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This book presents results of a research team which examines the impact of the EU eastern enlargements on EU governance structures involving the participation of civil society organisations. In this context, the focus is on questions of capacity and accountability in a multi-level perspective.

The research team is part of the NEWGOV Integrated Project, led by the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). It belongs to NEWGOV project 24, which is directed by Daniela Obradovic, Amsterdam Center for International Law. The research team is headed by Heiko Pleines, Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen. Further NEWGOV partners in the research team are Michał Federowicz (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw), David Lane (University of Cambridge, UK) and Zdenka Mansfeldová (Institute of Sociology, Academy of Science of the Czech Republic, Prague).



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## 8. Women's NGOs in EU Governance. Problems of Finance and Access<sup>1</sup>

### 8.1. Introduction

EU gender policy has often been characterised as one of the most elaborated and advanced policy fields. With comparatively strong civil society participation and the recent Gender Mainstreaming strategy, it has moved beyond employment as its sole focus.<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that gender equality issues and with them Women's NGOs in the new Central and East European EU member states (CEECs) are gaining momentum?

The new EU members adopted the gender *acquis* in record time; they pushed it through much faster than the old member states did, and with a more homogeneous result (for the entire *acquis communautaire*, see Schimmelfennig/Sedelmeier 2005, 225). However, a 'Potemkin harmonisation' (Jacoby 1999) may now be emerging: Since the hurdle of membership conditionality has already been surmounted, the gap between adoption and implementation of gender equality directives is widening, and domestic political factors, including national gender regimes, adjustment costs and resistance from the bureaucracy and societal groups, are gathering steam.

Nevertheless, the European Union has proven itself as a political opportunity structure in which women's groups can affect national policy and place otherwise ignored issues on the agenda. In this context, the capacity of women's organisations from the new member states to participate in EU governance is of vital importance. This particular case exhibits complexity on several different levels, and diverse challenges are evolving for meaningful participation. To begin with, NGOs in the new member

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1 This article is based on research on Polish women's NGOs conducted by Gesine Fuchs and on research by Silvia Payer, which is based on a survey conducted by the author in 2006 within the framework of postgraduate studies on 'International Gender Research and Female Politics in Eastern Europe'. The research was focused on Bulgaria and Slovakia. For the development of the thesis, interviews were conducted with women's NGOs, NGOs, donor organisations and government officials. A questionnaire was disseminated via email.

2 EU gender equality policy rests on three pillars: (1) Equal treatment since the 1970s: A set of directives to ensure equal treatment in the labour force (equal pay, access to training and admission to professions) was enacted in the 1970s; (2) Positive actions: 'Positive actions' further contributed to the elimination of unequal starting positions and living conditions in a patriarchal society, via e.g. women-specific legislation and support programmes or quotas and (3) Gender mainstreaming (GM): Thirdly, in 1996 the European Commission declared 'Gender Mainstreaming' as the official policy frame (see Bretherton 2001). Gender mainstreaming is the systematic integration of gender issues (priorities, needs, effects) in all policy fields and governmental institutions with the goal of promoting the equality of women and men. This objective is to be pursued during planning, implementation and evaluation phases.

states are newcomers both on the EU political scene and at home; they are not as firmly entrenched on the domestic front as their counterparts in the EU-15. The organisational and financial bases for forming and negotiating women's interests, making political claims and influencing EU governance are often weak or completely absent. Women's interests are in any case fairly marginalised in the region. To compound matters, the general public has not yet come to see the EU as a standard channel of influence. On the other hand, national and regional actors in the new member states have been increasingly directing their activities to the EU level, and have undergone political learning processes that are very useful for democratic consolidation and civil society capacity building.

Against this backdrop, we examine the capacity of women's NGOs from the Central and East European countries to engage in EU governance. It is clear that the main obstacle to this engagement is the lack of funding and access to decision-making processes; sufficient resources in particular constitute a *conditio sine qua non*. We will start with an assessment of the situation of women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe and then elaborate the problems of funding. Using Poland as an example, we will examine the extent to which women's NGOs from the new member states have become integrated into EU governance.

