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Article

## Gender Politics of “Illiberal Pragmatics” in the Polish Defense Sector

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### Abstract

Since 2015, the illiberal Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) government in Poland has engaged in campaigns against “gender ideology,” rolling back several equality mechanisms and provisions, and mainstreaming traditionalist values into state policy. Following from this, scholarship has predominantly addressed PiS gender politics through the concepts of anti-gender backlash and gender backsliding. Against this background, Polish defense policy constitutes a puzzling realm that significantly escapes these frameworks, revealing instead a mix of backsliding, institutional and discursive continuity, and positive gender change. While the displacement of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment office has erased similar bodies in the defense sector, the government has swiftly created a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, strengthened the Armed Forces Women’s Council, and continued prior policy and discourse on women’s service. Meanwhile, the increased defense preparations following the war in eastern Ukraine have doubled women’s percentage in the armed forces, partially regendering the very idea and practice of defense. To explore this ambiguity, the article draws from feminist institutionalism and multi-sited sociological methods. It proposes to move beyond backlash towards the analytical concept of illiberal pragmatics—a complex, gendered logic of governance which seeks to balance illiberals’ dedication to national sovereignty with pragmatic political, security, demographic, and economic considerations. Under illiberal pragmatics, women’s interests are pursued within a more conservative framework, with gender norms simultaneously upheld and destabilized across different realms. Nevertheless, the key feature of illiberal gender politics lies not in backsliding, but in a pragmatic balancing act between national integrity and structural pressures for change.

### Keywords

anti-gender; defense; gender; illiberalism; military; Poland; security

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

After the 2015 electoral success of the illiberal right-wing Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) party in Poland, the BBC ran a video story on a Polish teenager narrating her participation in the recently boosted school military education program, along with an article on new self-defense courses offered to women by the Ministry of National Defense (MOD). Both stories have arguably functioned as low-profile “trivia,” hiding on the margins of mainstream international discourse focused on the anti-gender backlash in Poland under illiberal governance—the erosion of liberal gender equality infrastructure, and the mainstreaming of “tradi-

tional family values” into state policy. However, this article argues that omitting these silent gendered developments in the currently expanding defense sector would be a dire intellectual mistake, as they may hold a key to a better understanding of the ambiguous workings of Polish illiberal gender politics as such.

Following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in eastern Ukraine, the PiS government has sought to strengthen Poland’s defense capabilities for turbulent times. This renewed focus on defense has led to growing military spending, army modernization and personnel buildup, and creation of new volunteer channels engaging citizens in defense, among them Territorial Defense Forces (WOT), defense

education programs in schools and universities, and state-supported pro-defense organizations. These undertakings translated into the growing presence and normalization of women in the rapidly reforming defense sector. In the Polish Armed Forces (PAF) alone, the percentage of women has doubled under PiS governance, and the opening of new voluntary channels of defense participation has worked to decrease the long-prevailing gendered gaps in security knowledge and skills in Polish society. Moreover, while anti-gender backsliding has run rampant in many spheres of Polish policy and politics under illiberal governance, the defense sector has largely been spared these radical innovations. Instead, the swift implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) for the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), among others, suggests the government has cautiously continued prior policy commitments and discursive lines with regards to women in defense and security.

These patterns of continuity and moderate gender progress in defense may seem puzzling given the overall tendency of mainstream feminist literature to analyze illiberal gender politics in the frameworks of anti-gender backlash or backsliding (e.g., Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019; Piscopo & Walsh, 2020). By means of overcoming the limitations of the backlash framework, this article proposes the concept of the gender politics of “illiberal pragmatics,” understood as a logic of gendered governance which seeks to balance the overall dedication to national sovereignty and integrity with pragmatic considerations. This innovative analytical framework allows the article to explore and explain the “messy” coexistence of gendered institutional backsliding, continuity, and positive change across different sites at once.

The next section situates the concept of illiberal pragmatics against key findings from literature on anti-gender politics in Central Europe, mapping out patterns of backsliding in the realm of defense in Poland. Section 3 briefly introduces the theoretical and methodological approaches informing the article—feminist institutionalism and feminist security studies, as well as multi-sited sociology. It also discusses research methods and sources informing the analysis, among them expert interviews with security “insiders,” policy documents, and official government communication. Moving beyond instances of backsliding discussed earlier, Section 4 explores patterns of continuity under illiberal governance, bringing attention to spaces where the MOD has cautiously followed prior established policy and discursive paths. Section 5 highlights patterns of regendering observable in Polish defense after the critical juncture posed by the 2014 war in eastern Ukraine. The concluding section summarizes the main arguments, and situates the concept of illiberal pragmatics amidst broader critical scholarly calls to rethink the gender politics of the New Right.

