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## **WOMEN - POLITICS - EQUAL OPORTUNITIES**

### **Prospects for Gender Equality Politics in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>**

This study is the result of a research project entitled Prospects for Gender Equality Politics in Central and Eastern Europe - Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, conducted by the Peace Institute in Ljubljana.

The point of departure for this study was the observation that since the first and second elections in most post-socialist CEE countries, the participation of women in national and party politics has remained low: only 5-15% of parliamentary representatives are women, and this figure is even lower in governments of countries “in transition”. These countries have introduced virtually no mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality; moreover a kind of general opposition to the introduction of legal measures for equal opportunities policies (quotas and the like) seems to have prevailed among most of the newly formed parties, the general public and even some independent women’s groups. At first glance we could detect poor mechanisms and no serious attempts to increase the participation of women.

The objective of the project was to explore the reasons for this situation, especially for the low level of participation of women and its links with the absence of mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality in some of the countries of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), and to provide the groundwork for potential policies for change in this area, i.e. for the introduction of affirmative action measures within the political system, party politics and NGOs. The project, which was of a comparative nature, focused primarily on those mechanisms and policies designed to support women's participation in institutional and especially party politics. However, we inevitably had to touch upon other issues on the political agenda and public policies, since they are closely related to the possibilities of political participation and active citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> Research for the project *Prospects for Gender Equality Politics in Central and Eastern Europe* was made possible by the following founders: "Social Consequences of Economic Transformation in East-Central Europe" (SOCO) program (Institute for Human Sciences), financed by the Austrian Federal Chancellery's "Fund for Co-operation with Central and Eastern Europe" and by the Ford Foundation (New York) and by the Slovenian Ministry of Science and Technology. The publication of the research was supported by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

# Gender equality and equal opportunities policies in Central and Eastern Europe

## Introduction

With the inauguration of democracy and the rule of law in post-socialist countries, the opinion that a liberal-democratic political system, in combination with a market economy, stands for sufficient guarantee of individual prosperity and political equality prevailed in public political debates and among the majority of social scientists. As a result the liberal capitalist concept of freedom prevailed as the model of “citizenship”. New democracies have only paid limited or no attention to the principle of the inclusion of new actors and agendas in the new and changed political environment so as to enable the participation of individuals who are outside traditional political institutions. An over-narrow definition of the “political” has blocked initiatives for a greater level of political participation on the part of women in post-socialist systems. Accordingly, demands for the introduction of mechanisms that would ensure the equal participation of women were often understood as illegitimate and unacceptable<sup>2</sup>. The acceptance of a simplified liberal-democratic agenda has ruled out the reconsideration of the structural relationships between the public, private and intimate spheres (cf. Jalušič 1999b).

In such a climate, initiatives aimed at illuminating problems relating to the position of women and demands for more rights for women and for equal opportunities policies are faced with problems on three fronts. Not only do they have to cope with a high degree of aversion to politics, which is perceived as a dirty and corrupted enterprise, with this attitude arising in the first place from the anti-political spirit of “velvet revolutions”; they are also enveloped in anti-feminism, which is an overall phenomenon particularly pronounced among the elite of educated women. “The majority of women from Eastern Europe are therefore convinced that the women’s movement ...is not an appropriate instrument to introduce changes. Women ... prefer the individual strategies of self-actualisation typical of professional women” (Butorova 1996: 131; cf. also Jalušič 1999). At the same time and on a daily basis, these initiatives face an extremely die-hard liberal-capitalist legitimisation of policies (E. Goffman's “strong discourse”) which is very difficult, if not impossible, to fight (Bauman 1999: 28; Bourdieu 1998: 95).

