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INVISIBLE STRINGS AND VISIBLE LAWS: REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN SERBIA, ROMANIA, HUNGARY AND POLAND

Abstract: This article examines how abortion attitudes are shaped in four Central and Eastern European countries, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland, by exploring the interplay between individual values, trust, and national sociopolitical contexts. Although these countries share post-socialist legacies and similar legislative histories, they differ in levels of access to abortion and public support for reproductive rights. The study pursues two key objectives: (1) to provide a comparative overview of abortion policy development in each country and (2) to analyze how confidence in religious institutions, gender role beliefs, democratic values, and respondents' sex predict attitudes toward abortion. Methodologically, it employs a twofold approach: a qualitative comparison of legislative trajectories and a quantitative analysis of survey data using the World Values Survey and the European Values Study (2017–2022). Findings indicate that trust in churches predicts lower support for abortion only in Romania, while in Poland it has a positive effect, potentially reflecting backlash to restrictive laws. Traditional gender beliefs negatively affect abortion support in Romania and Serbia, but not in Hungary or Poland. Democratic values are positively associated with support in Romania, Serbia, and Hungary, but not Poland. Gender differences also vary by country: men are more supportive in Serbia and Hungary, while in Poland, women express greater support. The results point to the importance of historical, religious, and political contexts in shaping abortion attitudes. They further support theories that interpret anti-abortion sentiment as part of broader anti-gender movements fueled by economic insecurity, cultural backlash, and right-wing populist discourse. These findings highlight the need to situate individual-level attitudes within wider ideological and institutional frameworks.

Keywords: abortion, democratic backsliding, anti-gender mobilization, right-wing populism

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Nevidljive niti i vidljivi zakoni: reproduktivna prava u Srbiji, Rumuniji, Mađarskoj i Poljskoj

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad razmatra kako se stavovi o abortusu formiraju u četiri zemlje centralne i istočne Evrope – Rumuniji, Srbiji, Mađarskoj i Poljskoj – kroz analizu odnosa između ličnih vrednosti, poverenja i šireg društveno-političkog konteksta. Iako ove zemlje dele post-socijalističko nasleđe i slične zakonodavne tokove, one se razlikuju po stepenu dostupnosti abortusa i podršci javnosti za reproduktivna prava. Istraživanje ima dva glavna cilja: (1) da pruži uporedni pregled razvoja politika abortusa u svakoj od zemalja i (2) da analizira u kojoj meri poverenje u verske institucije, stavovi o rodnim ulogama, demokratske vrednosti i pol ispitnika utiču na stavove o abortusu. Metodološki, studija kombinuje kvalitativnu analizu zakonodavnih tokova sa kvantitativnom obradom podataka iz Svetskog istraživanja vrednosti (World Values Survey) i Evropskog istraživanja vrednosti (European Values Study) (2017–2022). Nalazi pokazuju da poverenje u crkvu predviđa manju podršku abortusu samo u Rumuniji, dok u Poljskoj ima pozitivan efekat – što može ukazivati na otpor prema restriktivnim zakonima. Tradicionalna uverenja o rodnim ulogama negativno utiču na podršku abortusu u Rumuniji i Srbiji, ali ne i u Mađarskoj i Poljskoj. Demokratske vrednosti su povezane s većom podrškom u Rumuniji, Srbiji i Mađarskoj, ali ne i u Poljskoj. Rodne razlike takođe variraju među zemljama: muškarci su skloniji podršci abortusu u Srbiji i Mađarskoj, dok su u Poljskoj žene te koje pokazuju veću podršku. Rezultati ukazuju na značaj istorijskog, verskog i političkog konteksta u oblikovanju stavova o abortusu. Takođe potvrđuju teze da se anti-abortus sentiment može razumeti kao deo šire antirodne mobilizacije koju pokreću ekonomska nesigurnost, kulturni otpor i desničarski populizam. Nalazi naglašavaju potrebu da se individualni stavovi posmatraju u svetlu šireg ideološkog i institucionalnog okvira.