## 8.2. Women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe

For women living in Central and East European countries, the post-socialist transition presents a formidable challenge. Before the changes in 1989, the majority (up to 94%) of working-age women in CEECs had full-time paid employment. Their high level of participation in the labour market was made possible by several state-mandated benefits, such as paid maternity leave, annual paid leave to care for sick children and heavily subsidised child care (Bretherton 2002, 6). During the transition period, the employment rate in CEECs declined dramatically. Millions of women lost their jobs when many state industries were privatised or closed down altogether. Many others found themselves with low-paid work or exploitative jobs. Due to the dire economic situation, women continue to be in urgent need of work, and are therefore highly vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation (Bretherton 2002, 7). On average, women in the region earn nearly a quarter less than men (<http://www.unifem.sk/>). Very few women have been able to take advantage of the new opportunities provided by their changing economies (ETF 2006, 19).<sup>3</sup>

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3 This recently visible feminisation of poverty in transitional countries is merely the deepening and widening of a situation that existed even prior to the changes of 1989; access to financial resources was more limited for women in socialist societies, too (Lokar, 2005, 6; Moulechkova, 2004).

One significant survival strategy for women to surmount the economic crises unleashed by the transition process was to actively participate in the development of the 'third sector'. Women created programmes for people who needed services. They worked for the community, took jobs for which they were overqualified and worked for low wages, unprotected and without legal contracts (Lokar 2005, 8).

Most women's organisations in CEECs appeared in the wake of the Beijing Conference in the second half of the 1990s;<sup>4</sup> few women's NGOs had heretofore existed.<sup>5</sup> The number of women's NGOs varies substantially from country to country, depending in part on the character of the former socialist regime. Some states permitted informal women's and feminist networks in the socialist era. Meanwhile, the presence or absence of political opportunities *after* 1989 to develop a women's agenda also influenced the formation of NGOs. Some women's groups are affiliated with political parties but have independent status by virtue of their non-political character. Women have founded mainly small and local organisations that are organised around e.g. the issues of domestic violence or human trafficking, problems that had previously received scant attention in CEECs (Bretherton 2002, 8). In relation to the overall number of women's NGOs, very few concentrate on changing the situation of women by means of political participation (Sloat 2004, 6). Women's movements and organisational networks in Eastern Europe are characterised by a special thematic profile. Work, education, the body and violence are some of the meta-issues that have surfaced during the transformation process. Nowadays, education, employment, qualifications and knowledge are necessary but by no means sufficient factors for female independence. They certainly do not guarantee a living given the rampant sex discrimination in the new capitalist economy coupled with the state's retreat from social duties and provisions. In the past few years, domestic violence has become another meta-issue, sometimes supported by state-sponsored campaigns. Activists understand domestic violence or violence against women to include not only spousal abuse but also structural or material violence in a broader sense, as illustrated by Julie Hemment in her work on Russian crisis centres (Hement 2004, esp. 829). Women's organisations work to foster empowerment and orientation and to exert political influence; to this end, they have tended to build networks and service-NGOs rather than big umbrella organisations.

In the early 1990s, women generally founded NGOs active in historically 'gendered' fields, as they were less likely to encounter resistance from society or the state

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4 The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China – September 1995; for achieving the stated conference goals of 'equality, development and peace for all women everywhere', the Beijing Declaration on women's rights was adopted, and the Platform for Action (PFA), one of the most progressive agendas, was generated; for further information, see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html>.

5 IHF: 'Women 2000: An Investigation into the Status of Women's Rights in Central and South-Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States', Nov. 2000, [www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?download=1&doc\\_id=2055](http://www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?download=1&doc_id=2055).

there. According to Ferree/Mc Clurg, 'Women are institutionally disadvantaged in contexts waged on men's terrain. Women are thus more likely to organize outside the formal polity, in those community and grassroots contexts that are gendered female.' (Ferree/McClurg 2004, 589) Most of those initiatives run by women and for women were active in social affairs and focused on support, consultation and training: 'Most of them play a particularly important role in the field of social protection, since they largely represent and defend the interests of specific disadvantaged groups. Because most of these NGOs are familiar with the specifics of particular communities (lifestyle, culture, religion, labour and social skills and habits, health and similar problems) they play an equal role along with the State in the development and implementation of social protection and are able to ensure that assistance will reach every single target' (Marinova/Gencheva 2003, 22–23). Subsequent women's NGOs have extended their scope of activity, but all 'women's NGOs' share the common goal of improving the situation of women. Some identify themselves as feminists, but many others explicitly do not. In recent years, when many of these NGOs relabelled their activities in order to qualify for EU funding programmes, their activities often became linked to development or human rights issues. Even today, organisations dealing mainly or exclusively with women's issues seldom identify themselves solely as women's organisations; more often, they also call themselves 'human rights' or 'development' organisations. One reason for this practice is that most databases on NGOs simply do not have categories for the topics of gender issues, women's rights or equal opportunities. Therefore, if women's groups want to be accessible, they have to choose an extant rubric. Not even the EU's CONECCS – the database for Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society – provides any gender-related category in its search function.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, women's NGOs' charters have undergone a 'change of wording' in the past few years that has dissociated them from women's issues. One consequence is that women's NGOs have acquired substantial expertise in the human rights approach to women's issues (Ilieva/Kmetova/Delinesheva 2005, 22–26). They have participated in the monitoring of the EU Accession Plan for Equal Opportunities for women and men and taken part in Stability Pact initiatives that address political and economic empowerment, participation and decision-making for women (Marinova/Gencheva 2003, 21–22).

