
The Impact of EU Enlargement on the Civic Participation of Women in Central and Eastern Europe – The Perspective of the Karat Coalition

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Introduction

The EU accession process was the dominant political context in eight Central and Eastern European countries in the years prior to May 2004, when they became EU members, as it continues to be in the current candidate countries (Bulgaria, Romania) and in countries planning to apply for membership in the near future. This process has had an impact on women's civic participation and has positively reinforced the role of women's NGOs and the position and structure of the institutional mechanisms aimed at gender equality. It has also increased the level of gender awareness. However, its (positive) impact on the current real situation of women has been less evident.

Europe has been in a state of constant change since 1989. But while Europe is overcoming its former division, new borders are being established in the East and South-East of Europe. The new political situation in Europe is reflected in new terminology. The countries or group of countries are defined by their accession status (or lack of it) in relation to the European Union. The former division between the EU and CEE/CIS was replaced by a new one on 1 May 2004: a division between the old and new EU member states on the one hand, and those outside the European Union on the other. The new political division is also perceived as the inclusion of some states and the exclusion of those who have no chance of joining the EU in the near future. As a consequence, co-operation between former partners in the third sector – women's NGOs – is now seriously threatened by the new EU border. This is quite alarming, as collaboration, the sharing of experience, and the joint action of women's activists in the CEE/CIS regions in the past has significantly contributed to strengthening gender-equality advocacy in countries in these regions and to a certain extent has prevented the growth of a gap between EU countries and Eastern European countries outside the EU in terms of their observance of gender equality standards.

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Civic dialogue: the impact of EU standards and requirements on women's civic participation at the national level¹

Women's activists from both the accession and candidate countries have perceived the EU accession process as a great opportunity to more effectively advocate for the improvement of the situation of women, especially in the labour market. The EU's gender equality legislation, policy and programmes, and the mechanisms for their implementation, while not perfect, provide the tools to influence governmental policy in the direction of ensuring gender equality. Feminist activists are aware that merely joining the EU will not automatically lead to the improvement of the situation of women, and that EU membership is not a panacea. Instead they simply perceive it as a significant opportunity to adapt various mechanisms of democracy.

EU membership has been a priority for the accession governments, and this has had positive consequences for women. The governments have begun to observe the directives, standards, opinions and recommendations of the EU regarding the equal status of women and men. An increasing number of politicians (even if they are not enthusiastic about the implementation of the gender equal opportunities policies and laws) have been influenced by EU standards and at least try to behave in a politically correct manner. In addition, the government has started paying attention to the demands of women's organisations.

In this context civic dialogue was an important EU requirement, as it led to a change in the attitudes of governments towards NGOs. Despite the fact that civil society played a leading role in the development of the post-1989 democratic system, the role of NGOs in the social and political life of post-communist countries has not been well defined. The EU requirement of civic dialogue also gave NGOs legitimacy in the eyes of the governments, which until now had been very slow in recognising the social significance of NGOs.

Government recognition of the role of NGOs in civil society, forming advisory bodies made up of NGO representatives and inviting them for consultation on government documents and strategies, illustrates how EU recommendations have been translated into national mechanisms. Unfortunately, in some cases, despite the government's good will, their lack of experience in discussing and negotiating with NGOs and accepting their amendments at such a level means that NGO expertise (which often exceeds that of public officials) has not been fully utilised. Furthermore, consultations have sometimes been treated as an obligation and formality enforced from the 'top' (i.e. the European Union). Nonetheless, this initiative has to be seen as very positive, especially given that it is only the start of a process.

¹ This section is based on 'Gender Assessment of the Impact of EU Accession on the Status of Women in the Labour Market in the CEE. National Study: Poland', by K. Lohmann and A. Seibert (eds.), KARAT Coalition 2003.