Ključne reči: abortus, slabljenje demokratije, antirodna mobilizacija, desničarski populizam

Introduction

In contemporary Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), gender issues, particularly reproductive rights, have become a focal point in the region's broader political battles over the meaning and direction of democracy. Far from being peripheral, questions of abortion access, bodily autonomy, and gender equality as a whole are now central to understanding the region's political transformations. While gender equality was seen by many as an essential part of the democratization process (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), in recent years we have seen the rise of anti-gender movements targeting abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and other progressive policies – such

as the introduction in sex education and even policies aimed at reducing gender violence – which these movements have labelled ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender theory’ (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). What distinguishes these movements is their deployment of populist strategies, rooted in distorted conceptions of democracy. They often position themselves as defenders of “the people” against corrupt elites and external influences, portraying progressive reforms as imposed threats to national identity and cultural sovereignty (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Śledzińska-Simon, 2020; Zaharijević, 2018). With this volatile ideological landscape, abortion remains one of the most polarizing political issues in CEE, where communist legacies, strong religious influences and shifting political contexts intersect.

Studied countries are all shaped by their communist legacies, though each experienced different forms of state socialism that have left varied cultural and institutional imprints. Religion within the regions also varies, with Romania and Serbia being predominantly Orthodox, while Hungary and Poland are Catholic. The difference in religion is also observed in levels of religiosity, with Romania and Poland being significantly more religious than Hungary and Serbia (Baronovski & Evans, 2018).

Adding to the political context, they also have different standings at European level, with Hungary and Poland being members of the European Union (EU) since 2004, and Romania since 2007, and while Serbia became an EU candidate in 2012, after being a potential candidate since the early 2000s, it has not yet joined the EU (European Commission, 2025).

In terms of legislation, Poland currently enforces one of the most restrictive abortion legislations in the region, permitting the procedure only in case of rape, incest or life-threatening pregnancies (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In the other three countries, abortion on demand is legal, but with different degrees of limitations. Hungary has, over time, put in place several legal obstacles, such as restricting non-surgical abortions (Parker, 2022). In Serbia abortion is possible, although access remains inconsistent and often marked by poor conditions and limited support (Belgrade Center for Human Rights, 2023; Rašević & Sedlecky, 2009), while in Romania access to abortion is limited due to the high number of medics refusing to perform the procedure on religious or moral grounds (Centrul FILIA, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The discussion on anti-abortion attitudes, associated movements, and their ties to right-wing politics is far from new. Scholars were already writing on the topic in the 1980s, in the context of the rise of the anti-abortion

movement in the United State. Many of their insights continue to offer relevant theoretical frameworks today (Petchesky, 1985; Luker, 1984; Ehrenreich, 1981; Petchesky, 1981). What we now categorize under the broader umbrella of anti-gender movements were initially theorized as backlash movements, a reaction against societal shifts regarding gender roles, women's participation in the labour market, and their changing status in family and society (Petchesky, 1981). Yet the fact that these movements are reactionary does not render them baseless or insignificant. Rather, they are fueled by anxieties caused by progressive developments that challenge established norms, which is in turn exacerbated by the deepening economic insecurity (Petchesky, 1981).

Since the 1980s, the literature on anti-gender mobilization has expanded significantly. In the European context, scholars have increasingly focused on the regional specificities of these movements, particularly after 2010, when they gained momentum across CEE (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). Within this context, the argument that anti-gender movements are a backlash movement still holds true. Graff & Korolczuk (2022) argue that they are based on anxieties concerning the rise of individualism, with the decline of community values as a consequence, and the growing uncertainty of everyday life. Thus, the right-wing populists instrumentalise the anxieties of people living in socioeconomic precarious conditions, but also of those who are afraid progressive change will lead to the loss of their sociocultural position (Korolczuk, 2020). This is also a point of divergence from previous literature, because contrary to the argument that the United States anti-abortion actors are mostly independent, current literature argues anti-gender movements have become increasingly tied to right-wing populists (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Korolczuk, 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). There are alliances created between ultraconservative activists, right-wing politicians and religious actors (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Moreover, the assumption that these movements are innately neoliberal is no longer accepted, as it has been theorized that anti-gender mobilizations in Europe are shaped as a form of anti-neoliberal resistance (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