We are therefore confronted with a deep-rooted political culture based on a new model of the market that does not support political participation in the sense of active citizenship (Jalušič 1999). The issues of structural discrimination thus remain virtually unaddressed on account of the opinion that general anti-discriminatory laws and the mechanisms of legal and constitutional complaint suffice for the realisation of equality rather than making it necessary to set up supportive and positive mechanisms to enable equality in the first place. We are experiencing a peculiar reoccurrence of a situation that existed before the introduction of various models of equal opportunities policies in the countries of Western Europe, North America and Australia in the 1980s, though slightly modified in our case.<sup>3</sup> In the so-called

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<sup>2</sup> In the words of Marilyn Rueschmeyer, gender equality is “a term that most politicians, male and female alike, hesitate to use. Quotas for women in political representation are generally shunned because they are associated with the politics of the past. And women who came into politics then, it is said, were only tokens, less qualified and experienced than men” (Rueschmeyer 1998: 293).

<sup>3</sup> In her analysis of the experience of affirmative action in the US, Canada, Australia, Norway and Sweden, Carol Lee Bacchi talks of the considerable influence of the dominant political culture on the perception of equality, most notably in the US where there is a deep-rooted opinion that existing legislation is just in principle, that it enables equality, and that instances of discrimination represent only occasional deviations from the legislation. As a result the instances of institutional and structural discrimination are concealed, and attempts to

new democracies the debate about gender equality and equal opportunities policies is being opened up only now but is, from the very start, affected by media globalisation and, through it, the peculiar selection and appraisal of debates resulting from the experience of equal opportunities policies in Western Europe and particularly affirmative action in the US. Numerous instances of criticism of negative experiences arrive from these countries to the Central and Eastern European media.<sup>4</sup>

Studies in the fields of sociology and political theory, gender studies and criticism of gender discrimination in Central and Eastern European countries have only recently begun to question a liberal-democratic model which is only apparently neutral in terms of gender and social status (Potuček 1999; Havelková 1996, 1996b; Jalušič 1997, 1999). This is the main reason why it is so difficult to include topics such as gender equality and equal opportunities policies on public agendas. What we have here is, to a large extent, the problem of the legitimisation of topics themselves since, in post-socialist countries, they are in many ways encumbered by the socialist past and the above-mentioned structural-historical context of anti-politics, anti-feminism and liberal-market discourse.

Experience confirms that from the liberal standpoint, particularly in new market economies, initiatives for the introduction of equal opportunities policies are invariably criticised in advance as being against “free choice” and healthy competition. Precisely this argument is often used by sociologists, liberal ideologists and politicians in CEE countries when opposing such policies: they support the thesis that the issues of discriminatory pay (for example, the occupation of less well-paid positions) or the low level of participation in politics are in fact questions of women's “free choice” (Tomc 1999). In addition, there is a strong tendency in sociology, and in particular its popular media version, as well as in the media in general, to seek a psychological explanation for women's non-participation and non-representation in politics, and for occupational segregation by sex (Havelková 1999a: 7 and 1999b: 151). The debate becomes especially heated when demands for quotas<sup>5</sup> are involved. Here one often comes across a discourse that hangs onto existing stereotypes about the gendered division of roles and labour, particularly within the private sphere, which is a discourse that in some way “ignores but also assumes” (here not only accepting is meant, but also presuming of something that will proceed in the same direction – quotation of the title ‘ignored but assumed’) the traditional division of labour in the family (Havelková 1996). This is, however, only confirming C. L. Bacchi's statement that demands for affirmative action as a rule “destabilise expectations regarding gender roles”, which is why some oppose them (Bacchi 1996: 31).<sup>6</sup>

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promote equal opportunities politics sometime end up as debates that focus on the objects of prejudice and discrimination rather than on the structures and agents of discrimination (Bacchi 1996: 15).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed the debates revolve mostly around the question of “political correctness” and its redundancy – for example in relation to sanctioning sexual harassment. The American “model” is here caricatured as a negative example of a country that introduced such measures, yet they mostly revolve around practices at American universities.

<sup>5</sup> Quotas are at any rate unpopular due to the communist past and obligatory representation, and because of the assumption that women cannot be categorised as a social group. The Czech prime minister V. Klaus stated in 1996 that “the introduction of promotional mechanisms for women in politics, such as quotas, could even constitute an ‘insult to women’” (Vodražka 1996: 12).