An example from Poland

The political situation and women's NGOs

The role of women's NGOs has been similarly unclear as that of other NGOs. The women's movement developed significantly after 1989 and it continues to grow, and from the beginning of the democratic transition women joined in the civic dialogue. Currently there are more than 300 women's organisations in Poland. The degree of civic participation of women, the dialogue and co-operation between women's organisations and government, have depended largely on which government was in power. The right-wing government in 1997–2001 promoted a patriarchal model of the family, and during this time women's NGOs were the only bodies promoting women's rights and actively fighting the discrimination of women, in reference to international agreements ratified by the government. Women's NGOs were critical of government policy, which ignored the need for strategies aimed at ensuring the equal status of women and men. This resulted in the consolidation and strengthening of women's NGOs, and their consolidation led to the extremely successful involvement of women's NGOs in the 2001 election campaign and to a significant increase in the number of women in Parliament (20% in the lower house and 23% in the upper house, up from 13% and 12% respectively). This not only demonstrated the strength of the women's movement but also showed politicians that they must be accountable to women. The increased role of women's activists in political life (related partly to EU accession) was visible in 2001, when using arguments related to gender equality standards and the EU gender equality directive for establishing gender equality machinery they pressured the government, which led to the creation of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men (2002).

Consultation on policy documents

In the dialogue with civil society, women's NGOs together with representatives for different industries and ministries, and experts and academics and others were all invited to take part in consultative working groups focusing on documents and strategies developed by the government. The Ministry of the Economy and Employment consulted in this manner on the development of new employment and social policy strategy and documents, which respond to the European Employment Strategy and the equal opportunity pillar, including gender equality.

Co-operation with women's national machinery and other ministries

In Poland a good example of co-operation between women's NGOs and the Polish government is their co-operation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men. This co-operation is executed in part through the Advi-

sory Board to the Plenipotentiary, where the expertise of women's NGOs has very often been used. In addition, the Office of the Plenipotentiary, as a member of working groups in other ministries, appoints representatives of women's NGOs to join these groups. In other new member states and in the western Balkans similar co-operation has also been taking place, and very often women's NGOs and national machinery jointly implement EU-funded projects.

CEE women's civic participation at the EU level

The work of women's NGOs and networks in the region is also linked to the wider work of civil society at the EU level. Women's organisations actively participate in the discussion about the impact of EU accession on women and to a certain extent about the future of Europe (Karat Coalition's Contribution to the Forum of the Convention for the future of Europe, 2002). As far as co-operation with women's organisations from the EU is concerned, it changed as the date of the accession for eight CEE countries approached. Invitations to join the debates and conferences organised by EU women's NGOs focusing on the impact on women of the enlargement process was already visible during the Swedish presidency (the first half of 2001), and it increased further during the Danish presidency (the second half of 2002). There was a notable increase in interest in women from 'exotic Eastern Europe', but also a willingness to understand the perspective of the women who would soon become EU citizens. Co-operation was developing despite difficulties associated with the ability of those involved to understand one another, not so much in terms of language but rather in terms of the very different experiences of EU and CEE women. Unfortunately, despite several examples of very good co-operation between CEE and EU women, the co-operation started quite late and did not significantly contribute to the capacity of CEE women's NGOs to participate in civic dialogue, advocacy and lobbying at the EU level before the accession.

CEE women's civic participation at the EU level after accession

CEE (the new member states) women's civic participation at the EU level considerably increased after accession. This is mainly thanks to numerous initiatives from EU advocacy networks based in Brussels, which require legitimacy to lobby at the EU level of behalf of NGOs from 25 countries and to strengthen lobbying activities at the national level in the new member states.

The new political situation in Europe after May 2004 and its implications for the civic participation of women

Although the process of enlargement has positively reinforced the role of women's NGOs and their civic participation in the new member states, in the accession/candidate countries, and slightly also in some neighbouring countries, it also caused new and largely artificial political dividing lines to develop across the continent between the new member states and their non-member neighbours with or without membership perspectives. This will increase the gap between the situation of women in the region and their civic participation at national and EU levels. The European Union, instead of creating new borders, should ensure its relations to Eastern and Southern Europe and CIS countries are inclusive in nature. This needs to be reflected in all its policies towards the region.

