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Regional Trans Activism in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Towards Trans-feminist Activism

Abstract: This paper examines the growth of the trans activist movement in the post-Yugoslav space and its regional connections, with a focus on the fight against anti-gender politics. The movement itself emerged and developed in this region over the past two decades; however, its organization and goals have evolved over time. Connecting the community at the regional level is facilitated by shared history, culture, and particularly by language similarities. The creation of a regional organization (Trans Network Balkan) in 2014 contributed to the strengthening of these ties. Also, in the last ten years, regional connectivity has become increasingly necessary due to the emergence of anti-gender actors that operate in very similar ways in this region, leaning on dominant conservative societal attitudes and institutional practices, and already prevalent transphobia, gender-based oppression, and discrimination. The struggle for trans rights has expanded to many more fronts than before, as activists who call themselves feminist and claim to fight for women's rights, and some leftist groups have started to propagate very strongly anti-gender and anti-trans narratives. In response to this phenomenon, trans activists must focus on strengthening the existing alliances and gaining new allies to prevent further growth and strengthening of transphobia, which could lead to the total degradation of human rights for trans and gender nonbinary people. One of the resistance strategies is to create and strengthen the trans-feminist movement in the region, which involves the joint action of activists from various civil rights movements based on feminist values and principles of inclusiveness.

Keywords: trans activism; anti-gender politics; trans-feminism; other feminisms; Trans Network Balkan.

The intention behind this paper is to introduce a topic of great importance to the trans community into the academic discourse and to contribute to reducing the gap that exists between academia and activism, as well as between the knowledge produced within academia and the knowledge produced through activist practice, particularly in relation to trans issues. I have been involved in the trans activist movement for almost twenty years. I began my academic work with the intention of connecting transgender studies with the community to which I belong and contributing to the informed production of knowledge in this domain in this region. For that reason, this paper also provides an account of my personal activist experiences and insights, as

I actively participated alongside other activists in the construction of regional trans activism.

Over the last two decades, trans activism in the post-Yugoslav space has undergone a series of transformations, resulting in both socio-political changes and the emergence of new communication technologies and media. Socio-political changes were and still are conditioned by the process of accession to the European Union¹ which, among other things, implies that the states that intend to become members must fulfill the conditions regarding the promotion of the rights of sexual and gender minorities. This implies the amendment of existing laws and the adoption of new laws in the field of human rights, as well as the introduction of specific measures aimed at reducing discrimination and improving the position of LGBTIQ individuals. As a consequence of this, pride parades began to be held in the region starting in 2001, and the LGBTIQ community started to gather in an organized manner, forming non-governmental organizations to advocate for their rights. In the beginning, trans activism was part of the broader LGBTIQ movement, and the trans topics were mostly treated sporadically, while the primary focus was on the rights of sexual minorities. Then, in the early 2000s, isolated initiatives were launched by LGBTIQ or queer collectives that introduced trans topics into their programs and projects, and began to gather trans individuals, advocating for changes in law and the institutional regulation of medical and legal transition.

The development of these programs created the conditions for the emergence of activist initiatives, which began to appear in the post-Yugoslav region in the early 2010s and were initiated by transgender people themselves. This was also positively influenced by the development and rapid advancement of new communication technologies, the ever-faster Internet, and the emergence and proliferation of social networks, which made it possible for transgender people to connect more easily, exchange experiences, information, and resources, and mutually support each other.² Over time, small-scale activist initiatives and informal groups grew into organizations whose primary goal is the fight to improve the human rights of transgender people. The activist work carried out by these organizations included, and still includes, the implementation of various programs of psycho-social support for trans, intersex and gender variant (TIGV) individuals, informing and sensitizing the general public about the problems faced by the TIGV community, advocacy and cooperation with various institutions in order to improve the rights of TIGV individuals, empowering the TIGV community to engage in activist work, raising the visibility of the TIGV

¹ Except for Slovenia, which applied for EU membership in 1996, all other countries of the former Yugoslavia did so between 2003 and 2016.