### 8.3. Problems of Funding and the Role of EU Assistance

In the 1990s, many trans-national organisations, western states and private foundations invested in the creation of civil society with active NGOs in post-socialist states (Funk 2006, 68). For many years, grants from American foundations and the Open Society

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<sup>6</sup> See the list of policy areas at [http://ec.europa.eu/civil\\_society/coneccs/listedomaine.cfm?CL=en](http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/coneccs/listedomaine.cfm?CL=en).

Institute, historically the most important provider of funds for women's rights work in this region, were a very important source of funding for NGOs (Blister 2005, 7; Clark et al. 2006, 90). Most of the donors that supported the improvement of women's situation in the transition period later started to scale back their programmes, including foreign governmental donors. Every country in the region has been affected by this sharp decline in funding levels over the last few years, which took effect almost immediately after the European Council announced the intended entry of the particular countries into the EU.

A possible reason for the heavy decline in foreign financial support for NGOs might be the general sense among donors that due to the aid recipients' forthcoming EU membership, democratisation was already 'underway'. Therefore, the focus of the official development assistance was either shifted to anti-poverty projects or simply dried up when many donors pulled out of the region entirely. This shift has affected women's organisations dramatically. There seems to be consensus in the donor community that the EU itself is now mainly responsible for the development of civil society and funding the NGOs (Clark et al. 2006, 86).

However, one of the EU's strategies for strengthening the principle of subsidiarity has been to shift the financial aid agendas to national governments. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies are now directing more funds to national governments rather than to the NGOs themselves (Clark et al. 2006, 2). Accordingly, the national authorities, mostly the ministries, have to build commissions, which then decide how the money will be spent. Although these commissions are required to involve representatives of NGOs, universities and local governments, someone from the relevant ministry is always in charge. Hence, women's NGOs in CEEC are often forced to look to their national governments for funding, a scenario that presents obvious challenges if they happen to take a critical stance on official policies. Moreover, the preferred topic of most Central East European governments is the reconciliation of family and working life rather than gender issues.

Thus, with waning foreign monies and limited (and sometimes politically sensitive) national financial aid, EU funding is one of the few remaining options for women's NGOs in the new member states. However, many of these NGOs lack the capacity to apply for and administer EU funding. To many of the smaller, younger and less experienced women's groups, particularly in the rural areas, the structures and funding mechanisms of the EU remain a mystery (UNIFEM 2006, 16), and the complex procedures of the EU applications and project implementations themselves very often pose obstacles. Experts estimate that, for example, only about 20% of all Polish women's organisations are capable of applying for EU-funds<sup>7</sup>.

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7 Personal communication between G. Fuchs and Joanna Piotrowska, *feminoteka.pl*, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2007.

The EU's information dissemination policy has a decisive – if not exclusionary – impact, as its lines of support often do not reach to women's NGOs. This failure is in part due to linguistic barriers (i.e. information is not always available in the NGOs' native languages), improper announcements or to the limited availability of the information (much of it is either only online or available in print only in metropolitan areas). The criteria for supportable organisations, projects and structures have their origins in the private economy, in which minimum turnover, number of staff, size, time of existence or co-financing possibilities are taken into account. These criteria tend to reinforce the traditional gender gap between men (who tend to operate in the formal sector with good access to resources) and women (who tend to operate in the informal sector with poor access to resources and different working structures).

Furthermore, the EU's accounting rules, late payment schedules (forcing NGOs to cover costs up front and await reimbursement), insistence on co-financing of project budgets, bureaucracy and inaccessibility all seriously undermine the local NGOs' access to EU funding. In addition, successful EU grants often have to be shared with foreign (NGO or for-profit) partners in EU member states (often as lead partners), which results in fewer funds for the local NGO (Funk 2006, 75–76). And as NGOs are not-for-profit, they cannot benefit when their for-profit partners profitably market the outcomes and new developments from women's NGOs later on.