## 2. Illiberal Gender Politics in Defense: From “Backsliding” to “Illiberal Pragmatics”

With the rise of political actors contesting both liberalism and “gender ideology” as enemy figures globally, the gender politics of illiberalism (used here to refer to political projects that define themselves against liberal democracy and liberalism, of which they have a prior experience; see e.g., Laruelle, 2021) has drawn considerable academic interest (e.g., Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Kováts, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). There is a general scholarly consensus that anti-gender politics has been employed by right-wing actors as a “symbolic glue” tying together a new anti-liberal coalition around the contestation of such diverse issues as gender mainstreaming, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), sexual education, gender studies, and LGBTQ rights (Grzebalska et al., 2017). As argued by scholars, the use of “gender” as an “empty signifier” by the Right (Mayer & Sauer, 2017) has partially reflected the very conceptual polysemy in feminist activism and academia where the concept is defined in varied ways, referring to biological or “cultural” sex, unequal power structures between men and women, as well as a self-defined sense of identity (Kováts, 2018; Pető, 2021, p. 314). In the realm of feminist security alone, binding documents such as the UNSCR 1325 focus on advancing women’s rights and equality, while queer reinterpretations call for the need to “refute the assumption of a sexual binary” as such (Hagen, 2016). This polysemy notwithstanding, scholarship generally concurs that the electoral successes of illiberal or right-wing populist parties globally constitute a critical juncture for gender equality institutions and measures, with the mainstreaming of anti-gender ideology into popular discourse and state policy causing serious erosion of existing equality infrastructure (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019).

Faced with this critical juncture, dominant strands of feminist scholarship tend to view illiberal gender politics through the explanatory frameworks of backlash or backsliding, narrating current political reformulations of gender equality as a pushback against, and reversal of, earlier achievements, interrupting an otherwise assumed, linear trajectory of gender progress (Faludi, 1991; Grabowska, 2014; Piscopo & Walsh, 2020; Szczygielska, 2019). Among these backsliding patterns scholars name policy decay, the undermining of implementation, the erosion of consultation mechanisms, and the discursive delegitimization of gender equality policies (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019, p. 12). These broader, aforementioned patterns of eroding the legal and discursive basis for gender equality policies in Poland have also affected the defense sector. One potent example is the institutional displacement and dilution of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment office in 2020 (Gawęda, 2021), which also automatically ended the innovative Women in Uniformed Services consultancy

team working under its auspices since 2014. Moreover, the body of the Plenipotentiary for Women's Military Service of the MOD established in 2006 was liquidated in 2018 after years of prior institutional displacements—with the office combined with the Women's Affairs Council in the PAF in 2009, re-separated in 2016, and dismantled by PiS alongside the institutional strengthening of the Council which was put directly under the Minister of National Defense.

PiS's campaigns against "gender ideology" on both domestic and EU level with regards to such issues as the Istanbul Convention (Zacharenko, 2020, p. 21) and EU foreign policy (von der Burchard, 2020) have also affected the ability of Polish "femocrats"—women's rights advocates holding government or civil servant positions (Sawer, 2016)—to induce transformative change in the defense sector. As argued by one interviewee from within the former administration, even prior to PiS coming to power, the hostile atmosphere around "gender" has turned various issues related to equality into a politically suspicious agenda, with defense and security femocrats facing internal pressures from superiors to both explain and suppress their relationship to feminism and "gender ideology" (interview with former high-level ministerial employee, February 11, 2022; see also O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2020). Moreover, culture wars over "gender," along with their policy repercussions such as the restriction of abortion rights, may arguably negatively impact women's ability to meaningfully participate in the security sector, as well as receive proper protection during conflict.