² Numerous research studies have shown that online spaces are places where the TIGV community connects and empowers: Christian Compare, et al., "The Power of Connection: Resource and Responsibility in the Virtual Community Experience of Italian Trans and Gender-diverse Activists," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2024); Sabrina Cipolletta, et al., "Online Support for Transgender People: an Analysis of Forums and Social Networks," *Health and Social Care in the Community* 25, no. 5 (2017): 1542–51; Avi Marciano, "Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 (2014): 824–38.

community, as well as a whole series of other activities aimed at improving the social position of TIGV people. However, a small number of trans activists at the national level did not manage to cover all existing needs for support within local communities and simultaneously educate the public while participating in all advocacy activities. There was a considerable need to create a support system for trans activists as well as to empower more people from the TIGV community to engage in activism. Accordingly, in 2014, a group of trans people, including me, launched an initiative to form a regional organization that would focus on providing this type of support and empowerment by connecting people from different countries of former Yugoslavia.

Connecting in the region and activist organizing

The regional connection between trans people was first conditioned by the need for information related to medical transition. Due to the lack of legal-administrative regulation of medical transition, as well as the insufficiently developed system of trans-specific health care in the entire region, trans people were referred to each other for all information and procedures in this matter. Consequently, they developed a network of self-support and shared important information among themselves. What is also specific for this region, especially during the first decade of the 2000s, is that trans people from the entire region were directed to Serbia when it comes to medical transition, because the only medical team specializing in the process of medical transition and gender reassignment procedures was formed in Belgrade in the mid-1980s.³ Being directed to only one health center had a significant impact on making and strengthening connections between people from different countries in the region. Those of us who live in the capital of Serbia have often been contacted by people from the region, asking us to help them find a place to stay when they visit and to assist them in getting in touch with the medical team in Belgrade. That personal support expanded to mutual empowerment, facilitating the initiation of activist organizing in other countries in the region. Some local activist organizations and individuals recognized the need for a stronger organized regional connection of trans people. They focused some of their projects on organizing seminars that brought together the trans people from different countries. Three such gatherings were of great importance for the launching and development of the initiative to establish a regional trans organization. The first one was organized by the lesbian activist organization LORI from Rijeka in 2011⁴ and included trans people from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second gathering was held in Sarajevo in 2013,⁵ at the initiative of a local trans activist, Aleks Gosto from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while

³ Svetlana Vujovic, et al., "Transsexualism in Serbia: A Twenty-Year Follow-Up Study," *Journal for Sexual Medicine* 6, no. 4 (2009): 1018–23.

⁴ Lezbijaska organizacija Rijeka "LORI", "Put u proSTRANStvo," accessed May 10, 2025, <https://lori.hr/put-u-prostranstvo-info/>.

⁵ Vanja Cipurković, "Trans Community (Self)organizing in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Community (Self) organizing of the Transgender Movement in Western Balkans Region* (Asocijacija Spektra, 2020), 49.

the third gathering was held thanks to the already established trans organization from Croatia – Trans Aid, and the feminist organization Ženska soba, which in 2014 organized an international trans activist symposium called Transposium.⁶ Immediately after the latest gathering, the Trans Network Balkan (TNB) was formed, operating in eight countries of the region since 2014.⁷

Since the period of initial development within LGBTIQ organizations and during the first phase of self-organization, trans activism at the level of individual countries has primarily focused on psycho-social support and the formation of self-support groups, but also on advocacy for changes in legislation and the introduction and/or improvement of trans-specific health care. Over time, the number of activist programs of some organizations increased, developed with the goal of significantly raising the visibility of TIGV people, creating publications and research that focus on topics of importance to the TIGV community, developing the artistic creativity of TIGV individuals, and strengthening the capacity of the organizations by empowering and educating a new generation of trans activists. On the other hand, in some countries, trans organizations and informal groups were established significantly later, or they stagnated in development and even disappeared. The reasons for this are numerous, but one of the most significant is the underempowered community that is interested in and educated about activist work, and that, through its engagement, would contribute to expanding the capacity of activist organizations and thereby enable their survival. At the same time, it is important to point out that the size of the community is not a decisive factor, but rather it is the willingness of people from the community to engage in activism, and this implies the importance of the empowerment of the community to engage in the activist work and a certain level of knowledge to carry out that type of work. Additionally, it is essential to have ongoing support and assistance from other activist organizations and individuals with relevant experience. In Croatia, the trans organization KolekTIRV (formerly Trans Aid) was created and developed thanks to “the exchange of knowledge and skills, and by providing a space for organisational growth and community engagement.”⁸ The Association Spectra in Montenegro was established with the support of the Queer Montenegro organization following the Transposium held in Podgorica.⁹ In North Macedonia, the LGBT organization Coalition Margins in 2011 “created a space and hosted the formation of