As the EU's financial assistance is generally a co-support (covering 50% of supportive costs on average), women's NGOs are continually forced to look for new funding possibilities. In addition, the organisation receiving the aid is not allowed to reap any profits from EU-funded projects (Weidel 2004, 31–34), which makes it nearly impossible to accumulate savings towards the necessary co-financing. Another stumbling block inherent in EU funding is the eligibility rules for costs. It is significantly easier to raise funds for media, technology and communications work, leadership development, and linking and networking than for staff salaries, administration and capacity building (Clark et al. 2006, 12). National rules on the registration and taxation of NGOs further hamper the women's NGOs' efforts to apply for EU funding. In addition, EU monies are dispensed in Euros, which exposes recipients in Central Eastern Europe to an exchange rate risk.

It should also be noted that the overall amount of funds the EU disburses for women's issues is relatively small. In fact, in absolute and relative terms, the amount that the EU has spent on women's NGOs since the eastern enlargement is lower than in the mid-1990s, with the exception of trafficking and domestic violence grants (Funk 2006, 77). Though women's NGOs from the new member states tend to be in a precarious situation, they have formally gained access to decision-making processes at the EU level. Their actual degree of involvement in EU governance will now be examined for the Polish case.

## 8.4. Gaining Access to EU Governance. The Case of Polish Women's NGOs

### 8.4.1. Polish Women's NGOs

The Polish women's movement has crystallised around different issues since the demise of socialism in 1989. These include the planned ban on abortion since 1989 and the transformation of living conditions, along with issues of education, work and other gender-political conflicts. In a first phase of 'social self-defence', many informal women's groups that had already existed prior to 1989 registered themselves officially. The Federation for Women and Family Planning was founded in 1992 ([www.federa.org.pl](http://www.federa.org.pl)). In November 1994, twelve important women's organisations united to form the Social Committee of Non-governmental Organisations (SKOP). Until 1997 and from 2001–2005, a forum of the women's organisations co-operated with the government in the implementation of the Beijing Action Platform as well as on other questions of gender equality. Since the World Women's Conference, almost all of the women's organisations' demands have been legally legitimised. The law has in fact become the primary medium for calling attention to violence against women, forced prostitution, job discrimination and severely restricted reproductive rights.

Today, around 300 women's organisations, groups and research centres are active across the entire country, engaged in particular in the areas of employment and qualifications, social assistance, violence and health. Up to 2004, the Women's Information Centre Ośka (Ośrodek Informacji Środowisk Kobiety, [www.oska.org.pl](http://www.oska.org.pl)) created vital networking and discussion opportunities in the women's political environment. Numerous initiatives, like election alliances, drafts for an anti-discrimination law, political protests sprang from this environment. Following internal irregularities and debates on strategic positioning, however, Ośka lost substantial funds and leading staff. From 2005 on, no other organisation was willing or institutionally capable of overtaking Ośka's advocacy and co-ordinating functions. Overall, the Polish feminist movement is small, though with an increasing number of sympathisers. Although the movement stages numerous (but small-scale) protests, political-strategic matters are rarely aired. Observers have even described a complete lack of alliance policies or strategies. The withdrawal of funding, especially of institutional grants, has forced feminist organisations to reduce activities, lay off staff and move to smaller offices.

The terms of Polish conservative governments from 1997 to 2001 and again since 2005 exhibited inferior co-operation with state institutions and took actual steps backwards in terms of gender policies (as evidenced in the now partially privatised social security system, to name just one instance). The leftist government of 2001–2005 appointed an equal opportunity officer in the ministerial rank, whose office launched

many domestic as well as international co-operation projects. Among other things, equal opportunity officers were appointed regionally. The office was dissolved in 2005 and a subsection for family issues in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was established in its stead. While the chairwoman of the Women's League (the former socialist front organisation), as well as a high-profile feminist philosopher had formerly occupied the post (Izabela Jaruga Nowacka and Magdalena Środa, respectively), the conservative Joanna Kluzik Rostkowska now took office until mid-2007 (she was appointed employment minister in August). Although Rostkowska harboured traditional attitudes e. g. on homosexuality, she expressed modern Christian-Democratic views in terms of economic opportunities – namely, that the gainful employment of women must remain a component of modern societies (see *Gazeta Wyborcza* of 8 November 2005). She earned respect and recognition for her activities to promote female employment and entrepreneurship, mainly with EU funds.<sup>8</sup> Many women's organisations now engage in employment projects in order to obtain EU funds; these projects do not necessarily reflect their previous focus vis-à-vis their activities or political priorities.

#### 8.4.2. Adopting the EU as a Master Frame

Up until roughly 1998, women's organisations usually deployed the 'international commitments' master frame to mobilise followers and legitimise their goals in the public eye (on framing in general, see Snow/Benford 1988 and 1992; for the international women's movement, Joachim 2003). In framing the issues, the Polish women's movement built upon the fact that the relevant political forces in Poland had affirmed their affiliation with the European value system and had pledged adherence to international norms. The Polish opposition had cited European values to challenge the socialist state since the 1970s. Now that Poland has acceded to the EU, these norms and values apply directly. After all, if Poland is part of Europe, then it must adopt and obey the obligations resulting from international and European agreements. This is particularly important in terms of the civil rights of inviolability and individual freedom of choice, especially regarding the abortion question.