Against this background of policy and discursive backsliding, the gender politics of the Polish defense sector also exhibits more puzzling patterns of continuity and positive change that go beyond erosion and reversal. As the next analytical sections will discuss in more detail, despite the hostile atmosphere around gender mainstreaming, the Polish MOD under PiS has largely continued along the prior policy and discursive path dependency on a number of issues, while the critical juncture presented by the war in eastern Ukraine has also led to a paradigm shift in Polish defense organization that ignited processes of regendering of defense (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016) as an idea and a practice. Given the above, this article argues that to make sense of the complexity of illiberal gender politics in Poland, scholarship would benefit from moving beyond normative and definitive concepts such as gender backsliding which "provide prescriptions of what to see" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Instead, this article proposes a more analytical concept of "illiberal pragmatics" which merely suggests "directions along which to look" (p. 7) in order to disentangle the workings of illiberal gender politics in a given context.

The concept of "illiberal pragmatics" originally stems from scholars of sexual politics in contemporary Singapore who conceptualize it as a paradoxical space where authoritarian, post-colonial, and neoliberal currents intersect in surprising ways in social and legal pol-

icy, forming ambivalent political conditions and subjectivities (Phillips, 2014; Yue, 2007; Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012). Applied to the Polish context under PiS, the gender politics of illiberal pragmatics is defined here as a logic of gendered governance which aims to balance the party's overall dedication to protecting national sovereignty and integrity with broader pragmatic political, security, demographic, and economic considerations. It is by now well-established in scholarship that PiS has significantly converged with radical anti-gender discourses and networks, a tactic driven primarily by a pragmatic view that utilizing anti-gender politics can serve the party's political goals (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). What is far less discussed, however, is the fact that the workings of PiS gender politics are often more ambiguous and contradictory than theories of backlash under anti-gender convergence would suggest. Instead, this article argues that the key feature of illiberal gender politics lies in its pragmatic balancing maneuver of safeguarding national integrity amidst structural pressures for change. As such, illiberal gender politics subsequently strengthens and dislocates gender hierarchies across different realms of policy and discourse. Within this logic of governance, both gender policy continuity and positive change can still occur, albeit most probably within a more limited, national-conservative framework. As the Polish case study showcases, amidst anti-gender campaigns, gender equality policy in defense has still been pursued within the framework of equality between women and men, steering away from both more ambitious intersectional approaches, and poststructuralist understandings of gender. Moreover, women's interests and rights in defense were advanced insofar as they were seen as a pragmatic adjustment, rather than challenge to, national security, social cohesion, and cultural sovereignty. In light of this, Polish illiberal gender politics also escapes the popular explanatory framework of "femonationalism" (Farris, 2017), as it induces gendered transformations of defense without openly evoking feminist discourses, and without positioning the Right as the defender of gender progress.

### 3. Theoretical Background and Methods

Exploring the gender politics of illiberal pragmatics necessitates a specific type of theoretical and methodological approach able to trace institutional change and continuity across different realms simultaneously. This article predominantly draws its analytical frameworks from feminist institutionalist research. This perspective seeks to explore ways in which institutions are structured along gendered lines, as well as explain how and when institutional processes lead to positive gendered change or, on the contrary, to the obstruction of such transformative processes (Gawęda, 2021; Thomson, 2018; Waylen, 2008). The article also draws from relevant works within feminist security studies which study the "gendering" and "regendering" of security institutions and policies

in particular (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016; O’Sullivan & Krulišová, 2020; Snyder, 1999). By means of situating the analysis of the defense sector in the context of the illiberal turn in contemporary Poland, the article also relies on literature on Central European anti-gender politics (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Grzebalska & Petó, 2018; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019).

Feminist institutionalist research that informed this article tends to focus on institutional transformations in a clearly delineated “site,” be it a policy or strategy document like the UNSCR 1325 or the Istanbul Convention, or a government body like the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment. However, given that under illiberal pragmatics, gender policy is structured differently across different realms, focusing on the trajectory of one institution or policy could only offer a limited view of the entirety of gendered transformations of defense in Poland. In order to overcome this shortcoming, the article draws its methodological inspiration from multi-sited sociology (Nadai & Maeder, 2005). This approach originally emerged from the constatation that single locale-oriented methodologies of classical ethnographic research cannot adequately account for the interconnected and “fuzzy” character of contemporary socio-political processes (Marcus, 1995). Instead, the multi-sited approach recommended to follow the object of study across different institutional, topical, or geographical “sites,” treating the findings acquired from them as “elements of a puzzle that are put together to form a complete picture” of the phenomenon in question (Nadai & Maeder, 2005, p. 20). In the context of this article, this meant, firstly, conducting research in and on several institutional and policy “sites” related to defense—the Polish NAP for UNSCR 1325, relevant gender equality infrastructure, the MOD, Polish war memory, as well as new defense institutions such as WOT and paramilitary organizing. Secondly, the multi-sited approach rested on the analytical maneuver of constant juxtaposition of the way gender politics is structured in these different spheres to arrive at a more complete picture.