<sup>6</sup> On the other hand these policies are sometimes opposed by target groups as well (minorities, or women in our case), since the debate on equal opportunities politics for identity groups often means that the public concentrates on the very group in question as “the object of prejudice” rather than on the structures or agents of discrimination themselves. The target group itself thus becomes stigmatised, so women's opposition to quotas may be occasioned by this fact. In addition, this may be understood as the basis of a new anti-feminism,

Even though identity politics is not our main concern here, we would like to draw attention to a number of related issues. As a matter of fact initiatives for equal opportunities policies are usually related to the category of identity politics and give rise to difficulties resulting from the social and political construction and homogenisation of a group. Though based on good intentions, they always (but most notably when considering “women” as a category) provoke ontological debates about the status of women as potential addressees.<sup>7</sup> The success or failure of an initiative and public perception can be significantly affected by the very naming of target groups and policies, and by the transfer of experience from one country to another, whereby public standpoints and prejudices against policies that promote women or other marginalised social groups inevitably get passed over as well. This has been confirmed by the East-West “Feminismusstreit” (Jalušič 1997) and by the attitude of the public towards affirmative action in Western Europe and North America and its transfer into public (primarily media-led) debates in some CEE countries. Precisely for this reason it seems important to avoid the straightforward transfer of concepts from one country to another. Emerging discussions, especially in the media (Havelková 1999a and 1999b), reveal negative attitudes towards affirmative action and measures for an increase in the political participation and representation of women in particular<sup>8</sup>.

In her study of affirmative action in a number of Western countries, Carol Lee Bacchi draws attention to the fact that political action inevitably involves the use of categories that can never be neutral. The way some category is used in a specific political action is of decisive importance for the success or failure of an action. Therefore, the analysis of political categories and the construction of analytical categories is already a “highly political process” (Bacchi 1996: 7)<sup>9</sup>. In our case the category is that of “woman” or gender, and since we are concerned with the naming of reform politics aimed against inequality, the category in question is “equal opportunities politics”. However, the politics of equal opportunities may include various groups and categories, as is evident from the instances of this type of politics in the US, Canada and the Netherlands, where women make up only one of a number of affected groups<sup>10</sup>. Although we talk of “equal opportunities policies” in this paper, it should be emphasised that reform policies have different names in different countries (also with regard to their content): in the US for example, it is called “affirmative action”, in Sweden “gender equality”, in Canada “employment equity”, in Australia “equal employment opportunity for women”, and in the Netherlands and Norway “positive action”. We use the non-American term, which has become familiar in some Western European and Scandinavian countries and also found its place in EU documents, resolutions and directives. Although such a use is not completely unproblematic it somehow avoids the US dilemma of whether

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intolerance or even racism, particularly where equal opportunities policies are perceived and interpreted as “preferential treatment” in the first place, i.e. “granting more rights to some” (Bacchi: 36).

<sup>7</sup> As already pointed out, this is not our subject of interest in this study, yet we would like to draw attention to the numerous debates on equality, identity, difference and essentialism, and the reconstruction of politics, political thought and the political, e.g. Riley 1988, Young 1990, Butler 1990, Butler and Scott 1992, Dean 1997, Hirschman and Di Stefano 1996, Bickford 1996, Boling 1997, etc.

<sup>8</sup> In “Affirmative Action” Carol Lee Bacchi describes how crucial debates on affirmative action that originated in the US were transferred to Canada, Australia and Western Europe through the mass media and American multinational companies, and how they had an adverse effect on debates in those countries (Bacchi 1996: 31).

<sup>9</sup> Even established categories such as “preferential treatment”, “positive discrimination”, “positive action”, etc. are by no means neutral but incorporate established beliefs, concepts and political experiences.