More systematic references to 'European regulations' began in 1998 with the accession negotiations. Little by little, women's organisations began to decry the nation's failure to adopt the 'gender *acquis*'. They proceeded to inform themselves about the gender equality policies of the EU and launched their own projects with EU support. In addition, they networked on the EU level. They stressed the need for political action via comparison with other EU states. This strategy can be seen as a consequence of the political learning process: Political changes do not come about via appeals to political

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8 See personal communication between G. Fuchs and Beata Kozak, eFKa Kraków, August 17<sup>th</sup> 2007.

decision-makers, but require self-initiative (especially if misleading information policies are to be improved).<sup>9</sup> The women's organisations' own information policy offensives ('Europe Supplement', 'European Travel Kit for Women', etc.) were a step away from the state-society antagonism in Polish political culture. The state is no longer the sole addressee for political demands; society as a whole is increasingly seen as an invaluable participant in social change.

While the concepts of direct and indirect discrimination were finally embodied in the labour code after numerous protests and appeals (just prior to the conservative-liberal coalition's exit from office in 2001), women's rights nevertheless remained controversial in the Polish public sphere. The fate of the 'Letter from 100 Women' ('list stu kobiet') of February 2002 illustrates the limitations of an appeal strategy and dependence upon external allies. The letter was addressed to the European Parliament and the Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, Anna Diamantopoulou. In it, prominent personalities (e.g. Wisława Szymborska) and the most important women's organisations expressed their concern about the course of the accession debate in Poland. Due to numerous public declarations, it could be inferred that a pact between the Catholic Church and government had been established: The Church would support the accession in exchange for the renouncement of a recent liberalisation debate on abortion. In a prime example of an emotional public debate, Bishop Pieronek criticised the equal opportunity minister by calling her 'feminist concrete that does not melt even under hydrochloric acid'<sup>10</sup> because she had flatly demanded this particular liberalisation as well as matter-of-fact sex education in schools. In her reply two months later, EU commissioner Diamantopoulou asserted that the abortion question was a 'difficult topic' and was the exclusive legislative jurisdiction of the member states.<sup>11</sup> A letter from January 2003 demanding that the European Parliament reject the Polish 'Declaration on Morality, Culture and Sanctity of Life' as part of the treaty of accession experienced a similar fate. This demonstrates that references to EU regulations and requests for direct support from EU officials had a very limited impact on Polish gender policy prior to accession<sup>12</sup>.

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9 In April 1999, the Ośka Conference on 'Government Politics vs. Women' wrote an open letter to the Integration Committee; it may strike its brochure 'European Union – Women' (Unia Europejska – kobiety). Its incorrect, distorted contents exemplarily demonstrate that the importance of independent information, particularly in the climate of the reactionary gender politics of the conservative government at that time, can hardly be overrated.

10 In reaction, T-shirts which read 'More feminism, less hydrochloric acid' soon emerged.

11 Text via [www.oska.org.pl/infopage.php?id=41](http://www.oska.org.pl/infopage.php?id=41), available on 8 March 2002; reply by Diamantopoulou in *Chołuj* 2003, 224.

12 In this context, Western European solidarity with gay parades in Eastern Europe and attempts at re-politicising Christopher Street Day with slogans like 'homo europaeicus – walk upright' in Cologne seem to be a big success.

Over the course of the accession negotiations, the Polish public became increasingly critical and sceptical of the European Union. The information politics of the government improved only haltingly (see Grabowska 2001, 34). During the preparation for and the negotiations themselves, gender issues and gender mainstreaming were not addressed (see Bretherton 2001, 69–72). Implementation of the ‘gender acquis’ was not of paramount concern for either side. In 2007, a young male student was the first to sue employers for discriminating against men, as reported in the press (*Newsweek Polska* 28/2007, 72–75).