⁶ Amir Hodžić, J. Poštić, and Arian Kajtezović, “The (In)Visible T: Trans Activism in Croatia (2004–2014),” in *Intersectionality and LGBT Activist Politics: Multiple Others in Croatia and Serbia*, eds. Bojan Bilić and Sanja Kajinić (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47.

⁷ Trans Network Balkan is formally registered in Croatia but operating in eight different countries (Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Slovenia and the North Macedonia).

⁸ Hodžić, “The (In)Visible T,” 45.

⁹ Jovan Ulićević and Čarna Brković, “The resilience of Trans Existence through Solidarity in Montenegro: (Non) pathologizing Narratives of Transgender Lives,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 45.

the first trans group that in 2018 would become an activist collective, TransForma¹⁰ which is still operating in cooperation with Coalition Margins. According to Martin Gramac, trans activism in Slovenia “draws upon the support and resources of the lesbian and gay as well as feminist movements.”¹¹ In support of the claim that the size of the community does not play a decisive role in starting initiatives and that, without the support of other organizations, it is not possible to create a sustainable movement, we can use the example of the situation in Serbia. Proportionally to the population count, Serbia has the largest trans community in the region. However, until 2020, Serbia did not have a trans led organization at all, but trans activism was represented as part of the program of the existing LGBTIQ organizations. Despite the large community connected through online platforms and a self-support group, the basic conditions for self-organization were not met.¹² Hence, the first trans led organization dealing with the promotion and protection of the rights of trans people in Serbia was founded owing to the support of the Trans Network Balkan.¹³

Unlike organizations that focus their activities on the territory of the country where they were founded and create their programs in accordance with the needs of the local community, Trans Network Balkan was devised as an organization that spans eight different countries in the region. Since its inception, its focus has been on raising the capacity of local organizations and individuals who want to engage in trans activism, as well as creating a common online platform for sharing information important to TIGV people from the entire region. Shortly after its establishment, Trans Network Balkan took over the organization of the Transposium from Kolektiv TIRV in accordance with the vision of organizing this gathering in different countries of the region and with the aim of creating stronger connections between communities and allies from the entire region. Shared history, culture, and especially language similarities, as well as very similar societal attitudes toward trans issues, and similar institutional practices, discrimination, and oppression of trans individuals in all post-Yugoslav countries, are the basis for making strong connections, sharing experiences, knowledge, and resistance strategies between people from the region. From 2015 onwards, in addition to Zagreb, Transposium has been held in Podgorica (Montenegro), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Belgrade (Serbia), and Skopje (North Macedonia).¹⁴ In 2020, the

¹⁰ Slavcho Dimitrov, “Transgender Lives in North Macedonia: Citizenship, Violence, and Networks of Support,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 35.

¹¹ Martin Gramac, “Tortuous Paths towards Trans Futures: The Trans Movement in Slovenia,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 141.

¹² Aleksa Milanović, “Trans Activism in the post-Yugoslav Space: Resistance and Inclusion Strategies in Action,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 190.

¹³ Kolektiv Talas TIRV, “Kako smo ustalasi trans aktivizam u Srbiji”, u *Postjugoslovenski TRANS životi aktivizmi kulture*, ur. Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović (Multimedijalni institute Zagreb, 2022), 290-297.

¹⁴ From October 9 to 12, 2025, Transposium will be held for the first time in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the city of Tuzla.

event was organized online due to the pandemic. The concept of planning and organizing this event is designed so that it is hosted by a different local trans organization every year, in cooperation with and under the mentorship of the Trans Network Balkan. In this way, local groups acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to organize such events, while increasing their visibility and fostering community building. In addition to Transposium, Trans Network Balkan's activities include various trainings for trans activists, as well as mentoring work with local organizations and providing advice and knowledge necessary to strengthen the organizations' capacity. Strengthening trans activism remains one of the organization's top priorities. However, over time, the need for activities that would comprehensively address the problem of the increasingly aggressive actions of anti-gender actors in the region emerged.