In the context of women getting involved in the antifeminist movement and taking anti-abortion stances, Ehrenreich (1981) argues that this happens because this progressive change in the ideas surrounding motherhood and marriage makes women afraid that they will lose the sense of stability and security they provide. This is especially relevant, since the women holding these ideas are usually in a context where they have lower levels of education and income, a higher level of religiosity, got married earlier and are housewives or employed in women dominated fields (Luk-

er, 1984). A historical precedent for this dynamic can be found in socialist Romania, where gender discourse shifted markedly from early egalitarian ideals to a narrative that re-centered women's identity around motherhood and child-rearing responsibilities during the 1970s and 1980s. This shift, clearly visible in the state propaganda discourse targeting women, reveals how official narratives can redirect women's roles toward domesticity in times of political and demographic anxiety (Constantinescu, 2017). As Soare & Tufis (2020) observe, within authoritarian frameworks, motherhood is reaffirmed as a traditional gender role essential not only for national survival but for maintaining social order.

Thus, the way in which women's stances on abortion are influenced by their demographic attributes, splits them into women who fight for welfare policies and women who fight to maintain the status quo because they feel it offers them protection, a split which Ehrenreich (1981) believes is caused by economic crises. This protective stance may also be reinforced by the internalization of sexist gender norms, which shape women's gender identities in ways that naturalize their own subordination and reinforce existing power structures. As Constantinescu (2021) argues, internalized misogyny functions not as the root of gender oppression, but as a mechanism that sustains it, influencing how women view themselves and others, especially when intersecting with other forms of prejudice such as racism or classism. In this sense, internalized misogyny may not only inform attitudes toward other women but also shape how women regulate their own bodies and behaviors in line with dominant gender norms (Constantinescu, 2021).

Anti-abortion attitudes are a complex issue, as they are influenced by different socioeconomic, cultural and political factors. While economic factors are especially important, because economic crises and neoliberal policies mean cuts in social and health services, thereby shifting a substantial share of care responsibilities from the state to women within the family (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), religion also plays a big role in anti-abortion sentiment. Barkan (2014) showed religiosity acts as a suppressor variable when looking at gender differences in abortion attitudes, while religiosity is important not only individually, but also at a national level (Adamczyk, 2022). This focus on religiosity is particularly relevant in CEE, where religion has been deeply intertwined with political history, national identity formation, and anti-gender mobilization. The Catholic Church, for instance, has played a significant role in the 'war on gender', opposing the United Nations' inclusion of the term 'gender' in documents (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017) and aligning itself with ultraconservative networks and right-wing populist parties across the region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Throughout CEE, religion functions not just as a belief system but as a cultural and political signifier. In Poland, Catholicism remains deeply embedded in national identity, with ultraconservative actors framing “gender ideology” as a threat to the traditional family, nation, and Christian civilization (Azis & Azarine, 2023; Korolczuk, 2020). Similarly, in Romania, the most religious country in Europe (Baronovski & Evans, 2018), the Orthodox Church plays a central role in shaping public values, particularly those connected to family and morality (Turcescu & Stan, 2005). However, when it comes to the anti-abortion campaigns in the country, it was actually the neo-Protestant groups which have been the most active in this sense (Mihai, 2025). Another predominantly Orthodox country, Serbia has seen the increased involvement of the Church in the state since the early 2000s, which has led to the intensification of religious nationalism and backsliding in terms of gender equality (Drezgić, 2010). Meanwhile, in Hungary, where the Catholic Church holds less dominant cultural authority, the Fidesz government has increasingly incorporated Christian references into its public discourse, often invoking traditional values in discussions of national identity and family policy (Halmai, 2018).