### 8.4.3. Joining the EU-Level Umbrella Organisation

When Poland joined the EU, Polish women’s NGOs became directly involved in EU governance. Their main line of access was through the European Women’s Lobby. The European Women’s Lobby, or EWL ([www.womenlobby.org](http://www.womenlobby.org)), was founded in 1990 on the initiative of the European Commission and, according to its own data, represents over 2700 organisations. It is thus the largest women’s NGO on the European level (Schmidt 2000, 211). The EWL is a member of the European Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and is represented on the Social Platform. About 80% of its budget comes from Commission funds; a small part comes from membership dues.<sup>13</sup> The EWL takes a stand only on ‘non-controversial’ topics in order to represent as many member organisations as possible. These include the struggle against violence against women (including all forms of prostitution), increasing women’s role in decision-making processes, fighting discrimination on the job market and in employment policy, combating multiple discrimination and enlargement issues. Preparing dossiers for the Councils of Ministers constitutes a substantial part of their work. In light of this agenda, the question arises whether the EWL is in fact the Commission’s alter ego. The EWL worked for the new directive for the same access to services. It was also successful with the codification of gender equality and mainstreaming in the Treaty of Amsterdam (Schmidt 2000, 218–220).

Women’s NGOs that are active in at least four member states can join the EWL, while smaller groups can affiliate with national co-ordinating groups. These in turn send members to the EWL General Assembly, which elects the executive committee. Organisations from candidate countries have only been able to join since January 2003. An important step for Polish women’s NGOs in terms of European networking was the establishment of a co-ordinating group in Poland in the summer of 2004.<sup>14</sup>

13 A reason for the European Commission’s support surely was the fact that it saw women’s politics as an important tool for the expansion of its own authority and was able to legitimise it via the establishment of the EWL (Schmidt, 2000, 222).

14 The following description is based on minutes and reports for the establishment of the *Polskie Lobby Kobiet* (Polish Women’s Lobby), which was available under [www.oska.org.pl](http://www.oska.org.pl) in October 2004.

Nearly all major organisations took part in it, but not without controversy: The EWL had apparently not been interested in co-operating with women's organisations from the accession states for quite some time. There were and continue to be numerous political reservations, e. g. regarding the EWL's conservative attitude towards the prohibition of prostitution. The idea of a platform of Eastern-Central European women's organisations for the European level was ultimately rejected in order to avoid accentuating or perpetuating the East-West divide.

The 'Polish Women's Lobby' was set up with an open, co-operative formula; it was not an umbrella organisation. At a nationwide meeting, statutes, authorities and spheres of activity were discussed. It was emphasised that Polish organisations should be represented in the EWL as well as in the EU's control and advisory committees (e. g. for structural funds). About three dozen organisations signed the co-operative protocol, but discord was quick to surface. The Coalition for Gender Equality (Karat) had not participated in the preparations at all and the Family Planning Federation later withdrew. This fallout was reportedly due to large discrepancies between the agenda and key activities of the European Women's Lobby compared to the main concerns of Eastern European or Polish organisations (see Aigner 2007, 80–82). In particular, questions concerning women's health and reproductive rights, namely access to legal and safe abortion, are simply non-issues for the EWL. For the Polish women's movement, however, the abortion question is *the* focal point. The issues of economic and social rights beyond the labour market, such as future EU enlargements and new dividing lines between EU and non-EU states, are likewise ignored.

The representation of Polish women's organisations at the EU level has proved tricky. The Polish Women's Lobby was closely affiliated with Ośka, whose former director was elected delegate to the Executive Board of the EWL. The quality of exchange of information between the EWL and Polish organisations was deemed very bad by the latter. This resulted in the dissolution of the Polish Women's Lobby. Aigner reports that the expectations of the Polish organisations and networks vis-à-vis the EWL are slated to be introduced to relevant actors and integrated into governance processes in Brussels (Aigner 2007, 81).

In 2006, some women's organisations mainly from outside Warsaw took the initiative to re-establish the Polish Women's Lobby, this time as a federation (see [www.polskielobbykobiet.pl](http://www.polskielobbykobiet.pl)). They did not consist of outspoken feminists, but were rather traditional or conventional women's groups, including post-communist organisations. The Polish Women's Lobby was founded at the end of 2006. Renata Berent, chairwoman of the Democratic Union of Women, hopes that the number of member organisations will rise to 46. There are clear political motives for this second attempt at establishing a Polish Women's Lobby: the wish to make the voices of Polish women's organisations heard in Poland and the EU and to take an active part in umbrella or-

organisations like the EWL.<sup>15</sup> The situation of the whole milieu of women's organisations has been assessed critically, with emphasis on the lack of organisational consolidation and strategic activities.

The attempts to create a second Polish Women's Lobby seem to have gone on without the participation of feminists. Some feminists are very sceptical about the post-communist organisations involved; they also question the Lobby's information policies and the very sense of lobbying at the EU level.<sup>16</sup> It remains to be seen if feminist organisations will join the second Polish Women's Lobby. In our opinion, this situation emphasises the difficulties of the women's movement to negotiate interests and political demands and to ultimately act strategically. Obviously, this is not simply a matter of interest or willingness, but it shows the necessity for stable and institutionally funded organisations that can afford to occupy themselves with capacity building.

