

## The Political Space for Women's Agency in the Framework of EU Eastern Enlargement

'Constructing Supranational Political Spaces: The European Union, Eastern Enlargement and Women's Agency' is the title of a project that was run in 2000–2005 by the Gender and Sociology Department at the Institute of Sociology AS CR. The project made a comparative study of the Czech Republic and Poland. It was headed by Prof. Joanna Regulská<sup>1</sup> from Rutgers University in the United States, and it was financially supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) USA and the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

The project focused on the process of EU Eastern enlargement, exploring the ways in which women in two accession countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, have engaged as political actors in the construction of a supranational political space. It devoted special attention to the restrictions on what women can do (through an analysis of constraints, such as a patriarchal political culture, the legacy of socialist uneven development, the limitations stemming from the EU's primarily economic focus, and institutional, rhetorical restrictions) and to what women are able to do successfully owing to the new opportunities created by globalisation trends and by the post-1989 transformations. In an empirical and institutional analysis of the processes, actions, and responses in connection with the EU initiated by women and by EU institutions in the two states, the study presents an account of the ways in which agency is mobilised and competing interests are negotiated in the process of constructing political spaces. Through its focus on agency the study articulates the process through which agents act, choose, and connect with other actors. The study explores women's agency and asks how women construct dynamic sets of strategies. By focusing on the complexity of women's agency the research was designed to uncover new

forms of interaction between the nation-state and on a supranational scale.

The significance of the project can be summarised in two main points. First, it represents one of the first extensive examinations of the discourse on EU Eastern enlargement and gender and presents an account of the ways in which women activists and NGOs, state politicians, and EU representatives use and re-work EU and gender discourse as a means of advancing their goals and formulating political agendas. Second, the study helps to clarify how women understand politics and their political activities, how they can construct their agency, interests, and identities beyond the nation-state, and how these identities are translated into mobilising practices across various scales.

The project was co-ordinated from Rutgers University and three teams worked on the project research: at Rutgers University – Prof. Joanna Regulská and Magda Grabowska, a PhD student; at Warsaw University – Prof. Małgorzata Fuszara and Joanna Mizilińska, PhD The project co-ordinators in the Czech Republic were Mgr. Alena Křížková, Mgr. Hana Hašková and PhDr. Marie Čermáková from the Institute of Sociology AS CR; Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, PhD. and PhDr. Eva Kalivodová from the Gender Centre at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts; and PhDr. Lenka Simerská a Mgr. Marksová-Tominová from Gender Studies o.p.s.

The project began in May 2002 with a meeting in Warsaw, where the research topics and methodology of the project were discussed and hypotheses and theoretical concepts of the research were defined. The main research methods elected were: document analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of the press. The research goals laid out in the project were designed to encompass the environment of EU enlargement and of all the important actors in this process and in the process of formation of a women's agenda in connection with EU enlargement in the pre-accession period

of 1996–2004. The first stage of the research involved the analysis of documents related to the country's accession to the EU from the perspective of gender contents and equal opportunities policy. This was intended to map the gender discourse in the EU, which is passed on to the candidate countries through its written and more or less binding documents, and also to trace how these procedures subsequently emerge and appear in documents in the Czech Republic and Poland. For this reason the analysis looked at documents from the European Commission referring to equal opportunities policy and the regular reports of the European Commission on the preparation of the Czech Republic/Poland relating to EU accession, along with other documents, such as the Employment Action Plan from this period.<sup>2</sup> It was also necessary to map the media discourse during periods when important documents emerged or were published or when other important events took place in connection with the Czech Republic's/Poland's accession to the EU or in the area of equal opportunities for women and men. Therefore, throughout the course of the project extensive analysis was conducted on the three most widely read daily newspapers, examining the occurrence, context and content of references to the European Union and women.<sup>3</sup>