The article is based on many years of research exploring the post-2015 restructuring of defense in Poland and its gender dimensions across different sites, using a triangulation of mixed qualitative methods and data sources. Research conducted specifically for this article comprised the analysis of relevant post-2015 strategic documents (e.g., National Security Strategy) and official communication of government and military bodies (press releases published on MOD and army websites), media interviews and articles related to defense reforms, non-participant observation of a number of defense-related public and closed events, as well as six semi-structured expert interviews conducted between January and March 2022 with Polish defense and security analysts and journalists, gender and security academics and professionals. The primary goal of the interviews was to provide context and expert, in-depth understanding of

information from publicly available sources. On request of these “elite” interviewees who quoted confidentiality reasons, interviews were not recorded but detailed notes were taken and written up after each conversation. Secondary materials were selected based on their relevance to the topic of gender politics in defense under PiS governance. After an exploratory analysis, all materials were coded under three emergent themes: erosion/reversal, continuity, and positive change.

Additionally, the article also draws from a number of prior research projects. The first one is a fieldwork study of the gender politics of Polish paramilitary organizing conducted between the years 2016–2018 (Grzebalska, 2021). Given that paramilitary organizing has arguably provided a blueprint and personnel basis for post-2015 defense reforms, findings from this project offered a better understanding of how women, gender equality, and femininity function within these new defense institutions. The second one is a comparative Visegrad study on military engagement in Covid-19 pandemic response which informed this article’s analysis of the ongoing transformation of defense and soldiering in Poland (Grzebalska & Maďarová, 2021). The third one is research on women in Polish war and military memory which helped elucidate discursive continuity and change under illiberal governance (Grzebalska, 2017). In line with the spirit of the multi-sited approach, findings from all these “sites” were juxtaposed to form a more adequate understanding of how these different “threads” of illiberal gender politics in defense are interwoven together.

#### **4. Continuing Along Path Dependency? Conservative Gender Mainstreaming in Defense**

While broader patterns of gender backsliding in Polish policy and politics have also affected the defense sector, the latter has not been the direct target of radical anti-gender discourses and policy innovations. Instead, this section argues that the PiS government has largely taken the path of cautious and conservative continuation of prior policy commitments and official rhetoric related to women and equality in defense.

In Poland, key policy provisions and regulations concerning women’s military service followed from the country’s accession to NATO. Year 1999 saw the establishment of the Women’s Affairs Council in the PAF, and gradually, women have been admitted to military schools of various levels and volunteer military service, with the military adjusting its organizational culture and regulations with regards to such issues as physical requirements or maternity and paternity leave. While overall progress for military women after 1999 was duly noted in academic and policy works (Frączek-Broda, 2019), so has been the military’s resistance to egalitarian change to its organizational culture. In fact, a number of experts consulted for this article saw gender progress in the Polish defense sector after NATO accession as insufficient and

primarily driven by “political correctness” rather than an “authentic dedication to equality” (interview with a security scholar, February 11, 2022). Arguably, this state of affairs has largely continued under PiS, with government officials cautiously moving along the path dependency, neither revoking prior commitments to women’s rights in defense, nor seeking to champion more ambitious gender policy reforms.

For instance, after media articles alleging mobbing and sexual harassment in the Military Police, the MOD strengthened the Women’s Council by putting it under direct supervision of the Minister, along with ordering the overview of procedures, quoting the need to “solve problems rather than sweep them under the rug” as a rationale (MOD, 2018). While concrete effects of this rhetorical support so far remain unknown, the latter is nevertheless worth noting given PiS’s attempts to withdraw from the measures on combating violence against women laid out by the Istanbul Convention. Moreover, while government officials’ statements on Poland being “ready” for a woman general have been uttered for a decade, media reports suggest that President Duda has fast-tracked this concern with the Armed Forces (Lesiecki, 2018). In the meantime, WOT has promoted Lieutenant Colonel Anna Czajowska-Malachowska to the Commander of the Light Infantry Battalion, the first woman to assume such a role in this new territorial segment of the PAF (Mycio, 2022).