Sociopolitical contexts also play a part in attitudes towards abortion, along with the country’s affluence or development (Gaskins et al., 2013; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Cross-national research has shown that in countries with more restrictive abortion laws, individuals tend to express lower levels of support for abortion access compared to those in countries with more permissive legislation (Loll & Hall, 2019). This indicates that policy not only reflects public opinion but also actively influences it. One explanation for how this phenomenon works is that policies shape community norms, which are the foundation of individual beliefs and attitudes (Shellenberg et al., 2011). This context becomes even more relevant in CEE countries, where abortion has been ideologically associated with Marxism or leftist ideology and where the discourse against ‘gender ideology’ consistently uses anti-communist rhetoric (Corrêa et al., 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). However, these narratives vary significantly across national contexts, depending also on each country’s political regime (Zhang, 2020) and specific historical experience with abortion policy under communism.

Methods

This study employs two methodological approaches:

- 1) A comparative analysis on abortion legislation in Romania, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland;

- 2) A quantitative analysis of attitudes toward abortion, using data from two major cross-national surveys: the World Value Survey and European Value Study (2017-2022 dataset) (EVS/WVS, 2024). All the variables used in the analysis are the same in the two data-sets and can be used in a comparison.

Table 1. Country characteristics

Characteristic/Country	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Serbia
Dominant religion	Catholicism	Catholicism	Orthodoxy	Orthodoxy
Religiosity ranking (out of 34) ³	8	20	1	10
EU membership	+	+	+	-

To analyze the factors influencing abortion attitudes across these four countries, the study employed a series of multiple linear regression models, estimated independently for each country. This method allows for the simultaneous inclusion of several predictor variables, liberal values, trust in churches, gender-related attitudes, importance of democracy, and sex.

Results and Discussion

Legislative Analysis

Poland liberalized abortion in 1956 to reduce maternal deaths from unsafe abortions (Act of 27 April 1956 on the Conditions for the Termination of Pregnancy), with the obligation to consult two doctors being eliminated in 1959. However, in 1993, after the issue was brought back into debate, abortion became legally restricted again (Act of 7 January 1993), the basis of this change being the adoption of the 1991 Medical Code of Ethics, which declared abortion to be ethical only for medical reasons or if the pregnancy was the result of a crime (Nowicka, 2010). The 1993 law remained in place until recently, with the exception of the period between 1996 and 1997, when a more liberal law was introduced, only to be later declared unconstitutional (Bucholc, 2022). In 2020, the politically controlled Constitutional Court (Wiącek, 2021) ruled that fetal malformation would no longer be considered a legal ground for abortion, effectively instituting a near-total ban (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In Hungary, abortion has been legal since 1953, but restrictive measures have been introduced over time. A 1992 law declared fetal life begins at conception (Act LXXIX of 1992 on the Protection of Fetal Life), and 20 years later, amendments to the law limited access to non-surgical abortion

3 See Baronavski & Evans (2018).

(Parker, 2022). Furthermore, in 2022, the government has introduced a policy, according to which medics are obliged to show signs of life to the mother before performing the abortion (Cursino, 2022). This adds unnecessary psychological barriers to the procedure, by shaming women seeking abortions and it is part of Orbán's pronatalist agenda, in which he also uses anti-migrant rhetoric (Orbán, 2023).

After the legalization of abortion in 1957 (Decree No. 463/1957), Romania took a different direction from the rest of the eastern countries, when Decree 770 was instituted in 1966 (Decree No. 770/1966), banning abortion on socioeconomic grounds. The primary goal of the decree was population growth (Niță & Ile, 2020), linking women's reproductive roles to national identity. The law was repealed in 1990, but although abortion remains legal up to 14 weeks (Romanian Penal Code, Law No. 286/2009), a 2021 report by Centrul FILIA (2021) showed that fewer than 60 of 171 hospitals surveyed offered abortion services, with many doctors refusing on religious or moral grounds). The legacy of Ceaușescu's coercive pronatalism has made lawmakers reluctant to push restrictive legislation, yet public discourse often echoes conservative values that reframe women's reproductive roles as instruments of national survival (Iancu, 2016; Puiu, *in press*).