Alliance building in response to anti-gender movements in the region

The anti-gender movement is a global phenomenon whose initial development can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when the Catholic Church began to develop strategies to combat what they called "gender ideology", which is a term initially created to oppose women's and LGBTIQ rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality.¹⁵ The mid-2000s are characterized by the first phase of mobilization of anti-gender actors united around opposition to the adoption of laws on same-sex partnerships and/or marriages in Italy, Spain, and Slovenia, and the beginning of the introduction of sex education in schools in Croatia. The next phase of this mobilization was significantly stronger and affected Western, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as South America. In 2012, it manifested in the form of mass demonstrations in France and Poland, intensifying in Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia.¹⁶ Anti-gender actors around the world, despite their national, ethnic, or religious differences, very quickly connected and gathered around the same goals, and they structured and organized their actions using identical mechanisms and strategies. In less than two decades, local anti-gender campaigns have produced a global phenomenon that can most accurately be defined as anti-gender politics, in which promotion is not only carried out by social movements and individual actors, but also implemented as part of state politics.¹⁷ Organizations that advocate for anti-gender politics are also connected through numerous

¹⁵ David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, "Gender Ideology' in movement: Introduction", in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, eds. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 5.

¹⁶ Maja Gergorić, "Anti-rodni pokreti u 21. stoleću," *Analitičarskog politološkog društva: časopis za politologiju* 17, no. 1 (2020): 150–51; Nađa Bobičić i Marijana Stojčić, "Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji," *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 53 (2023): 3–31.

¹⁷ Eszter Kováts and Andrea Peto, "Anti-gender Discourse in Hungary: A Discourse Without a Movement?," in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, eds. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 117–31; Cenk Özbay and Ilkan Can Ipekci, "State-led Anti-gender Politics, Islamism, and the University: Experiences of Gender Studies Scholars in Turkey," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 20, no. 1 (2024): 89–110.

transnational forums, networks, and umbrella organizations, and together they form a global network of right-wing extremists lobbying for the same set of goals.¹⁸ Through joint work, investigative journalists from several countries have determined that there is close cooperation between anti-gender activists and politicians from different countries working together to undermine women's and LGBTIQ rights.¹⁹ They also determined that the same network is involved in Croatia's conservative NGO – In the Name of the Family, and Serbia's right-wing political party – Dveri, which had previously been identified as having attended the World Congress of Families together.²⁰

In the last decade, anti-gender actors have become increasingly vocal, assertive, and more organized in the post-Yugoslav space, opposing reproductive health rights, the organization of LGBTIQ pride marches, laws on same-sex partnerships, laws on gender equality, and even the introduction of gender sensitive language in public discourse.²¹ Increased visibility of trans people, which occurred primarily in the West but also in the post-Yugoslav space in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, was followed by increasing transphobia, and it also resulted in focusing anti-gender actors on transgender people more. The emergence of trans organizations and greater visibility of trans activists was accompanied by the emergence and strengthening of anti-trans rhetoric and anti-trans narratives that were increasingly spread by numerous influential individuals, groups, and activist initiatives throughout the region.²² Some of these actors belong to traditionally conservative or ultra-right circles, and their appearance was not surprising or unexpected. However, alongside them, groups and initiatives emerged that in the past did not spread transphobia, nor were they expected to do so. Of particular concern is the fact that some of these groups are supported by academia and parts of the public that do not belong to conservative and right-wing circles. For example, in Serbia, the spread of anti-trans narratives appeared

¹⁸ Their connection is illustrated by the example of an organization called Agenda Europe, which serves as an umbrella organization for over 300 organizations and individuals from more than 30 European countries. Members of this lobby group are ultraconservative NGOs, European politicians and officials, conservative academics, far-right political groups, United States Christian Right actors, and American far-right and Russian propagandists. Neil Datta, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009–2018* (European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights Brussels, 2021).