Perhaps the most potent example of this logic of cautious path dependency, however, is the curious implementation of the WPS agenda initiated by the landmark UNSCR 1325 adopted in 2000. The UNSCR 1325 was the first United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that was solely devoted to women’s situation in conflict and post-conflict settings. It stressed the importance of women’s equal participation in all decision-making processes, called for the protection of women and girls from war crimes, and urged the incorporation of gender perspectives in peace and security efforts (Cohn et al., 2004). Since then, the UNSC adopted nine more resolutions on WPS that altogether form an internationally binding policy framework to be implemented by member states and relevant actors. Since its adoption by the UNSC, the creation of Polish NAP was high on the agenda of the then MOD representative for women’s military service, Bożena Szubińska. Still, Poland has not produced its NAP until as late as 2018, when it was swiftly prepared under the PiS government (Government of Poland, 2018). While the document was largely kept under the media radar, it was consulted with a number of governmental and non-governmental actors, among them the Polish branch of Women in International Security, and was evaluated positively by feminist foreign policy experts (Kopka-Piątek & Reichardt, 2020). The Polish NAP was since extended until 2023 by the decision of the Council of Ministers.

One reason for its uncontroversial adoption under PiS governance may lie in the nature of the Polish NAP

itself: its largely external orientation, and its primary focus on women and girls. Like in most national contexts, the Polish NAP is predominantly outward- rather than inward-looking, continuing the problematic focus of WPS in general on “insecurity overseas rather than within the national context” (Shepherd, 2016, p. 324). By centering on international peace and security, the Polish NAP avoids politically-sensitive, domestic developments related to the backsliding in reproductive rights and erosion of equality mechanisms in Poland, as well as the militarization following from the worsening security environment in the region. Moreover, like other regional NAPs, the Polish NAP steers away from more ambitious or transformative agendas (see also O’Sullivan & Krulišová, 2020). As such, it predominantly focuses on the safety and rights of women and girls, and largely mirrors the “equality of opportunity” paradigm, thus measuring equality by the percentage of female personnel and existence of relevant trainings and measures.

Another reason for the swift preparation of the NAP may have been its significance for Poland’s broader foreign and security policy goals under the PiS government which firmly recognize “developing cooperation in...global formats” as a way to strengthen Poland’s position in the international security system (Government of Poland, 2020, p. 25). Work on the NAP coincided with Poland’s efforts to become an elected, non-permanent member of the UNSC in the years 2018–2019. As argued by two interviewed experts, not proceeding with the NAP may have affected Poland’s ability to gain the seat against the counter-candidacy of Bulgaria, a cost too high to pay given Poland’s desire to shape international responses to the Russian threat. Lending support to interviewees’ assessment, Poland’s new National Security Strategy indeed recognizes the pursuance of the WPS agenda as an important element of the country’s commitment to international security (Government of Poland, 2020, p. 25).

Finally, patterns of continuity are also visible in the official discourse on women’s military service. The early years of the gender transformation of the military were dominated by strong resistance based in traditionalist views on femininity and masculinity (Latawski, 2003, p. 33). Over time, wider societal and legal changes have seeped into the defense sector, also transforming the official rhetoric around women’s service towards one merging “new” notions of professionalism and equality with more conservative tropes of motherhood and “female support” for past independence struggles. Analysis of official MOD statements issued on International Women’s Day between the years 2013–2021 revealed that this discourse has largely continued under PiS. This reflects the party’s overall tendency to combine the view of women as mothers and reproducers of national culture with pledges for women’s equality in the workplace (Gwiazda, 2020). Far from mobilizing radical anti-gender discourses, high-profile PiS officials have supported

women's military service by writing it into older Polish traditions. As former Minister of National Defense Antoni Macierewicz argued in his speech on International Women's Day: "It is not only about showing respect to women who serve in the army today...it is also about recalling a great Polish tradition" (Szefer MON powołał pełnomocnik, 2016). This "Polish tradition" that the Minister referred to is the history of women's wide-scale mobilization for the 19th- and 20th-century Polish independence struggles which saw the advancement of their citizen and soldiering rights (Grzebalska, 2018).