A new division between Eastern and South-Eastern Europe is foreseen in the new Financial Instruments² that are being developed and discussed in Brussels now. These Instruments divide the region into the candidate countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey (Croatia and Turkey), potential candidates (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia), and neighbouring countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). A response to this newly foreseen division was the recent participation of major gender equality networks and organisations from Central and Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States in June 2005 in Brussels to deliberate over current changes in EU policy towards their countries.³ In Brussels this delegation, which was supported by UNIFEM, met with Members of the European Parliament and EC Officials to convey several concerns relating to the new Financial Instruments. They called for the new EU Financial Instruments to be amended to integrate gender perspectives, as the EU commitment to the promotion of gender equality is not reflected at all or only very weakly reflected. The new instruments fail to draw on the lessons learned by the new member states under the 'old' instruments, and particularly, the considerable challenges encountered by NGOs in gaining access to EU funds. Cross-country or sub-regional co-operation to advance gender equality is at risk of being hindered by applying different instruments with varying rules and different procedures to different categories of countries.

² The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), and the Stability Instrument (IS). These instruments will be the framework for EU support to most countries in Southern and Eastern Europe and the European part of the former Soviet Union from 2007 until 2013.

³ Press release, 'New Financial Instruments Are Gender-Blind' Key Representatives of Women's Networks and Organizations from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States Call for the New EU Financial Instruments to be Amended to Integrate Gender Perspectives, Brussels, June 2005.

Conclusion

The work of women's NGOs in the region is directly linked to wider work on civil society and democratisation; women's groups and networks strengthen and increase the capacity for democratisation as they address its capacity for gender equality. EU enlargement created a great opportunity for women's civic participation from the old and new member states and for women from all of Europe. Karat Coalition believes that political action towards gender equality could be strengthened by developing a common agenda for and by women from the whole of Europe, and CEE women from the new member states should play a bridging role to prevent the emergence of a new European East-West divide.⁴

About the Karat Coalition

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 the idea was born to establish a coalition of women's NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe. This idea was realised in the Karat Coalition, which was formally established in February 1997 and in 2001 was registered as an international organisation. As a regional coalition of organisations and individuals Karat promotes gender equality in the CEE and CIS regions, monitors the observance of international agreements and documents, and lobbies on behalf of women's interests at all decision-making levels. Karat has members in 22 countries in CEE and CIS.

Since the beginning of its existence Karat has been a successful advocate for the improvement of the situation of women from the CEE/CIS region at all levels: national, regional or international (mainly UN and EU). Particularly important is the involvement of Karat in the Beijing Process. Karat members actively participated in B+5 and B+10 reviews. They presented the shared perspective of women from the CEE/CIS region and advocate for their rights when participating in CSW meetings, and they have also prepared alternative reports for several countries in the region (2000) and information sheets on the progress of the implementation of Beijing documents in various countries of the region (2005). Apart from involvement at the UN level, Karat engages in advocacy and lobbying activities at the EU level. Since 2002 it has been actively involved in the EU integration process. Its involvement is diverse consideration that Karat's members are new member states, accession countries and the neighbouring countries of the EU. Karat presents the perspective of the whole region by taking part in various EU advocacy and lobbying actions. It moreover also focuses on building up the capacity of its member organisations in the areas of advocacy and lobbying.

Karat has acquired extensive experience and become a recognised expert in combining economic issues with women's rights in the context of CEE/CIS region. Its main recent

⁴ 'Gender Equality. Social and Economic Justice'. Position paper to the 49th UN CSW, New York, 28 February – 11 March, 2005, by the Karat Coalition and Stability Pact Gender Task Force.

projects focused on these issues. Karat has also issued publications on the economic situation of women from the region, the impact of the EU accession process, the monitoring of women's workers rights, etc. All publications are available on Karat's website:

<http://www.karat.org/publications/publications.html>

In 2001 Karat launched its Economic Literacy Programme. As an expert in the economic and social situation of women in CEE/CIS region, Karat is often invited to provide its expertise in this field, to conduct training or to provide speakers at various events. For more information go to: <http://www.karat.org>

KINGA LOHMANN initiated and co-founded the Karat Coalition in 1997 and after working as its regional co-ordinator she was appointed executive director in 2002. She participated in the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, when the idea of initiating co-operation between women from CEE/CIS was born. She is an activist involved in formulating the special CEE/CIS vision on women's equal status and representing this viewpoint at UN and EU fora. She is the author and co-editor of several reports monitoring the implementation of international commitments by governments to promote gender equality and a member of the Advisory Board for the Polish Minister for Gender Equality (2002–2005), the External Gender Consultative Group for the World Bank in Washington (since 2004). She is an historian by training.