¹⁹ Based on leaked emails, journalists from Croatia, Poland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Sweden have uncovered information indicating that activists and politicians from the organization Agenda Europe were also developing joint strategies. Hrvoje Šimičević, "U mreži Agende," *Portal Novosti*, March 30, 2024, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-mrezi-agende/>; Hrvoje Šimičević, "Istina o Agendi," *Portal Novosti*, March 23, 2024, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/istina-o-agendi/>.

²⁰ Sven Milekic, "Croatian, Serbian Rightists Join Forces at Family Conference," *BalkanInsight*, May 25, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/25/croatia-serbia-groups-on-controversial-world-family-conference-05-24-2017/>.

²¹ Angel Dimitrievski, *The Anti-Gender Movement as a Threat to Democracy in the Western Balkans*, The German Marshall Fund, 2025; Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia's Church Protests Gender-Related Laws," *BalkanInsight*, June 29, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/29/north-macedonias-church-protests-gender-related-laws/>.

²² Aleksa Milanović, "Uticaj štampanih i onlajn medija na širenje transfobije u Srbiji," *Sociologija* 64, no. 3 (2022): 474–77.

in some feminist and left-wing groups, but also in academic circles. There have been initiatives and groups that claim to be feminist but advocate for strongly anti-trans views. In addition to them, an activist organization appeared that advocates for LGB rights and claims that being transgender is a cover for the “forced conversion” of lesbians and gays. In November 2019, the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, organized a conference titled *Feminism and the Left*, with a conference program committee consisting of scholars from Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This conference included panels on trans rights and trans activism without any trans speakers, and with some of the panelists and audience advocating transphobic attitudes and trans-exclusionary visions of feminism and the left.²³ In December 2020, the Center for Women’s Studies in Zagreb appointed a new director who publicly expressed trans-exclusionary attitudes on social networks, which caused condemnation and criticism from feminists in other countries in the region. However, in response to those criticisms, a letter of support appeared, signed by numerous regional feminist organizations, some of which were previously considered allies of the trans community.²⁴ Those events prompted the mobilization of regional, intersectional feminist, and trans-inclusive movements to collaborate and strategize on how to respond to anti-trans reactionary politics in the region.

Although the anti-gender movement actively targets LGBTIQ rights, the trans community has turned more towards building alliances with feminists. To a large extent, that is the consequence of distancing trans activism from identity politics and refocusing on a broader trans-feminist context, which weakened collaborations of the trans community with most of the mainstream LGBTIQ organizations. Those alliances still exist, but the trans movement does not insist on them at any cost and does not make a great effort to foster closer connections and cooperation. In the past two decades, the LGBTIQ movement in the region became professionalized, and most of the LGBTIQ organizations could be labeled as mainstream activism that focuses largely on organizing pride parades and advocacy for same-sex partnerships. Even though the trans community is seen as a part of the broader LGBTIQ movement and in some cases LGBTIQ organizations contributed to trans organizing, it has been shown many times over the past two decades that the LGBTIQ movement has repeatedly failed the trans community in various ways. Trans people are mostly invisible and under-represented as part of the broader LGBTIQ movement. They are often tokenized and used solely to create an image of inclusiveness, as confirmed by the fact that they are not part of leadership or decision-making positions. Aside from the fact that the cis gay activists in particular are not sufficiently sensitised and informed about trans issues and are often transphobic, with the rise of anti-gender movements and their focus on trans people, sometimes they see transgender movement as detrimental to gay rights. Also, in general, activist organizations that are engaged in advocacy for

²³ Feminizam i levica nekad i sad, accessed May 2025, <https://feminizamilevicakonferencija.wordpress.com/>.

²⁴ Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović, “Uvod: u postjugoslovenskim trans svetovima,” u *Postjugoslo/avenski trans životi, aktivizmi, kulture*, ur. Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović (Multimedijalni institut, 2022), 13.