WOT in particular has pursued this type of memory politics in its communication. One WOT brigade was named after Elżbieta Zawacka, a WW2 Special Operations executive agent who played a role in granting women equal soldiering rights in 1944. WOT also showcases past women freedom fighters on its social media. For instance, one anniversary post commemorating the WW2 Home Army presents a male soldier paying homage to his grandmother, a member of the anti-Nazi resistance. While presenting women's engagement in defense as "normal" and unproblematic, this maneuver also significantly refashions and idealizes the past. It both silences the story of women's inequality in defense past and present, and subordinates women's historical emancipatory claims to the master narrative of harmonious "national emancipation" (Grzebalska, 2017). This memory politics showcases the logic of illiberal pragmatics as such—its attempt to pragmatically balance national integrity with structural transformative pressures. Within this logic, the pursuance of women's interests takes the form of "anti-modernist emancipation" (Gelnarová & Pető, 2016, p. 79). While women's advancement towards equal status in defense is accepted, the official rhetoric tends to locate it not in the modernist project of unbridled gender progress towards a better future, but, rather, in a reinvented and idealized past (Gelnarová & Pető, 2016).

As this section argued, despite the broader tactical convergence of PiS with anti-gender politics in a number of spheres, gender politics in Polish defense has so far largely represented a conservative continuation of prior policy and discursive paths established under former liberal democratic governments. While after 2015 women's issues have not been pursued in more ambitious frameworks, these cautious continuities nevertheless reveal the pragmatic dedication of PiS to preserving the policy and discursive basis of women's equality in defense in light of pressing foreign policy and international security considerations.

### 5. Critical Juncture and New Institutions: Towards the Regendering of Defense?

As the above section argued, the post-1999 efforts of mainstreaming gender into the defense sector have brought rather stalemated progress for women. By 2016, women constituted only 4.7% of Polish army per-

sonnel and were greatly underrepresented in leadership positions, with this combined lack of "critical mass" and "critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2009) contributing to the resilience of the overall military-masculine organizational culture. Defense has also remained a male-dominated sphere societally, with significant gender gaps in defense-related knowledge and skills. By 2014, only 6% of surveyed women (against 45% of men) declared they have undergone some type of military trainings (Public Opinion Research Center, 2014). Against this status quo of professionalized and male-dominated defense, the 2014 Russian war in eastern Ukraine has served as a critical juncture, significantly shifting the path dependency of the Polish defense sector. Consequently, new institutions and concepts of defense organization were created which brought with them novel patterns of regendering (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016) previously not possible.

Since PiS came to power, Poland has increased its defense spending, along with arms and personnel buildup (Mutschler & Bales, 2020, p. 19). This militarization has been accompanied by a slow and largely understudied paradigm shift in defense organization away from the prior model resting primarily on allied defense and deterrence and professional armed forces protecting the civilian society. PiS has centered its efforts on developing "common civic defense...based on the efforts of the entire nation" (Government of Poland, 2020, p. 15) as a new element of defense organization. This attempt to bring more citizens into defense has predominantly translated into building WOT, a volunteer and territorial segment of the armed forces. It also included the formation of new extra-military channels for volunteer participation in defense such as military education programs in public schools and universities, along with pro-defense and paramilitary organizations which have existed before, yet were put under state control and granted more support after 2015.

Some feminist institutionalists suggest that new institutions create potentials for shifting the gender regime more so than reforming old institutions does. As argued by Waylen, "the creation of new institutions can offer opportunities for gender concerns to be incorporated more easily and fundamentally at the outset of an institution's life than it is to 'add them in' at a later stage" (2008, p. 273). The recent move towards the model of "common civic defense" largely supports this claim. The WOT and other channels of citizens' volunteer engagement in defense have allowed for new patterns of regendering of defense (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016), understood here as a "structural change premised on women's inclusion, the revaluing of 'feminine' practices, and the displacement of gendered hierarchies" within the defense sector (Grzebalska, 2021, p. 3).

The first aspect of this post-2015 regendering of Polish defense can be recorded in the growing inclusion and acceptance of women within WOT and other novel volunteer defense institutions. By 2022, WOT has

reached almost 20% of female participants (Pietrzak, 2022). Even higher numbers were recorded in new defense education programs—in 2020, women constituted 43% of students of the Certified Military Classes, and 39% of Military Preparation Branches (email communication from MOD, October 5, 2020). In one youth paramilitary civil society organization, female participation has even reached 60% in two consecutive years (Grzebalska, 2021, p. 7). Due to the high numbers of women mobilized by WOT in particular, the overall percentage of female personnel in the PAF has doubled during PiS governance. In both official communication and closed meetings I attended, the growing participation of women in defense has been narrated by officials as a positive, unproblematic process of both “catching back up” with Polish traditions, and “catching up” with international standards. As stated in WOT official materials: “All over the world, social stereotypes have been broken....The society has evolved, much like the military...with women soldiers blazing new career trails for themselves and the next generation” (Jędruszczuk & Pietrzak, 2021).

