights), issues of violence against women take now central stage in anti-gender politics, as Krizsán and Roggeband decisively demonstrate in the book.

Second, the book makes an important contribution by counterbalancing its findings on anti-gender politics with an empirical analysis of feminist responses and resilience in the region. The findings show the significant role played by feminist organizations in democratic spaces for upholding democratic principles of equality. The book is also a statement to how efficient and responsive feminist resistance can be to undemocratic practices. Third, the book tackles a central theoretical debate in the field, which consists of connecting the backsliding of gender equality policies and the erosion of democracy in Europe. Through its comparative approach, the book highlights one similarity among the four countries: gender equality policy backsliding and de-democratization trends happening together. Notably, the book presents compelling arguments that suggest that democratic erosion is ongoing when states become supportive of anti-gender politics.

These are important findings that have the potential to push knowledge in the field forward and to reach more mainstream discussion about current challenges to democracy. The theoretical reasoning on which the main argument relies could have claimed more assertively the effects of the attacks against the Istanbul Convention on democracy in Europe. For instance, Krizsán and Roggeband state that strong opposition to the Istanbul Convention emerged because the debate became public, instead of following a “soft technocratic ratification process” (31), as is often the case in the region. However, I see a paradox here that remains undiscussed: is democracy not precisely about debating opposing opinions publicly? In other words, a deeper discussion of the theoretical tenets about democracy, such as agonism and antagonism in gender equality debates, could have strengthened the authors’ argument that attacks on the Istanbul Convention do indeed threaten democracy.

Overall, this book offers an extensive analysis on the politicization of gender and democracy in the context of the attacks against the Istanbul Convention in four selected countries of the CEE region, and it will be useful to many. It is an absolute must-read for any scholars wishing to better understand the current challenges to gender equality policy making in Europe and beyond. But I also warmly recommend it to those interested into feminist democratic resilience.

References

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