

**FIXING AN OLD DIVIDE:  
The Political Participation of Women in an Enlarged Europe**  
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As eight former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) join the European Union, it is critical to examine the dynamics of gender politics in the context of EU membership. This paper analyses the nature and extent of women's political participation in the democratic governance of their countries, focusing on both political institutions and non-governmental organisations. It draws on reports produced by academics in all ten CEE accession countries for an EU Framework 5 project on 'Enlargement, Gender and Governance'. The main methods include desk research (document analysis, statistical collection) and interviews with key actors (politicians, government officials, women's NGOs). First, the paper identifies the areas in which women are most active in political and civic decision-making, comparing and contrasting their participation in the decade prior to democratisation and today. It documents the considerable reduction in women's political representation across CEE post-communism, but also shows how women in some countries have slowly increased their share of political posts over the last decade. It argues that the relative share of women is higher at local levels of governance, as the more power an institution has the less likely women are to occupy its upper hierarchy. Second, the paper addresses the substantive issue of women's civic engagement by examining their campaign for political change. It examines the role played by women in bringing about new democratic institutions, discusses the state of the women's movement in the post-1989 period, maps the issues on which women's NGOs are lobbying for further reform, and assesses the barriers to more effective relations between women's NGOs and women politicians. It concludes that communist ideology has affected the ability of feminism as an ideology to take root. Because the demagogic communist agenda damaged awareness of women's rights by emphasising their liberation, this ideological legacy has hindered women's quest for real equality. Few acknowledge a coherent women's movement in CEE, while the split within women's organisations demonstrates the lack of solidarity among women.

Following the collapse of state socialism in 1989 and the transition to democratic politics and market economics, countries across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) reformed their institutions and practices in order to attain membership in the European Union (EU). Eight of them acceded to the union on 1 May 2004, with two more expected to follow in 2007. The creation of new democratic institutions offers a prime opportunity to increase women's political representation, yet the role of women has not featured highly in enlargement discussions. The EU influenced the development of equal opportunities legislation by requiring accession countries to implement the *acquis communautaire* (the body of EU legislation), and most CEE countries now have non-discrimination clauses in their constitutions and statutes to deal with equality issues. Although women still remain under-represented in political bodies, progress has been made over the past decade: women are slowly increasing their parliamentary representation, some political parties have cited women's issues in their campaign documents, and civic groups are furthering the struggle for greater equality.

This paper, which draws from an EU-funded research project,<sup>2</sup> provides an overview of women's political participation and campaign for change in ten CEE accession countries.<sup>3</sup> The first section

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<sup>2</sup> This paper draws from a research project entitled "Enlargement, Gender and Governance: the civic and political participation and representation of women in EU candidate countries" (EGG). The three year (12/03-11/05), twelve country study is funded by the EU 5th Framework Programme (HPSE-CT2002-00115). For more information, see [www.qub.ac.uk/egg](http://www.qub.ac.uk/egg).

focuses on women's political representation, examining pre- and post-89 participation rates in parliament and government. It is clearly impossible to make accurate comparisons given the total control exercised by communist regimes and the façade of parliaments that rubber-stamped decisions, but the inclusion of pre-89 data provides a historical context to the challenges that CEE women face today in their quest for greater participatory rights.<sup>4</sup> The second section examines how women's organisations are campaigning for political change. In particular, it considers the role of women in bringing about new democratic institutions, the state of the women's movement post-89, and the issues on which women's NGOs are lobbying. It also analyses the complicated relationship between women's NGOs and women politicians. The main methods involved desk research (document analysis, statistical collection) for the first section and interviews with key actors (politicians, government officials, leaders of women's NGOs) for the second.

## **1. Women in Political Decision-Making**

The paper begins by identifying the areas in which women are most active in political and civic decision-making, comparing and contrasting women's participation in the period immediately prior to democratisation and as it is today. It focuses on parliament, government and local government. 1979 was selected as a starting point for data collection in order to limit the scope of research while providing a comparative basis from which to focus on changes in women's involvement post-1989; as quotas were in place throughout much of the communist period in many CEE countries, the data is unlikely to differ significantly in previous years.