LGBTIQ rights actually work exclusively or predominantly on issues regarding homophobia and same sex partnerships while leaving trans issues behind. For example, in 2009 in Serbia, when the anti-discrimination law was being advocated and the Serbian Orthodox Church insisted on deleting a portion of the law regarding gender identity, LGBTIQ organizations complied with the decision, with the justification that it was better to achieve victory for some than for no one. When in 2015 activists in Slovenia advocated for same-sex partnerships, LGBTIQ organizations tried not to problematize the anti-gender narrative spread by anti-gender actors so as not to lose the support of the majority population and opted for a soft activist approach “based on portrayals of lesbian and gay people as nice and kind, similar to heterosexual and cisnormative people.”²⁵

Trans-feminist movement in the post-Yugoslav space

In 2021, Trans Network Balkan launched two connected activist projects, which were carried out in collaboration with local trans-led organizations from Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. The first project, titled *Nurture Trans(formative) Dialogue*, was structured around gathering TIGV and feminist activists from the region to collaborate on shared interests. This primarily involved creating a safe and inclusive space for sharing experiences and learning from one another, thereby preparing the ground for developing a joint, trans-inclusive feminist strategy in the region. Thus, the Trans Feminist Platform (TFP) was formed, and within a few months, it had gathered more than 50 individuals from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The communication between the members of TFP took place via a Discord server, mailing list, and live meetings, with the primary goals being networking and capacity building for trans-inclusive feminist movements. Most members of TFP are people active in academia, feminist, leftist, peace, queer, and other social justice movements in the region. Many of us collaborate on activist and academic projects that introduce trans and queer topics into scholarly discourse, striving to bridge the gap between theory and practice and attempting to reconcile academia and activism to create conditions for these two spheres to effectively communicate and collaborate. The results of this collaboration include the involvement of trans activists in academic projects, such as writing texts for books dealing with trans or anti-gender topics or participating in academic conferences that address these topics. It is also essential to involve academic scholars in activist projects, including informal educational programs and artistic endeavors.

The second project, titled *Towards Intersectional Feminism in the Balkans* was oriented towards strengthening and expanding the Trans Feminist Platform and increasing collaboration between feminist and TIGV movements in the region. Some of the objectives were to raise awareness about the importance of intersectionality and the inclusion of TIGV issues in feminist activism, map anti-gender actors in the

²⁵ Gramc, “Tortuous Paths towards Trans Futures,” 137.

region, discuss strategies for responding to anti-gender politics, and increase the participation of TIGV individuals in feminist, peace, leftist, and antifascist movements in the region. Project activities included regular online meetings as well as organizing panel discussions and in person meetings in different countries. Among the first important outcomes was launching a multimedia magazine – *plaTForma*²⁶ – which became an educational resource and place for making connections between transgender and broader feminist issues. In 2023, Trans Network Balkan published the first *Transfeminist Playbook*²⁷ covering the topics of the origins of the anti-gender movement, its basic principles, mechanisms of action, and communication. In this publication, the authors summarize the main anti-trans arguments produced and disseminated by actors in the anti-gender movement in our region, providing both counterarguments and alternative perspectives, along with detailed explanations of their narratives to reveal their true intentions and the harm they cause. The second part of the publication comprises six case studies from three countries: Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, in which the authors analyze specific key events, actions, or campaigns initiated by anti-gender actors that have occurred over the past few years. In 2024, Trans Network Balkan piloted the first Queer Praxis School – an educational program focused on transgender studies, feminist studies, critical theory, and fascism/anti-fascism. The program aims to foster greater connection among people from the region and to educate participants about issues relevant to the TIGV, queer, and feminist communities, equipping them with skills in research, writing, knowledge presentation, and civic engagement.

Through all the aforementioned activities, Trans Network Balkan began to build a regional trans-feminist movement focused on connecting and empowering TIGV individuals and feminist allies, working closely on joint strategies to challenge anti-gender politics. Accordingly, the regional trans movement in the post-Yugoslav space has offered a new definition of trans-feminism that differs significantly from the initial definition of *transfeminism* provided by Emi Koyama in her essay “The Transfeminist Manifesto” in which she emphasized that transfeminism is “primarily a movement by and for trans women.”²⁸ Koyama also states that the movement is open to a wide range of queer and trans identities, with a particular focus on trans women. However, in the case of post-Yugoslav activism and building of a new regional movement, the emphasis is on connecting the entire trans and feminist movement to make strong alliances which will work together on topics of common interest, and on forming a united block against patriarchy, fascism/neofascism, capitalism,

²⁶ Trans Mreža Balkan, *plaTForma*, accessed May 2025, <https://transbalkan.org/platforma/>.