In the autumn of 2002 a second meeting on the project was held in Prague, the aim of which was to complete the creation of the project's theoretical framework and, especially, to create the methodological grounding for the most demanding part of the project – in-depth interviews with representatives of NGOs and politicians. The decision was made that in each of the two countries approximately thirty in-depth interviews would be conducted with NGO representatives. The NGOs were selected on the basis of an exhaustive list of organisations dealing with women's or gender issues, but it also included NGOs that in recent years had worked on a gender-oriented project and at

the same addressed the issue of EU accession; the respondents were contacted by telephone. The in-depth interviews were conducted in the middle of 2003. As the research attempted also to describe the dynamics of the relationships of these organisations and their reciprocal awareness, the focus group method was applied. In the spring of 2004 the research team in the Czech Republic invited representatives from the ten most active Czech NGOs for a group discussion, which followed a prepared outline led by an experienced moderator. A total of seven representatives from the most active women's and other NGOs accepted an invitation and took part in the discussion, all of whom had participated in the in-depth interviews during the months before. At the start of 2005 the focus group discussion was repeated with the same participants. This procedure made it possible to compare over time the views women's NGOs have of their position and the space for the political agenda within the framework of EU accession, but it was also possible to observe the group dynamics of the representatives of these organisations, which actively co-operate with one another or are at least in contact within the same field of interest.

For the Czech team the next stage of research consisted of the planned interviews with politicians and officials in public administration who either directly or indirectly (creating documents, policy proposals, directing campaigns, creating political debates) took part in the negotiations on EU accession. In the summer of 2003, the Czech research team conducted ten in-depth interviews with politicians in the Czech government who as part of the pre-accession negotiations and over the course of the negotiations period were responsible for gender issues and equal opportunities policy. The aim was to cover all the significant types of actors at various levels of the Czech Republic's accession to the EU in connection with the emergence of gender issues at the Czech political level. The project researchers therefore met in the au-

turn of 2003 in Brussels for a regular meeting and to conduct ten interviews with European politicians and officials. In the summer of 2004 another ten interviews were conducted with representatives of the delegation of the European Commission in the Czech Republic on their view of the space opening for women's issues and issues of equal opportunities for women and men in the Czech Republic in connection with EU accession and the actors in this process.

The year 2004 was then heavily devoted to analysing the massive data files and presenting the preliminary results of the research to the scientific community at conferences and seminars. The research team underwent training to work with the *ATLAS.ti* program for conducting sociological analyses of qualitative data. The analysis of Czech data and Polish data was conducted separately using the anchored theory method – categories of meanings, subjects, and dimensions were formed, which allowed the researchers to arrive at a list of codes. The research team was very interested in ensuring that the results were to at least a certain degree comparable. At the group meetings discussions were aimed at creating a unified structure of codes and their dimensions, which were then to be monitored in the in-depth interviews in the next step of the analysis. In June 2004 a seminar was organised at the Warsaw Academy, where the main team researchers in the project presented the preliminary results of analyses of the data from in-depth interviews in non-governmental organisations, which constituted the project's main data source.

The project researchers presented the results of the research at other conferences and seminars, for example, at the 2nd Pan-European Conference on European Union Politics 'Implications of a Wider Europe: Politics, Institutions and Diversity' (The Johns Hopkins Bologna Centre, 24–26 June 2004),<sup>4</sup> and at McGill University in Montreal a seminar was organised on the topic 'Building Leadership in Non-Traditional Ways' (Women's Research Centre, 10 November 2004),<sup>5</sup> a lecture was

given there for the Political Science Department (12 November 2004).<sup>6</sup>

In the autumn of 2004 the main project researchers met at Rutgers University for a two-week research meeting to intensively work on the comparison of results from the two countries and to discuss the form that the final studies from the project would take. At the end of the meeting an international conference was organised at Rutgers University, 'From Cold War to European Union: Women and Gender in Contemporary Europe' (1–2 October 2004), which was designed as a forum to present and discuss the project and its results with the wider academic community, many of whom are working on similar topics in the United States and Europe. The Czech team presented the paper 'Interrogating Women's Collective Agency in Central and Eastern Europe'.<sup>7</sup> The conference also saw participation from, for example, Prof. Ann Snitow from the New School of Social Research in New York, Prof. Nanette Funk from City University in New York, Prof. Nira Yuval-Davis from the University of East London, Dr. Francisca de Haan from the Central European University and others.

The final meeting for the project took place in April 2005 at the Institute of Sociology in Prague, where the researchers discussed the preparation of the project's final studies and co-ordinated the individual comparative analyses that had been prepared by that time.

This author found the project to be an important experience in team building, and, as the Czech team co-ordinator, and enjoyed the experience of progressing from a position of partial knowledge of the research topic and issue to a more comprehensive level of knowledge. The process was very much about sharing information informally, accumulating individual fragments of knowledge and putting them together to fill in the puzzle. These fragments included the different stories, actors and their competencies and incompetencies, abilities and inabilities, actions, informal debates, written information (newspaper analy-