<sup>10</sup> Canada, for example, includes women, obvious minorities, the handicapped and Native Canadians. The US most often includes people of colour, ethnic minorities, the handicapped and women. The Netherlands includes ethnic minorities. Sweden uses a specific approach that could be called “gender neutral” since positive action refers to women as well as men (Bacchi 1996: 24).

affirmative action can be reconciled with the American political culture and its notion of equal opportunities.

### **What is equal opportunities politics?**

Generally speaking, equal opportunities politics can be defined as a politics or endeavour to introduce measures that could diminish structurally conditioned discrimination against some social group – in our case, women; these measures may pertain to various areas, such as employment, public and political participation and education, and/or may endeavour to change inadequate legislation that incorporates the elements of institutionalised and structural discrimination – in our case this involves in particular the participation and representation of women in politics. Equal opportunities politics is a reform politics, which has a long tradition in Western Europe, Scandinavia, North America and Australia (Stetson & Mazur 1995, Bacchi 1996). The topic of the shaping of equal opportunities for women and men in the countries covered by our study (i.e. Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, and Slovakia in part) has been introduced on their agenda through the process of the accession to the EU in the last couple of years.<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact it would be also possible to argue that the formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe did have some policies and mechanisms designed to promote women, but most of them lost legitimacy with the fall of the communist system, with only groundwork for these mechanisms lingering today. Certain models of this type of reform, and the national machinery supporting them, which although controversial have become established in the West, point towards some of the basic difficulties faced in the process of introducing identity politics, since many of those involved, i.e. liberal and conservative theoreticians and politicians, as well as members of target groups, oppose them (Cockburn 1991).

Our study is based on the hypothesis that the influence and co-operation of two political spheres or rather levels of political action – notably state or institutional politics (including political parties) and civil society initiatives – are indispensable for the formulation of equal opportunities politics and vital for endeavours to increase the participation and representation of women in political decision-making. The Western experience of feminist movements and their institutionalisation has shown that the relative success of “state feminism “ (feminism from above) is a result of the institutionalisation of feminism (as a movement of many years’ standing) within state and public administration, and of the continual advocacy of gender equality policies (Stetson & Mazur 1995:10). Even though communist Europe’s experience of the state and its apparatus had been a discouraging one, which is why women’s organisations that strive for equality constituted themselves on non-governmental and civil levels after 1989, one would assume that after ten years of post-socialism political actors would again recognise the significance of the state and the influence of parties and institutions.

We therefore sought to explore two types of possible strategy used in setting up equal opportunities politics, i.e. “top-down” and “bottom-up” strategies employed by institutions and non-governmental sectors alike, and their mutual influence and potential impacts. Furthermore, we concluded that the content of the public political debate (or rather, issues) found on the political agenda in specific post-socialist socio-political contexts was an important factor. The greater participation and representation of women in the political sphere is one of the conditions for the introduction of equal opportunities policies, but it is also a

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<sup>11</sup> Even though this is not our subject here, we will touch upon it in the study as it determines the political agenda and political process in these countries. Cf. Castle-Kanerova 1999 and Musilova 1999.

result of such endeavours. We therefore began from the assumption that the relationship here is complex and that there are several factors at play. Our project thus focused on and compared three main areas: a) the existence and shaping of institutional mechanisms for the implementation of equal opportunities policies; b) civil society (women's non-governmental organisations) and the political agenda relating to the advancement of women in the field of politics; c) political parties, electoral systems and their influence on the electoral chances of women. Moreover we did not only seek to explain the reasons for women's low level of political representation and the ways to increase it ("assimilationist model" – cf. Bacchi 1996: 29) but also studied the ways in which endeavours towards equal opportunities politics in this sphere could change the general agenda towards greater political and social equality and the inclusion of women and other excluded social groups in the system.

### **Institutional mechanisms and prospects for the implementation of equal opportunities policies**

Despite the fact that political discussions about gender equality and political actions aimed at achieving equality have been relatively rare in CEE countries so far, some elements of the mechanisms needed for the implementation of equal opportunities policies have been set up in the course of the past few years. What mechanisms for the realisation of gender equality exist in CEE countries, how were they formed, what is their role, and how significant are they?