In Serbia, abortion was widely practiced on socio-medical grounds since 1952, and the law was later liberalized further in 1969, making abortion on demand possible until the 10th week of pregnancy, without a waiting period (Rašević & Sedlecky, 2009). Abortion debates began in the 1990s, which were defined by an anti-communist and nationalist rhetoric, with the Orthodox Church being involved as a way to regain its socio-cultural influence (Drezgić, 2004). However, while there were attempts at making the legislation more restrictive, they all failed, which could be due to the fact that in Serbia, unlike in other CEE countries, feminists had a central role in these debates (Drezgić, 2004). Historically, the Yugoslav space had a different experience than the rest of the Eastern Bloc, as feminism emerged in the 1970s, helped in part the openness of the regime, and it was defined by a diversity of ideas, not fully aligned with either Western, capitalist feminism or the statist Eastern model (Zaharijević, 2017).

There are significant differences in terms of how each country dealt with abortion throughout time. However, recent developments, including the anti-abortion campaigns, are part of a bigger, transnational anti-gender movement. While legal frameworks vary, a common thread across these countries is the way in which state-promoted pro-natalist campaigns and nationalist-religious discourses have increasingly framed women as instruments of demographic recovery, often at the expense of reproduc-

tive autonomy. Therefore, while our analysis focuses on individual countries, we look at how attitudes are shaped by broader contexts and how they are interconnected with each other. Our aim is to go beyond national barriers in understanding these dynamics.

Quantitative Analysis

The longitudinal data on abortion attitudes in the analyzed counties reveal persistent yet shifting patterns of societal conservatism, particularly in relation to moral opposition to abortion.

Table 2. Attitudes against abortion⁴

Wave/Country	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Serbia
1981-1984	-	44.3	-	-
1989-1993	59.2	-	-	-
1994-1998	56.8	28.2	38.9	26.3
1999-2004	-	-	-	34.1
2005-2009	64.4	35.1	61	39.5
2010-2014	63.8	-	66.8	-
2017-2022	51.4	33.6	65.4	37.6

Poland consistently exhibits high levels of opposition across all time periods for which data are available, peaking at 64.4% in 2005–2009 and remaining above 50% even in the most recent 2017–2022 wave (51.4%). This pattern aligns with Poland’s strong Roman Catholic tradition and the significant influence of the Church on public discourse and policy making.

By contrast, Hungary displays significantly lower levels of opposition, ranging from 28.2% in 1994–1998 to 35.1% in 2005–2009 and slightly decreasing to 33.6% by 2017–2022. Despite its post-socialist context, Hungary’s more secularized society likely contributes to more permissive attitudes toward abortion, indicating that religiosity may serve as a key explanatory variable in cross-national differences.

Romania presents a different trajectory. Attitudinal opposition rose sharply from 38.9% in 1994–1998 to 66.8% in 2010–2014 before slightly declining to 65.4% in 2017–2022. This increase may reflect the resurgence of traditionalist and nationalist discourses in the post-accession period, along with the consolidation of Orthodox values in public life. While anti-abortion discourses is part of anti-gender mobilization, Romania is a

4 “Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between: Abortion”, measured on a scale from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable). For the table we have used the added value of 1+2+3.

particular case due the legacy of Ceașescu’s abortion ban that remains deeply embedded in Romania’s collective memory, particularly among older generations who witnessed its devastating consequences firsthand, including the high number of women deaths, unsafe procedures, and institutionalized children neglect. This historical trauma has tempered the popularity of overtly restrictive abortion discourse, making it a politically sensitive issue that many actors approach with caution. While there have been attempts to link anti-abortion to anti-LGBT and other anti-gender discourses, we cannot say that it has been successful. Nonetheless, the 2018 “Referendum for the Family” and subsequent legislative efforts to restrict gender education illustrate how abortion and gender equality continue to be politicized as part of a broader backlash against perceived liberal encroachments, suggesting that the symbolic framing of reproductive rights may intensify in future debates.

Serbia shows a somewhat similar pattern of increased opposition, rising from 26.3% in the mid-1990s to 39.5% in 2005–2009 and stabilizing around 37.6% in the latest wave.