#### 8.4.4. Building Alternative Networks

On the European level, the EWL holds a quasi-monopolistic position, which weakens the legitimisation opportunities of other actors. For local women's organisations and those that are not members of the national EWL coalition, the hurdles to direct influence are thus very high (Schmidt 2000, 222). However, some alternative routes to participation in EU governance have been carved out through international women's organisations. In three of them, women's NGOs from the post-socialist member states play an important role.

Since the early 1990s, regional networks of women's organisations reaching from Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe to the CIS have been emerging. Karat, or 'Coalition for Gender Equality', was officially established in Warsaw in 1997 as a result of discussions among regional organisations during the Women's World Conference in Beijing (see Marksová-Tominová 2006). Karat consists of about 30 women's organisations and focuses on the UN level, but addresses the EU as well. It monitors the implementation of international agreements, lobbies for national gender equality mechanisms and supports the political participation of women leaders in the region. Since 2002, Karat has issued repeated warnings against a new division in Europe due to the accession processes of CEEC states. It has emphasised the importance of considering the viewpoints, achievements and problems of non-candidate countries. In other words, enlargement must not be allowed to lead to a widening of the economic

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15 Personal communication between G. Fuchs and R. Berent, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2007.

16 See also personal communication between G. Fuchs and Joanna Piotrowska, *feminoteka.pl*, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2007.

gap in the region or to the breaking of ties between member and non-member countries.<sup>17</sup>

Karat builds strategic partnerships with other organisations, e.g. with the Stability Pact Gender Task Force for South Eastern Europe or the German NGO Women's Forum (Karat 2006, 2) for campaigns on specific issues. Since 2001, Karat has concentrated on economic issues (including economic empowerment) and literacy in the context of EU enlargement. It is important to note that Karat addresses the negative impacts of globalisation and neo-liberal reforms on women's social and economic status as well as the feminisation of poverty. The group integrates economic rights into the human rights discourse. These activities somewhat counter the frequently expressed criticism that feminist women's organisations in post-socialist Europe have ignored the burning questions of economic transformation and social inequality, concentrating instead on a classic liberal agenda of individual freedoms (e.g. Miroiu 2006).

Established in 1991, the Network of East-West Women ([www.neww.org.pl](http://www.neww.org.pl)) is an international network of resources and communication. Its aim is to promote dialogue, information exchange and activism between all actors who want to improve the situation of women in Central and Eastern Europe and the NIS. NEWW supports independent women's organisations and their capacities to influence policies relevant to women. Since 1994, they have improved their online communication and news network. NEWW has recently started to organise regional conferences on gender politics, such as 'women and economy'. In 2004, its headquarters moved from Washington to Gdańsk. NEWW has members in over 30 countries.

A third important regional network worthy of mention is Astra, which advocates sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) as fundamental human rights ([www.astra.org.pl/articles.php?id=127](http://www.astra.org.pl/articles.php?id=127), 26.06.06). Astra is engaged in awareness-raising and elevating SRHR to the top of the agenda, particularly in the EU and UN. Instruments for this mission include monitoring and reporting on the status of implementation of SRHR and gender-related policies. The network organises public events, conferences and workshops. In February 2006, Astra and the Polish Delegation of the Socialist Group held a hearing in the European Parliament. Its goal was to draw the European policymakers' attention to their obligations in this area. If, as Astra argues, SRHR are human rights, then EU institutions (which are fundamentally committed to the guarantee of human rights) are obliged to develop policies that secure these rights ([www.astra.org.pl/news.php?id=21](http://www.astra.org.pl/news.php?id=21), 26.06.06).

Karat and NEWW try to get permanent access to EU governance and the EWL has expressed the wish for more women's rights organisations on the EU level. But there is rarely any co-operation between them. Heidrun Aigner argues: 'Concerning the

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17 See [www.karat.org/eu\\_and\\_economy/regional\\_contribution.html](http://www.karat.org/eu_and_economy/regional_contribution.html), available on 12 October 2004, as a letter to the Convent for the Future of Europe in 2002.

co-operation between the EWL and the Poland-based networks Karat and NEWW, there seems to be a discrepancy between the latter's expectations and the former's perceptions vis-a-vis their roles. NEWW and Karat expect the EWL to usher them into the EU governance arena and to furnish access to its lobbying structures. The EWL, however, sees the groups merely as regional networks and does not consider them equal partners. In addition, one wonders whether the EWL really wishes to have organisations representing differing opinions on specific issues next to it.' (Aigner 2007, 83, own translation)

## 8.5. Conclusions

The current situation of women's NGOs in the new CEEC member states is precarious at best. Due to the fallback of the historically important private, independent and bilateral donors, the EU, with its policies and supportive measures, is becoming more and more decisive for the survival of the working activities of women's NGOs. Small NGOs and those located in rural areas have an especially difficult time meeting the EU's application and project requirements as well as the eligibility criteria. They often lack the capacity for participation. The application procedures and project rules for EU funding are often very complicated and lengthy. As such, they do not seem to have been designed with the smaller women's NGOs in mind. The co-financing rules and eligible costs criteria bar many women's NGOs from applying for EU funding.