When analysing equal opportunities policies in the Czech Republic, Martina Musilova asserts that "equal opportunities are not conceived of or recognised as a matter of long-term public interest". She mentions the "very particular situation in the Czech Republic", where equal opportunities (as an issue of the public interest) is "an instrument for fulfilling another matter of public interest, i.e. entry into the European Union ... since the Czech Republic is actively seeking membership". Therefore "equal opportunities policies have become an instrument for 'fulfilling' one of the tasks of a pre-emptive strategy", which has a consequence that they are implemented "from above" (Musilova 1999: 196-97, 199, 202). At first sight it may seem that this explanation could be applied, if only to a degree, to the whole CEE region, particularly inasmuch as "institutional public interest" is concerned, since state bureaucracies, parties and institutions developed an interest in EOP only after the EU began to exert strong pressure on their social policies. On the other hand reservations may be just as much to the point. It seems that issues related to "equal opportunities" and the setting-up of support mechanisms should be understood as a wider process that transcends the boundaries of the "harmonisation" process in those countries that desire to join the EU<sup>12</sup>. Despite a strong impression that equal opportunities policies in the past few years have been the result of EU directives, we think that with regard to CEE countries it is nevertheless possible to talk of at least three main incentives that encouraged the initial proposals and implementation of anti-discriminatory measures and the setting-up of "national machinery" for the introduction of equal opportunities policies. These incentives were:

- pressure from women's NGOs (civil society initiatives with extensive international links) and the initiatives of certain political parties, especially left-oriented ones

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<sup>12</sup> In her short study of this subject Castle-Kanerova wrote that "it can be concluded that behind the issue of equal opportunities lies the broader question of what new set of relationships between East and West are coming into place" and that "if we are to encourage new legal practices we also need to encourage new and active social structures". Here "Citizens' involvement is crucial" (Castle-Kanerova 1999: 236, 241).

- the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing that dealt with the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and the preparation of national action plans
- the process and preparations for the expansion of the EU and, within that framework, the adoption of EU regulations (guidelines/directives on equal opportunities policies)

All the above initiatives contributed to the laying of the groundwork for these mechanisms and launched a debate about equal opportunities policies. For quite a long time pressure from women's NGOs was the only factor in CEE countries that encouraged the shaping of legal bases for and measures of equal opportunities policies. The 1995 UN conference made a significant contribution to the placing of several important issues on the political agenda and encouraged action on the part of state bureaucracies. At the same time the Platform for Action encouraged more effective cooperation on the part of NGOs within individual countries, so they began to exert influence on official politics and hold international consultations. The third incentive (preparations for EU enlargement) provided a powerful external source of legitimacy for demands for equal opportunities policies and the greater participation and representation of women in state institutions and parties.

According to data<sup>13</sup> from CEE countries, mechanisms for the advancement of women began to be established mainly after 1994. Some countries kept certain elements of “national machinery” that existed under the previous system. Poland, for example, preserved “old regulations” in the form of a Governmental Office for Family and Women’s Affairs. However, these mechanisms were hardly sustainable as they became the target of frequent criticism aimed at their alleged upholding of the “communist legacy”. The surviving structure in Poland was especially difficult to sustain because anti-communist parties pulled together with the Catholic Church to oppose the legalisation of abortion<sup>14</sup>. Slovenia, for example, established elements of “national mechanisms” immediately after the first multi-party elections, initially in the form of the parliamentary Commission for Women's Policy (1990) and later through the government Office for Women's Politics<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, in 1991 and 1992 Slovakia already had a Government Committee for Women and the Family; it existed only for two years though (KARAT, 1999a: 6). It is paradoxical that today all countries included in this study, with the exception of Poland, have new mechanisms for the protection and promotion of gender equality. Equality in general is guaranteed by their respective constitutions<sup>16</sup> and some other laws. Until recently, these laws were mainly protective, relating mostly to employment and the family, thus allowing “positive discrimination” of

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<sup>13</sup> The data is taken from the following studies, research projects and reports: KARAT 1999a and 1999b; papers at the “Prospects for Gender Equality Politics in East and Central Europe” Workshop, Peace Institute, Ljubljana 2000; Biro & Szabo 1999; Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic 1999, CEDAW and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family 2000, Office for Women's Politics 1997, Ministry of Labour, and Social Affairs 1999.