Overall, the data suggest a complex interplay between religiosity, historical legacies, and evolving political climates. While Hungary’s relatively low levels of abortion opposition seem to diverge from regional trends, both Poland and Romania demonstrate how religious and institutional factors can reinforce moral conservatism over time. To better understand these links, comparative regression models were constructed. In each country, a liberal values index was computed by averaging responses to the following items: justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex, and sex before marriage. Item availability varied slightly by country, but all versions reflected the same underlying construct. Reliability was acceptable across all four samples:

Table 3. Reliability analysis for liberal values index

Country	Number of Items ⁵	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Romania	5	.738
Serbia	5	.627
Poland	4	.805
Hungary	4	.726

The dependent variable is “Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified,

5 Items: justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex, and sex before marriage for Romania and Serbia, and justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex for Poland and Hungary.

or something in between: Abortion”, measured on a scale from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable)

Hypothesis

- H1: Individuals with more liberal values are more likely to support the justification of abortion;
- H2: Confidence in religious institutions is negatively associated with support for abortion;
- H3: Individuals who express stronger adherence to traditional gender roles are less likely to support abortion;
- H4: Valuing democracy is positively associated with abortion support.
- H5: Across all countries, women will express greater support for abortion than men

Table 4. **Standardized Regression Coefficients (β)**,
dependent variable: justifiable abortion, WVS and EVS 2017-2022

Predictor	Romania	Serbia	Poland	Hungary
Liberal values	.649*	.597*	.606*	.619*
Men better business executives	-.096**	.016 (ns)	-.017 (ns)	.013 (ns)
Men better political leaders	-.031 (ns)	-.080*	-.008 (ns)	.029 (ns)
Confidence in churches	-.058*	-.015 (ns)	.171*	.030 (ns)
Importance of democracy	.053*	.076**	.035 (ns)	.072
Sex	+.023 (ns)	+.073**	-.053*	+.059**
Model R ²	.418	.370	.491	.419
Adjusted R ²	.414	.366	.487	.416

Note. p <.05 (*). p <.01 (**), ns = not significant.

Across all four countries, liberal moral values were the strongest predictors of abortion support, consistently showing large, positive, and statistically significant effects. The strength and direction of other predictors, however, varied.

We opted for Confidence in churches, as this variable captures respondents’ perceptions of institutional legitimacy and moral authority, which is particularly relevant in understanding how religious institutions influence attitudes toward abortion in post-communist societies. Rather than focusing on individual spiritual behavior – that was tested in the pre-analysis without relevant results, this measure reflects the extent to which people accept religious bodies as credible and influential actors in public and moral life. Only in Romania did trust in churches predict lower abortion support ($\beta = -.058$), suggesting an enduring moral authority of the Orthodox Church. Poland, in contrast, exhibited a positive effect of

confidence in churches ($\beta = .171^*$), and while unexpected, this could be explained by the public backlash against recent abortion restrictions. In Serbia and Hungary, confidence in churches was not a significant factor.

If for Poland and Hungary both variables measuring gender roles were non-significant, in Romania and Serbia they have a significant negative effect on abortion support; those who hold more traditional views on gender roles in the economic or political sphere are also more likely to reject abortion.

The perceived importance of democracy emerged as a significant positive predictor of abortion justification in Romania ($\beta = .053$), Serbia ($\beta = .076^{**}$), and Hungary ($\beta = .072$), while it was not statistically significant in Poland. In the countries where it was significant, this finding suggests that individuals who value democracy tend to also support women's rights. Support for abortion in this framework may reflect an understanding of democracy as a guarantor of private choice and bodily autonomy. However, the non-significant result in Poland points to a more complex relationship. In recent years, Poland has undergone a period of democratic backsliding and the findings are aligned with the changing nature of democratic discourse under regimes with illiberal tendencies. As Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue, right-wing populist actors in Poland have redefined democratic values through a moral lens, framing "real democracy" as rooted in tradition, national sovereignty, and the protection of the so-called natural family. Within this framework, individual rights, particularly those linked to gender and bodily autonomy, are often portrayed as threats to societal cohesion rather than as democratic entitlements. Thus, while democracy elsewhere in the region is associated with personal freedom and gender equality, in Poland, its public interpretation may be increasingly decoupled from liberal rights, leading to the observed lack of correlation. This divergence underscores the importance of understanding democracy not just as a procedural concept, but as an evolving cultural and ideological construct shaped by national context and political rhetoric.