### ***1.1 Women in Parliament***

Power originated from the communist party, particularly the central committee, which determined membership and leading positions by secret regulations and quotas. Women were generally well-represented among party members, but there were few women party leaders. The available data suggests that quotas for women's participation were not adhered to in the upper echelons of power. Slovenia had by far the most women leaders: 25.8% in 1982 and 20.4% in 1986. Bulgaria was particularly low with 6% in 1981 and 7% in 1986. The other CEE countries averaged between 11-14% women leaders per term.

In the 1970s communist leaders in many CEE countries introduced quotas on all aspects of political and economic life. The proposed proportion of women on parliamentary candidate lists was around 30% in some countries, with the majority of women representing the working class and agricultural sector. Consequently, a comparatively high number of women served as members of communist parliaments (see Table 1 below). In the early 1980s, women comprised at least 20% of parliamentarians

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<sup>3</sup> This paper examines the three Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), Eastern Europe (Romania, Bulgaria), and one country from Southeastern Europe/Balkans (Slovenia). For the sake of simplicity, this paper uses Central and Eastern Europe (or CEE) to refer to all 10 EU accession states.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the information contained in the first section of this paper, including the tables, draws from Sloat (Forthcoming 2004).

in all 10 CEE countries. In 1980 Lithuania and Latvia had the most women representatives, with 36% and 35% respectively. On the lower end of the spectrum were Poland (23% in 1980), Bulgaria (22% in 1981), and Estonia (21% in 1985).

Although the election results were presented as a victory for 'socialist democracy' (particularly in comparison with lower levels of women's representation in capitalist countries), women did not necessarily benefit from having a greater political presence. Furthermore, the participation of both male and female MPs was formal as the parliament approved all proposals prepared by the communist party; "The pseudo-elections under socialism, with party-determined quotas for women, did not strengthen candidates' self-confidence, but led to the development of an inferiority complex and a revulsion toward holding political office" (Šiklová 1993, 78). Consequently, many women withdrew from the public sphere and focused instead on family life.

There was a dramatic decrease in the number of women politicians elected to post-89 parliaments across Central and Eastern Europe (see Table 1 below). For example, the percentage of women elected in Hungary's first free elections in 1990 dropped to 7% (from 30% in 1980) and in Romania to 3.3% from (33% in 1980). Numerous academic studies have provided explanations for this immediate decline post-89 (e.g., Janova and Sineau 1992, Einhorn 1993, Karaszewska 1998, Reuschmeyer 1998, Jaquette and Wolchik 1999, Siemieńska 2000, Matland and Montgomery 2003). First, the number of women representatives decreased when the political institutions regained real power (Watson 2000). The ease with which men were able to push women aside highlights the façade of equality under socialism. Second, the reformed electoral systems were not always favourable to women. Quotas were either fully or partially removed post-89, while the legacy of false equality meant there was little public awareness about the importance of ensuring women's political representation. Furthermore, when parties put women forward as candidates, they are often too low on the party list to be electable.

Third, there is an image problem as politics is predominantly seen as 'dirty', corrupt, and 'male business'. This stereotype suggests that women are neither interested in politics nor fit for the job (Toth 1994, Kiss 1999). Many women are discouraged from putting themselves forward as candidates given the lack of resources, including money, spare time, and family support. Wage disparities and women's predominant employment in the lower-paying service sector leave women in a weaker financial position to risk standing for election. In very traditional and religious countries such as Slovakia, women have been obstructed by a patriarchal view of gender roles – according to which women should care for their families and men should fill public functions (Filadelfiova et al 2002).

During the 1990s there was a measurable increase overall in women's share of parliamentary seats, with Bulgaria, Latvia and Poland breaking 20% and Slovakia close behind. However, women are finding it more difficult to make a noticeable breakthrough into parliamentary politics in Hungary, Lithuania and Romania. Attitudes regarding the presence of women in politics are slowly changing as CEE societies become more accepting of women politicians and aware that the international

community (including the EU and UN) expects more women in politics. For example, one survey (Kalnická 1997) found that 77% of Czechs see the political participation of women as positive. Table 1 provides an overview of women's changing status in the lower houses of CEE parliaments.