What lies behind this growing inclusion are broader structural challenges related to personnel enlargement, with WOT recruiters long struggling to reach the size planned in 2017. In military sociology, the army, much like the family, is seen as a “greedy institution”—one placing great demands on individuals in terms of their loyalty, time, and commitment (Segal, 1986). In the context of Poland’s demographic decline, coupled with growing pressures on families created by neoliberal economic policy, military planners may see women’s engagement as crucial to keep acceptable recruitment and retention levels, and ensure security for turbulent times (interview with defense analyst, February 4, 2022). This pragmatic necessity may lend analytical support to dominant feminist theorizing which tends to see women’s military inclusion as instrumentalization rather than a genuine change (Stachowitsch, 2013). In Poland, however, WOT has built on decades of women’s growing volunteer involvement in grassroots pro-defense organizing. These institutions of “common civic defense” also exhibit patterns of gendered transformation that go beyond numbers—the revaluing of civilian-feminine lines of activity and orientations, and the partial displacement of gendered hierarchies within them.

Rather than defining defense service along the lines of military masculinity, WOT has continuously framed its membership as that of Citizen-Soldiers—those engaging in defense while remaining firmly rooted in civilian life, and combining military and civilian resilience-building activities (Grzebalska, 2021; Snyder, 1999). A case in point is the military response to the Covid-19 pandemic which saw WOT communicating in a human-centered language of societal resilience, empathy, and care, instead of using more militarized tropes recorded in illiberal political discourse (Grzebalska & Maďarová, 2021, pp. 144–145). The pandemic also saw WOT employed

to provide assistance not only to border guards and police, but also schools, hospitals, and social welfare centers, with territorial defense soldiers performing a number of aid and care roles that are structurally feminized in Poland (Grzebalska & Maďarová, 2021, pp. 146–147). As of today, no research exists on the informal gender politics within WOT. Nevertheless, in the paramilitary sector, which has largely formed the basis of WOT membership, most participants I interviewed saw their organizational culture as largely devoid of a gender division of trainings and task, not seeing the revaluing of “feminine” lines of activity and orientations as significantly coupled with the allocation of these civilian-feminine tasks predominantly to women (Grzebalska, 2021).

While recording these novel, gendered patterns of inclusion, revaluing, and dislocation occurring in the defense sector is a significant finding in itself, it should not suggest that processes of regendering are not encountering serious limitations. Given the current political hostility to gender mainstreaming—and the overall erosion of equality policy in Poland—addressing women’s discrimination both within and outside the defense sector has become more difficult. Moreover, the feminization of social reproduction and care work in Poland is hindering women’s equal participation in defense by structurally upholding the gendered division of labor in the society (Grzebalska, 2021, p. 13). Finally, despite the increase of women’s participation in the defense sector in recent years, women still continue to be gravely underrepresented in leadership positions. Nevertheless, the ongoing turn towards rebuilding the system of common civic defense has worked towards decreasing the overall gender gaps in defense knowledge and skills in Polish society. It has also brought women closer to reaching a “critical mass” within the sector, while at the same time, redefining soldiering to include care, empathy, and civil society assistance that are conventionally seen as tasks and orientations falling outside the scope of military masculinity. As such, the Polish case suggests that extensive mobilization of women and positive institutional gender change can still occur under illiberal governance, albeit in a more limited scope where they are reshaping, rather than challenging, national security and integrity.

## 6. Conclusions

This article builds on prior critical calls to overcome the limits of gender backlash scholarship (Kováts, 2022; Paternotte, 2020), and study illiberal politics as a distinct and more complex form of gendered governance (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 165) by paying attention to complexity and change within the politics of the New Right (Blee, 2020). Taking the currently transforming Polish defense sector as a case study, the article argues for the need to go beyond well-established frameworks of gender backsliding and femonationalism to understand the ambiguous nature of illiberal gender politics in Poland.