²⁷ Aleksa Milanović, Marija Jovanović and Jovan Džoli Uličević, *Transfeministička kuvarica* (Trans Mreža Balkan, 2023), accessed May 2025, <https://talas.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/transfeministicka-kuvarica.pdf>. This publication was translated into English and published in 2025 by the Office of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy, 2025, accessed May 2025, <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/05/12/transfeminist-playbook>.

²⁸ Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Northeastern University Press, 2003), 245.

neoliberalism, and other oppressive systems that (re)produce misogyny, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and racism. The need for a strong connection between regional trans and feminist movements is conditioned by the fact that local trans communities in the post-Yugoslav space are relatively small and therefore lack the capacity to provide an adequate activist response to oppression, especially in the context of the increasing expansion of anti-gender politics in the region. Of all the civil movements, only the feminist movement and movements with feminist values at their core have provided an adequate response to the strengthening of anti-gender politics. It is the only movement that the regional trans movement shares its values and foundational ideological positions with. Over the last five years, the regional trans movement, led by Trans Network Balkan, has focused its work and activities on socio-political issues that concern not only the trans community, but with the broader scope, such as addressing societal consequences of neoliberalism, and criticizing the rise of populism, neo-fascism, and autocratic regimes in the region and globally, adopting intersectionality as a significant analytical framework in feminist theory and directing the trans movement towards activist work that addresses broader social issues. In the words of Jovan Ulićević Džoli, one of the most visible and leading trans activists in the region, and executive director of Trans Network Balkan:

We perceive feminism as a set of values, which is not tied exclusively to sex and gender, but a type of alternative action that aims to transform our reality, which is oppressive along various lines and in relation to all parts of our lives. In relation to that, we experience intersectionality not through the prism of the diversity of our identities; in that sense, we very much run away from intersectionality, which easily becomes tokenization and competition among victims. We look at intersectionality and feminism as empowering values, through which we contribute in various fields, so we and our associates deal with feminist perspectives within the framework of anti-fascism, decolonialism, and workers' struggle. In this way, we fight against the relativization of quite important, powerful, and transformative concepts, and against the emptying of their meaning. For us, feminism is the creation of an order that respects solidarity and equality, the equal distribution of resources.²⁹

It is increasingly clear that insisting on identity politics will keep the trans movement focused on the specific problems in national contexts, reinforce the self-victimization of local communities, and facilitate the tokenization that the trans community is often subjected to in the broader LGBTIQ movement. All of this would be very counterproductive for trans activist work, and most importantly, it would distance the struggle of TIGV people from a myriad of other local civil rights movements in

²⁹ Mirta Maslač, "Recepti za solidarne prakse" (intervju), *Kulturpunkt*, April 8, 2024, <https://kulturpunkt.hr/intervju/recepti-za-solidarne-prakse/>.

the region that share trans-feminist values and from developing broader cooperation with other regions (e.g., the global South and the broader Balkan region). Instead of isolating trans movement from other social movements and focusing on narrowly specific problems, Trans Network Balkan strives to build alliances and cooperation with different social movements, and above all, with the feminist movement. Those alliances helped to build a trans-feminist movement in the post-Yugoslav space, with goals, strategies, and a general approach to activist organizing that differ entirely from mainstream feminisms. By all characteristics, the trans-feminist movement that we created belongs to the corpus of feminist movements that Firoozeh Farvardin defines as *other feminisms*.³⁰ The concept of other feminisms encompasses movements that originate from the Global South, areas considered geopolitical peripheries, and those founded by marginalized populations. They are characterized by a holistic approach to working on social change, the development of long-term strategies that will lead to structural and systemic changes, implying much more than achieving gender equality. Regardless of whether these movements are oriented towards local problems, they are characterized by an intensive connection with feminist movements worldwide and the exchange of knowledge and experiences with them. One of the essential features of these movements, which the trans-feminist movement we are building in the post-Yugoslav space also strives for, is offering a vision for the future and opening up space for various collaborations and actions through which we will create a better society for all.

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³⁰ Firoozeh Farvardin, "Other Feminisms: A Subversive Gift to the World," in *Beyond Molotovs: A Visual Handbook of Anti-authoritarian Strategies*, eds. International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies and kolektiv orangotango (Transcript Verlag, 2024), 286–95.

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