**Table 1: Women's parliamentary representation in CEE countries (%)**

	1980	1990	Change (1980-90)	Most recent election (date)	Change (1990-now)
Bulgaria	21.7 (1981)	8.5	-13.2	26.7 (06/2001)	+18.2
Czech Rep.	29.0 (1981)	11.0	-18	17.0 (06/2002)	+6.0
Estonia	20.7 (1985)	5.7	-15	18.8 (03/2003)	+13.1
Hungary	30.1	7.3	-22.8	9.8 (04/2002)	+2.5
Latvia	34.8	5.5	-29.3	21.0 (10/2002)	+15.5
Lithuania	36.0	8.1	-27.9	10.6 (10/2000)	+2.5
Poland	23.0	9.5 (1991)	-13.5	20.2 (09/2001)	+10.7
Romania	33.1	3.6	-29.5	10.7 (11/2000)	+7.1
Slovakia	29.0 (1981)	8.7	-20.3	19.3 (09/2002)	+10.6
Slovenia	26.0 (1982)	11.2	-14.8	13.3 (10/2000)	+2.1
Average	26.9	7.7	-19.2	16.7	+9.0

Source: EGG Work Package 2 reports, Interparliamentary Union 1995, Matland and Montgomery 2003

### *1.2 Women in Government*

Because women were poorly represented in the central committee of the communist party, very few women held ministerial posts in communist governments (see Table 2). Latvia was the most inclusive of women with 17% in 1980 and 1985. Slovenia was close behind, ranging from 17% women ministers in 1982 to 12% in 1986. Czechoslovakia fared the worst with only one female minister, who only served from January to October 1969 in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The remaining CEE countries fell in between these extremes, averaging 3-5% women ministers per government. Those who were offered posts usually supervised ministries deemed 'suitable' for women: education, social protection, health and culture, etc.

The number of women ministers slowly increased across many CEE countries during the decade after the democratic transition. A breakthrough occurred in Hungary after the 2002 election when the new socialist-liberal government appointed four women ministers. Similarly, Bulgaria had its largest number of women-ministers (5 of 22) following the 2003 election. In contrast, the Czech Republic has seen only five women hold (six) ministerial positions since 1990. As opposed to the communist period, women are beginning to hold less traditionally male-dominated posts, including prime minister and deputy prime minister (Bulgaria), foreign affairs (Bulgaria, Latvia), trade (Czech Republic), justice (Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia), and the interior (Hungary). Women have also served as speaker (Latvia) and deputy chair (Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia) of the parliament. Latvia is

the only CEE country to have a woman president in the post-89 period, although women have run for this office in others (Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia Slovenia).

**Table 2: Women in Government, 1980-2002 (percentage of total)**

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2002
Bulgaria	2.4 (1981)	3.7 (1986)	8/10/5*	5.0	22.7 (2003)
Czech Rep	0 (1981)	0 (1986)	4.7	4.4 (1996)	11.7
Estonia				7.1/13.3/0*	35.7/28.5*
Hungary	0	5.3 (1984)	0	6.6 (1994)	20
Latvia	16.7	16.7	0	7.1	25
Lithuania	4	3.8		3 (1994)	23 (2001)
Poland	2.4	3.1	0	4.8	20 (2001)
Romania	5.0 (1975)	11.6 (1987)		6.6 (1996)	
Slovakia	0 (1981)	0 (1986)	0	5.6/14.8* (1994)	0
Slovenia	15.4 (1978)	11.5 (1986)	7.4	12.5 (1994)	18.8

Source: EGG Work Package 2 reports \* There were multiple governments during these years.

### **1.3 Women in Local Government**

Given variable data and situational differences, it is difficult to draw comparative conclusions about women's participation in local government. For example, the relationship between women's pre-89 participation in local and national government varies: in Latvia there were more women in local government; in Slovakia there were more women at national level; in Poland and Slovenia the figures are almost identical. The situation remains ambiguous post-89: while women generally perform better in local elections, the high percentage of women elected to parliaments in Bulgaria and Poland in 2001 resulted in more women MPs than councillors. In countries where women's participation was relatively high pre-89 (Latvia, Poland, Slovenia), there was a 10% decline immediately after the transition followed by a steady increase throughout the 1990s. In all countries with available data, women's post-89 participation in local councils has increased during the decade after the transition.