Looking at the influence the respondent's sex has on the dependent variable, we can see that in Serbia and Hungary men are significantly more supportive of abortion than women, while in Poland women are more supportive on the matter. As Poland has one of the most restrictive abortion legislation in the area, we can hypothesize that the difference in the 3 countries comes from women's direct experience with the consequences of limited access. Interestingly, Romania stands out as the only country where sex is not a significant predictor. Notably, it is also the only case where confidence in churches has a significant negative effect

on abortion support. This alignment supports Barkan's (2014) argument that religiosity can function as a suppressor variable in gendered analyses, possibly masking the effects of gender when religious authority plays a dominant normative role.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the context-dependent and multi-layered nature of abortion attitudes across post-communist CEE. While some predictors display significant cross-national variation, others offer compelling insights into how institutional trust, gender norms, political values, and sociocultural legacies converge to shape public opinion.

Trust in religious institutions, measured through confidence in churches, emerged as a powerful contextual variable. In Romania, lower abortion support among those with higher church confidence suggests the enduring moral authority of the Orthodox Church, consistent with historical patterns where official narratives reinforced motherhood as a national and moral imperative (Constantinescu, 2017; Soare & Tufiş, 2020). In contrast, Poland showed a surprising positive correlation, potentially reflecting backlash to institutional overreach and growing public dissent following the Constitutional Court's near-total ban. This dynamic echoes Petchesky's (1981) foundational argument that anti-abortion attitudes are not static but shaped by complex social anxieties in response to shifting ideological climates.

The role of traditional gender norms was significant in Romania and Serbia but not in Poland and Hungary. This discrepancy may speak to different phases of backlash politics (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In line with Ehrenreich's (1981) and Luker's (1984) early work, those holding more conservative views around women's roles in society often support anti-abortion stances to preserve what they perceive as protective, stabilizing frameworks, especially in contexts of socioeconomic precarity.

Democratic values proved to be robust predictors of support for abortion in three of the four countries, highlighting a possible connection between reproductive autonomy and liberal democratic imaginaries. These results reinforce Inglehart & Welzel's (2005) theory that value shifts toward individual autonomy and secular-rationalism increase alongside societal development. However, Poland's lack of significance complicates this picture, suggesting, in line with Zhang (2020), that political regimes and institutional erosion may distort or decouple democratic ideals from gender equality commitments.

Sex differences in abortion attitudes were also notable. While women typically show more support for abortion (Loll & Hall, 2019), our findings complicated this narrative. In Serbia and Hungary, men were more supportive, while in Poland, where abortion restrictions are most severe, women's support exceeded men's. These results likely reflect not only legal context but the emotional and embodied impact of abortion bans on women's lives. Osborne et al. (2022) further nuanced this, showing how even well-intentioned or "benevolent" sexism, rooted in idealized visions of motherhood, can subtly suppress both men's and women's support for reproductive rights.

Importantly, these findings must be understood within the broader theoretical landscape of anti-gender mobilizations in the region. As Graff & Korolczuk (2022) argue, post-2010 anti-abortion and anti-gender movements across CEE function as populist backlashes against perceived threats to community stability, fueled by economic insecurity and fear of status loss. Their alignment with right-wing populists and religious institutions represents a shift from earlier, more fragmented mobilizations (Korolczuk, 2020), forging a powerful ideological front that repositions reproductive control as part of a broader culture war.

Ultimately, this study affirms that abortion attitudes are not merely reflections of personal beliefs or moral frameworks, they are shaped by institutional trust, cultural narratives, religious legitimacy, gendered expectations, and political strategy. Understanding them requires a critical lens that accounts not only for individual-level predictors but also for the transnational discourses, historical traumas, and sociopolitical alliances that continue to define the reproductive landscape in CEE.

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