Combining a feminist institutionalist approach with multi-sited sociological methods, the article posits that the gender politics in defense under PiS governance reveals a combination of institutional patterns of backsliding, continuity, and positive gender change. The broader eradication of equality infrastructure under PiS has also affected the defense sector, leading to the dissolution of critical bodies responsible for women's rights, whilst creating a hostile atmosphere around gender mainstreaming in Polish policy and politics. At the same time, given the significance of NATO and the UN for Poland's standing in the international security system during uncertain times, the MOD has largely followed along prior path dependency of conservative gender mainstreaming, swiftly implementing the Polish WPS NAP, and safeguarding the army from radicalized anti-gender campaigns. Meanwhile, a wide-scale defense restructuring towards common civic defense was undertaken against unfavorable economic and demographic currents. Guided by the concept of common civic defense, this re-organization of defense has opened up a space for women's greater inclusion within the sector. It has brought the percentage of women in new defense channels and institutions closer to a "critical mass," and opened up the space for new women to reach positions of "critical actors." It also partially regendered the very idea and practice of defense in novel ways to include more "feminine" tasks and orientations, thus transforming soldiering beyond the conventional notion of military masculinity.

In order to make sense of this "messiness" of PiS gender politics in defense, the article proposed to look at it through the analytical concept of illiberal pragmatics, understood as a complex form of gendered governance which seeks to uphold national integrity and sovereignty amidst broader pragmatic pressures of structural and cultural change. Within this pragmatic logic of balancing maneuvers, PiS gender politics has often converged with that of radical, right-wing anti-gender actors in an "opportunistic synergy," allowing the party to assume power or halt progressive advocacy (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, p. 7). This evident convergence has led mainstream scholarship to narrate the party's gender politics through the explanatory concepts of backlash and backsliding. Against this background, this article wished to draw attention to the underdiscussed finding that some of women's interests and rights in the realm of defense have nevertheless been advanced under PiS governance. Far from being heralded by the government as being in the name of women's rights and feminist politics, as the theoretical concept of "femonationalism" would posit, these gendered transformations of defense have largely proceeded silently, and within a more national-conservative framework. As such, the ongoing regendering of defense necessitated by structural pressures has been normalized as unproblematic in the face of security challenges, and in line with the "Polish tradition." These gendered patterns of continuity and pos-

itive change in Polish defense should not be underestimated, as they may "blaze the trail for more ambitious projects in the future" (Kopka-Piątek & Reichardt, 2020, p. 40). Nevertheless, just like the post-1999 procedural and rhetorical dedication to gender equality without women's substantive inclusion in defense brought about a rather stalemated progress, the current extensive mobilization of women devoid of transformative gender policy interventions can similarly lead to only limited change. Without addressing broader structural inequalities related to the feminization of care in Poland, as well as the persistence of discrimination in defense institutions, women's participation in the sector is bound to remain restrained and unequal.

The question that remains to be addressed is whether the findings on the gender politics in defense under PiS governance would be generalizable to other policy and political spheres. After all, in the rapidly worsening security environment in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), defense and security have a special status and importance for the ruling party. Moreover, the defense sector has its own specificity, resting on the post-1989 principles of neutrality and professionalism, and the logic of cautious institutional change representing the dominant values of the society (e.g., Latawski, 2003). At the same time, some research suggests that the balancing act of illiberal pragmatics can be observed in other realms outside defense. For instance, Gwiazda (2020) argues that PiS gender politics is more nuanced than dominant literature cares to admit, combining anti-gender claims and policies with conservative feminist ones related to women's labor market participation, social rights, and political representation. Further research is necessary to explore the extent to which the gender politics of illiberal pragmatics can be observed in other realms of Polish policy and politics. The final words of this article are written after the Russian full-scale military invasion in Ukraine in February 2022. In Poland, this critical event has not led to any drastic changes in defense policy, but, rather, further accelerated defense preparations along priorly established lines. In conjunction, the war has arguably strengthened the political and social consensus around current defense preparations, including the normalization of women's wider presence in the defense system. In this context, exploring the understudied issue of gender and defense in Poland and CEE, as well as its relationship to illiberal governance, gains even more pressing significance. As the CEE region maneuvers through this uncertain period of socio-political transformations, we are reminded of the need for a broader revision of our theoretical concepts so that they can analytically guide us rather than merely prescribe us what to see.

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The author confirms that there is no conflict of interests.

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