**Table 3: Women in Local Government, 1980-2002 (percentage of total)**

	1982	1987	1990	1994	2002
Bulgaria		27.1 (1988)			
Czech Republic					9 (2000) **
Estonia				23.9 (1993)	28.4
Hungary	20*	20*	15.6	21.6	27.5
Latvia	49.2	48.7	35.8	37.5	41.2 (2001)
Lithuania	50			19.4 (1995)	18 (2000)
Poland	30 (1980)	23.7 (1988)	10.9***	17.8***	17.76
Romania		28			

Slovakia	20.30 (1981)				
Slovenia	27.9		15.7	11	13

Source: EGG Work Package 2 reports

\* There is no detailed data available for Hungary, but estimates are around 20%

\*\*The data refers to the average percentage of women in Czech regional governments, which were established in 2000. There are local governments in each city, but no central register from which to obtain gender statistics.

\*\*\* Denotes lowest level of Polish government only

Several explanations have been put forward to explain the greater success of women in local politics. First, local governments have less power, attract fewer men, and leave more open spaces for women. The lower cost of local political campaigns means women can afford to compete more readily and political parties may be more willing to invest the smaller sums in women candidates. Second, women seemingly favour local politics because it is literally closer to home. As governance moves closer to the people, it becomes more representative of the people active at the local level – often women (Neimanis Astrīda 1999). Many women seem to prefer to work on local issues, which tend to have a more immediate impact on their families and communities (e.g., education and social care). Furthermore, local politics better enables women to combine political aspirations with their family duties, as less travel and time is required. Third, women can benefit from local electors selecting an individual or independent candidate (particularly in Estonia, Hungary and Slovakia) rather than choosing on a party basis. Finally, there appears to be an urban-rural divide with women doing particularly well as mayors of villages.

## 2. Women's Campaign for Political Change

Having discussed women's struggle to retain positions of authority in formal decision-making institutions following the democratic transitions of 1989, the paper turns to women's civic engagement and campaign for political change. It begins by discussing the role played by women in bringing about new democratic institutions, as many were key actors in the democratisation movement but were marginalized by their male colleagues when positions of real political power became available. It then considers the non-governmental sector, an area in which women have been increasingly active post-89, by assessing the state of the women's movement. This section concludes by analysing the difficult relationship between women's NGOs and women politicians.

### 2.1 Women in Democratisation Movements

Women were involved in democratisation movements across Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s, working as equal partners alongside men but often not receiving the same recognition of their activities. At the time, women in many countries believed political position was more important than gender. The founder of a Romanian civil movement recalls:

*... do not forget that if we had a number of incontestable dissidents, they were more frequently women. The example of Doina Cornea seems absolutely eloquent to me. She was not perceived*

*necessarily as a feminine presence in politics, and once again, neither of them were militants or persons of great social visibility for a reason or another.*

Of the three Charter 77 spokespersons in the Czech Republic, one was usually a woman (Přečan 1997). Most Czech female dissidents interviewed for the EGG research project cited this fact to support the idea of gender equality in the dissident movement. Only one respondent said this was not a natural outcome, but gained the (somewhat hesitant) approval of the signatories because of the emphasis some prominent Charter 77 individuals placed on women speakers: *“It has to be said that I was rather surprised when Václav Havel insisted on at least one female speaker right from the beginning. For me, it was completely unimportant...”*

Women also played a significant role in Poland during the entire period of Solidarity's formation and legal activity, but they were never in the leading positions. There were nearly no women in Solidarity's authorities, though they comprised almost half of the union's members. This situation was considered wholly normal with the predispositions of women and men: politics was considered a man's domain, while a woman's role was to care for the family and publicly support active men. The issue of women's discrimination, if noticed at all, was seen as a less significant issue that could be handled after freedom and democracy had been won for the entire society. Paradoxically, this conviction contributed to Solidarity's rapid recovery after 13 December 1981: while the activists were jailed or in hiding, women managed Solidarity's underground. Their activities were facilitated by the authorities' conviction that they should seek and detain male leaders, while the ‘women's sphere’ was free of suspicion (e.g., women transported documents in baby prams free of suspicion). For safety reasons, the identity of women in the underground had to remain secret. While their gender and the traditional view of women's roles facilitated this, it reinforced their invisibility in the public sphere, led to women's roles in the history of the underground being marginalized, and enabled their removal from power when men could again be active.