<sup>14</sup> In Poland the Plenipotentiary for the Family and Women, which clearly opposed restrictive legislation on abortion, was removed from office in 1992. Until 1995 the office did not accept any measures to protect the rights of women. In the course of this period the only active group was the parliamentary group, i.e. its members belonging to left and centre parties. They were mostly concerned with the liberalisation of abortion laws (Siemienska 1998, 138-40).

<sup>15</sup> The reason why Slovenia set up these institutions so early (immediately after it switched to a multi-party system) was the powerful feminist movement that was part of the civil society opposition in the 1980s (cf. Jalušič 1999a).

<sup>16</sup> Most of the constitutions comprise a general anti-discrimination clause stating that citizens are equal regardless of their social status, religion, ethnic origin, gender and so on. In the Polish constitution, for example, it is separately stressed that women and men have equal opportunities in the public sphere, culture and education, and that they get equal pay for equal work (Article 33) (Fuszara 2000: 18, Regional Report: 12).

women on the basis of their presumably “biological” functions. The legislation has begun to change though – in some countries thanks mostly to the influence of EU directives - like in the area of retirement and rents, and through some newly formulated laws concerning parental leave and labour relations, including sexual harassment. There are no special anti-discriminatory laws, or laws relating to gender equality, not even laws on equal opportunities politics or affirmative action (save for some draft laws such as the Polish document on gender equality from 1996, which was not passed by the Sejm in 1997<sup>17</sup>).

The above elements of government mechanisms mainly consist of special consultative bodies such as the Office for Women's Politics in Slovenia, or coordination committees like those in Slovakia, or special ministerial sections (in most cases they are part of the ministry of labour and/or social affairs and the ministry of the family – as in the Czech Republic, Hungary<sup>18</sup>, Slovakia and Poland<sup>19</sup>). These bodies are typically parts of ministries that are not perceived as “political” in the first place, and they are not backed, except in Slovenia, by separate parliament act or law, meaning that they are subject to the will of the ruling government and changing coalitions. Similarly, structures of national machinery are not clearly defined since they have no mandate to draw up laws or shape government policy regarding gender equality but instead have a predominantly consultative status (Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary). With the exception of the Czech Republic, they do have authorisation to engage in international cooperation. However, they do not have local offices or networks<sup>20</sup> (KARAT 1999a: 8). Control of the implementation of statutory equality and the operation of institutional mechanisms is weak; this also goes for countries that have adopted national action plans. There are no special control mechanisms save for some non-governmental initiatives (which are mostly weak), labour inspections, ombudsmen or councils for human rights (Slovenia, Czech Republic).

## Overview of existing institutional mechanisms

### Hungary<sup>21</sup>

1995	Department for Policy on Women (Ministry of Labour)
1996	Renamed the Department for Equal Opportunities
1997	National Action Plan <sup>22</sup>
1998	Merging of the Ministry of Labour with the Ministry of Social and Family Affairs - Section for the Representation of Women <sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> M. Fuszara writes that the Draft Gender Equality Bill was rejected in May 1999 after its first reading in the Sejm. She further stresses that the most controversial part was that which “ensured adequate representation for both sexes in public bodies appointed, elected or nominated by the state authorities”. The rejection of this bill left Poland without mechanisms for ensuring equality (parliamentary commissions for the equal status of women and men) (Fuszara 2000: 19-20).

<sup>18</sup> Hungary used to have a Department for Policy on Women, which was part of the Ministry of Labour.

<sup>19</sup> Poland is the only example where women are treated together with the family (since 1997), as the Plenipotentiary for Family and Women was renamed the Plenipotentiary for the Family.