Furthermore, the EU's lines of support rarely extend to women's NGOs; allotments for equal opportunities and women's rights constitute less than 0.1% of the EU's overall budget. At the time of the eastward enlargement, the EU switched to the subsidiarity system, which means that most EU funding is now allocated directly by the member states' national governments, whose first priorities are clearly not gender issues. Thus, NGOs that take a critical stance towards their own government might find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to procuring funding. As a result, women's NGOs have started to apply and work under different names, avoiding terms like 'women', 'gender' and 'equality'. In summary, because women's NGOs constantly have to fight for funds, they are vulnerable to the influence and agendas of their donors. Their ongoing lack of money, time and resources severely limits their ability to shape their own agendas and organisational development.

As the example of Poland shows, women's NGOs have had to fulfil several conditions and overcome numerous obstacles in order to influence the European Union as civil society actors. This has included the colossal undertaking of creating a civil society with the associated movements and NGOs, acknowledging the relevance of the EU for their own agenda and development of their own country. At the time, 'Europe' was used as an argument, image and master frame. This analysis has underscored how important involvement in EU civil society is for newcomers and marginalised interests

like Polish women's organisations. We have shown that the Polish women's movement has been learning by doing: Step by step, from appeals for information to fundraising and networking, it has become clear just how important and effective political activism can be in multilevel governance. Civil society has succeeded in making a critical step towards the elimination of the gap between political actors and European policy. It has contributed, not least with spreading information about funding opportunities, to the popularisation of the EU. The organisations have since learned to move into the institutions and set the agenda. Building capacities and alternative networks has been crucial for gathering momentum. This is why all successes are preliminary and precarious. As soon as funds are slashed, the capacity to act politically deteriorates.

The Polish women's movement's emphasis on Europe, the EU and European regulation was a useful political strategy, but one that nonetheless has clear limits. Joining the European Women's Lobby was therefore a logical next step towards Europeanisation, one that took place after a lengthy deliberative process and was linked to compromises. The failure in 2005 reflects structural – not personal – deficiencies in the movement. The Women's Lobby itself appears to be a prime example of a European umbrella organisation that is already well integrated into the negotiation system and can definitely boast successes. However, the exclusion of minority interests is also clearly illustrated by the principle of the 'smallest common denominator'. This dilemma can partly be resolved by the activities undertaken by alternative networks and coalitions, such as NEWW, Karat or Astra, which also wish to exert influence on the EU. Whether this should be considered a division of labour or organisational competition is an open question.

However, it is difficult to assess if Polish women's organisations have benefited from European integration, especially if one takes funding policies into account. Generally speaking, gender policies in the new member states now rely more on European regulations, but are still contested, and without ongoing political pressure, backlashes are probable.

Moreover, the 'Europeanisation' of Polish women's organisations analysed here clarifies the contradictions of the European Commission's rules for consultations with civil society groups. It is implicitly assumed – erroneously – that interests within a single group are harmonised, and that despite barriers, all interests can be organised. As a moderate, overarching and big lobby, the European Women's Lobby is essential, but since women do not constitute a monolithic group, the need for strong lobbies for other groups whose agendas differ from or contradict the EWL's is clear.

We see the present precarious capacities to participate in EU governance as a result of the developments since 1989. Donor policies (predominantly private) for the nascent civil society emerged incrementally and were not co-ordinated. Small organisations that emerged were supported, however. Although the big donor organisations

expressed their preference for umbrella organisations, these were not established; due to the experience with state socialism, civil society organisations were reluctant to relinquish their new independence by joining such federations. The result is that no strong lobby for women's organisations now exists and that isolation and competition prevail. The withdrawal of funds, especially for small organisations or those in disadvantaged and remote areas came suddenly, often before organisational stability had been achieved. The difficulties in acting and participating in EU governance are directly linked to the competition for funds and jobs. We conclude that interests cannot be negotiated or formed without enough money, space and trust for debate. And without interest formation, interest representation – be it on a local, national or supranational level – seems paradoxical.

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