Few women achieved key positions in new institutions and offices after democratisation, as the first section of this paper highlighted. Most women had no such ambitions and placidly tolerated male dominance as large civil bodies became more politicised. Other women retained an image of politics as ‘corrupt’ and ‘men’s business’, and welcomed the opportunity to extract themselves from a state-dominated sphere. A Hungarian sociologist and professor at the Gender Studies Research Centre at ELTE University recalled:

*It turned out that the regime change did not entail a change with respect of gender relations. And when women understood and acknowledged this, they withdrew from these spheres. So democracy does not come automatically...Only the toughest personalities were able to maintain their position...the rest of the women were serving coffee.*

## **2.2 Women’s Movements Post-89**

In addition to the importance of establishing healthy and functioning democratic institutions during a transition period, the development of a vibrant non-governmental sector is also vital to developing civil society in young democracies. Women took particular advantage of new civic opportunities post-89 by

forming NGOs, sharing common concerns, and joining new organisations. The early to mid-90s was a period of tremendous growth in the NGO sector, especially the development of women's groups. For example, more than 70 women's NGOs were formed in the Czech Republic during 1989-90 (Čermáková et al 2000). The majority of women's organisations in Lithuania were formed between 1992 and 1996, including the revival of some historical women's self-help associations and the establishment of various women's clubs, societies, and study centres. Organisations that functioned in 1998 were founded only after the country entered into a phase of democratic consolidation and after macro-economic stability was achieved in 1994-1997. In Romania, 95% of women's organisations were founded between 1989 and 2000 – a period when they could benefit from special support from international institutions, as many aimed to develop democratic practice and strengthen civil society.

It is difficult to record the exact number of NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe, given changes in name, failure to register, and variable classifications according to their activities. Countries with the biggest women's NGO sector include Hungary (350 though only 10 promote feminist issues), Poland (300 with 200 that are active), Estonia (150-200 with only 10 national NGOs), Latvia (115), and Bulgaria (75-150). The other countries average between 50 and 70 women's organisations. The majority of NGOs are based in urban areas, which causes problems reaching target audiences. In Romania, 71% of NGOs are based in Bucharest while 45% of women live in rural areas (AnA centre). In Poland 50% of organizations are seated in large cities - 15% in Warsaw alone (Kurczewski 2003). Polish women's NGOs particularly struggle in small towns, where only 1/10 of women-respondents have heard of women's NGO in their own town. Interestingly, social movements in Estonia were more active in the countryside than in towns and industrial regions (Ruutsoo 1993).

Women's NGOs are poorly funded across Central and Eastern Europe, as governments either fail to fund or provide limited money for non-profit activities. Many organisations have collapsed due to financial difficulties, while others have sought money from abroad (e.g., Nordic Council, British Council, USAID), international organisations (UNDP, EU), or private sources (Soros Foundation). Limited funds means women's NGOs are rarely able to initiate large-scale projects, and instead concentrate on voluntary work or delivering social services through a framework of programmes initiated by Western donors (e.g., domestic violence, counselling services). Many also began fulfilling functions formerly managed by the state, seeking to fill the vacuum caused by economic restructuring. As the leader of a Romania women's NGO explained: *'We are not given money for what we do, but for what they want us to do.'*

Dependence on foreign donors has caused problems for women's NGOs, not least because women's organisations fight each other for scarce resources. In Bulgaria, for example, the NGO sector remains underdeveloped due to a lack of autonomous fundraising, the tendency to target projects at available money, and the lack of expertise. This process, which has been termed the 'NGO-ization' of civil society, is a similar occurrence in Slovenia: "it is about the tendency of the NGOs to become professionalised and begin functioning according to institutional rules and hierarchies, so they will

concentrate on acquiring funds for their activities, and often lose sight of the relevant issues” (Jalušič 2002, 81). A more urgent problem is the declining investment by Western countries and organisations, as CEE countries reach higher development levels and foreign attention shifts elsewhere (such as further east into the Caucasus). While some former donors assume women’s NGOs can access EU funds, the bureaucratic application process is too complex and time-consuming for many small organisations.

NGOs generally fall within the same classifications across Central and Eastern Europe. Most are subdivisions of international organisations or political parties, professional organisations, charities, interest groups, organisations with a focus on human rights/violence/marginalized individuals, or academically-oriented. Their tasks involve lobbying, providing financial support, or teaching skills. However, organisations differ with respect to the degree to which they strive to provide information/mobilise the general public and to influence decision-making institutions. There is also a divide between activities that focus on service functions (assistance or consulting for specific groups of women) versus participatory functions (awareness raising, promotion of gender sensitivity, creation of decision-making mechanisms).

The range of issues serving as the focus of NGO activities is similar across countries, with four prominent areas of interest including political concerns and rights, the promotion of business and professional activities, social services such as health care and education, and activism to prevent violence against women and domestic abuse. Slovakia is a typical example, as women’s NGOs are working on the following issues: violence and trafficking, human and women’s rights, reproductive rights, women in politics and decision-making, women in business (support for women entrepreneurs, rural women etc.), education (fighting stereotypes), charity, culture, health and healthy environment, social work, and the Roma minority.

While individual NGOs are working on women’s issues, there is not a uniform movement with common aims and platforms. Thus, members of most women’s NGOs across Central and Eastern Europe deny the existence of a women’s movement and fail to view many of their activities in this context. In Hungary, for example, the number of women’s organisations increased without forming a loose coalition with common aims and objectives. NGO activities are so scattered that they do not form a movement, instead comprising a large number of locally based women’s clubs that promote lifestyle issues. As the Latvian Minister of Special Assignment on the Issues of Public Information stated during an interview for the EGG project: *‘I would not call it a women’s movement, what we have here in Latvia; we have individuals and individual NGOs working on these issues.’*

One of the major difficulties that handicaps women’s work in the political and civic arenas is a confused understanding of feminism, which is often interpreted as anti-family, anti-child, anti-men, and anti-feminine. In Estonia it is perceived as a radical idea from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while feminists are rarely seen as supporters of equal opportunities among ‘ordinary’ people. In Hungary, feminism is

defined narrowly as a movement dealing with private matters and sexually-oriented issues or is misinterpreted as misanthropist. In Poland, equal rights ideas in the early 1990s were discredited in two ways. One was the top-down equality decreed by communist authorities, commonly associated with a woman driving a tractor dressed in dungarees and the activities of the state-controlled Women's League (Fuszara 1991). The other involved anecdotes about Western feminists, who hated men and were burning their bras – a good that was in short supply for the female residents of Poland. Many in the Czech Republic associate feminism with unwanted state interventions and see it as a means for women to gain positions and advantages unjustly. According to a Czech visual art artist interviewed for the EGG project: *“when you say feminism, everyone imagines the radical feminists who march somewhere with banners and look like men.”* Instead of ‘feminism’ some women and organisations are beginning to use the term ‘gender’, as it is not connected to the exclusion of men or tainted by the media.

Consequently, gender equality is not seen as a problem in many CEE countries. In Lithuania feminism has a negative meaning because of Marxist ideology that was cultivated by communist conceptions of ‘equality’ during the Soviet period. Current authorities point out that the ‘equal rights’ granted to women by the Soviets have not been abolished, so therefore gender is not a legislative issue. In Latvia, gender is not a priority because of existing legislation and women’s employment opportunities, and is further legitimised through government institutions. Similarly, many Romanians believe society faces more serious problems, such as the consolidation of private property and democracy; changes that would most help women concern community problems (i.e., the work place, salary and pension, better home appliances) rather than more active civic participation. The general tendency in Hungary is to subsume the leftist or liberal alternative within the conservative viewpoint, a practice that produces a strange interchangeability of positions. Examples include the demography question, which is such a widespread public concern that most people are in favour of a proactive and interventionist state, and prostitution and trafficking, where no state regulations are deemed to be necessary given the right of the individual to sell and buy sex.

### **2.3 NGO Relations with Women Politicians**

Having considered the struggles faced by women to break into parliamentary politics and the challenges faced by women’s NGOs in their civic campaigns, it is useful to examine the relations between these two groups of women actors. Public attitudes toward women politicians are often negative, which affects their ability to openly support gender issues. For example, women’s NGOs in the Czech Republic criticise women politicians for not appearing interested in or concerned about women’s issues, even if they do not promote or articulate them actively. On the other hand, women’s NGOs understand the complex situation for women politicians due to the limited number of them and the disdainful attitude of many Czech politicians toward gender issues. Women politicians often act in public as representatives of the political parties to which they belong and not as representatives of women. During an interview for the EGG research project, a Czech literature artist stated:

*I am not aware of any activity. The way I see it, they do not come across as pro-women. They are just politicians in the sense that they fulfil the will of their parties... I have not even noticed that they would in any way accent specific women's issues, women's problems or that they would be in contact with women's groups and co-operate with them.*

Similarly in Romania, women parliamentarians tend to prioritise their own image and electoral gain over NGO priorities; thus, relationships with women's NGOs have been weak and mainly informative.

This situation is particularly evident in Hungary, as the few women who successfully obtain public office almost never represent women's interests for fear of being marginalized by their party or due to a lack of female solidarity. This persistent condition has to do with deeply engrained conservative cultural norms that surfaced during the transition and were soon translated into political principles. No political party is ready to dissolve the myths and misconceptions that surround women's issues or to challenge popular conceptions of 'women's place'. The Chair of the League of Roma Women in the Public Sphere stated during an EGG interview:

*There are a few women in our team who men politicians trust thinking that it is to their own benefit and, after all, they mean votes, and so I assume, in practical terms, they would not hinder the formation of a women's group or lobby. What I see is that, in certain situations, there are men in the background of women's organizations because the women's lobby is becoming stronger and so, hiding behind them, these men are able to bring themselves back into politics.*

This situation is improving in Estonia, however, as female politicians have encouraged other women to enter to politics, saying that it is important to avoid stigmatising and labelling them.

Women's NGOs in some CEE countries have been more successful in accessing their female leaders through training exercises or targeted lobbying activities. For example, some of Bulgaria's main gender-oriented organisations (i.e., Gender Project for Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation) have organised educational seminars among politicians, female NGO activists, and public figures of both genders. They have also approached governmental structures in charge of issues on migration, discrimination and social policy in order to promote a change in the conditions faced by contemporary women in Bulgaria. In Slovakia, several women's organisations have lobbied policy-makers and achieved some positive results. The parliamentary approval of acts against domestic violence, which was prepared by several women's organisations (Alliance of Women of Slovakia, Pro Familia and Fenestra), was a joint success of women's NGOs, lawyers, female politicians and female MPs. The pre-election initiative *Let us do it* (2002) is another example of active and positive cooperation between NGOs and female politicians.

### **3. Conclusion**

This paper has sought to illuminate the nature and extent of women's political participation in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing both on parliamentary politics and civic organisations. By considering the general trends of women's representation in different levels and domains of governance, the first section identified two main conclusions. First, there was a considerable reduction in women's political representation across CEE after the collapse of communism. However, women in most countries have

been slowly increasing their share of political posts during the last decade. Second, the relative share of women is higher at local levels of governance; in other words, the more power that an institution has the less likely women are to occupy its upper hierarchy.

The biggest barrier to increasing women's political participation may not be legal but cultural and attitudinal, as the persistence of rigid gender roles and stereotypes hinders both men's and women's career choices and self-realization. Unequal sharing of housework denies women the time needed to become politically active, while unequal pay prevents women from accessing the same financial resources as men. While quotas may become necessary to rectify the gender imbalance, they remain tainted by their misuse under communism and fail to address the wider societal attitudes and structural barriers that keep women out of politics.

The second section of the paper focused on the development of civic organisations in post-communist countries, examining women's marginalisation after democratisation and their greater focus on NGO development. Several key findings emerged from this analysis. First, communist ideology has affected the ability of feminism as an ideology to take root. Following the 1989 transition most people's perception of social change was the burden of economic restructuring (in which women were particularly vulnerable), while democracy and civic freedom were seen as secondary. Reinvigorated conservatism abolished many social measures that used to protect and promote women, while campaigns for gender equality were seen as unnecessary because the demagogic communist agenda damaged awareness of women's rights by emphasising women's (supposed) liberation. Second, this ideological legacy has hindered women's campaign for political change. Few acknowledge a women's movement in any CEE country, while the split within women's organisations demonstrates the lack of solidarity and empathy among women. Scarce financial resources cause competition among women's groups, whose efforts are often fragmented and disjointed. The idea that women should support women to achieve common objectives is not widely held, which may also partly explain the low participation of women in elected political positions. The failure by many women in government and the civil service to recognise gender as a political issue further hinders the development of equality.

Because the achievement of gender equality remains a goal shared across Europe, EU enlargement provides an excellent opportunity for women and men across the continent to raise social awareness about the importance of gender equality and work together for a more just society. But it remains to be seen how successful EU gender politics will be in ensuring equality across Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in shifting women's consciousness to a more progressive and pro-active conceptualisation of their own condition.

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