<sup>20</sup> There was a two-year project in Slovenia, supported by the UNDP, whereby the government Office for Women's Politics formed a local women's network, supporting and training female politicians at the local level.

<sup>21</sup> Source: Biro & Szabo 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Areas: women's rights; implementation of equal opportunities; improvement of social equality of women; gender education in public schools; violence against women; coordination of activities; creation of a database for and on women/statistics.

<sup>23</sup> Initiates legislative actions, gives opinions, does not formulate government policy



1999 Council for the Representation of Women (created by the government), consisting of deputy state secretaries, women's NGOs and experts

#### **Slovakia<sup>24</sup>**

1996 Coordination Committee for the Women's Problems (advisory coordinating body: governmental and NGOs)  
1997 National Action Plan  
1997 National Centre for the Equality of Women and Men (information, documentation, coordination centre)  
1999 Department for Equal Opportunities at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family  
1999 Parliamentary Women's Commission

#### **Slovenia<sup>25</sup>**

1990 Committee for Women's Politics (consultative parliamentary body) later renamed Committee for Equal Opportunities  
1992 Office for Women's Politics (consultative body within the government)  
1995 Ombudsman's Office  
No National Action Plan (!)

#### **Czech Republic<sup>26</sup>**

1998 Desk on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men<sup>27</sup> (within Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs)  
1998 Priorities and Proceedings of the Government in the Enforcement of Equality Between Men and Women  
1998 Inter-Ministerial Commission for Implementation of the Beijing Platform

#### **Poland<sup>28</sup>**

1986 Plenipotentiary for Women and the Family (with vacancy 1991-1995)  
1996 National Action Plan (not implemented since 1997)  
1997 Plenipotentiary abolished/renamed Plenipotentiary for the Family (women not mentioned)

#### **Difficulties of existing mechanisms**

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concerning equal status; head is a social political expert; no local counterparts within public administration.

<sup>24</sup> Source: Filadelfiova, Guran 2000, 11-13.

<sup>25</sup> Source: Jalušič 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 1999, KARAT 1999a.

<sup>27</sup> Tasks: to emphasise equal gender status and support women candidates for decision-making posts in government bodies.

<sup>28</sup> Source: KARAT 1999a.

Most national mechanisms do not provide for the introduction of special measures for the increased participation of women in politics. A number of proposals for such measures were indeed put forward but most of them were doomed to failure. One such proposal was included in the Polish Bill of Gender Equality; this did not make it through parliament. It comprised adequate representation (40%) of both sexes in public bodies elected or nominated by state authorities. Another proposed more financial resources for parties with women representatives in parliament, and another the provision of a one-third quota system in election legislation so that parties would not be able to submit lists with a lower percentage of women. Similar proposals existed in Slovenia where, in 1996, the National Assembly discussed the draft law on political parties, which included quotas, but it was not adopted. In Hungary the government Council for the Representation of Women, which is expected to commit itself to these topics, has recently been established; no data on its work is yet available.

The mechanisms we refer to are in fact nothing more than outlines of anticipated support institutions because there is not yet any consistent government policy of equal opportunities, and these political bodies have only limited or weak power (Ilonszki 2000). None of the countries from our study have any inter-sectoral or inter-ministerial coordination.<sup>29</sup> In addition their mandates are also unclear (the responsibilities of governmental and non-governmental organisations are frequently mixed). The pilot “gender mainstreaming” project in Slovenia, which ended in 1999, is an example of a government organisation genuinely beginning to exercise its authority at government level in terms of implementing equal opportunities policies within public administration<sup>30</sup>. Cooperation between governmental and non-governmental sectors continues to be more or less haphazard. Undoubtedly the main problem lies in the lack of a true commitment to gender equality policies at the government level (Biro, Szabo 1999: 5).

### **Civil society and the public agenda**

The public political agenda is drawn up by government institutions and their representatives, political parties, the media, and non-governmental organisations. In CEE countries it was non-governmental feminist organisations, or rather women's movements, who set up new women's agendas in the first half of the 1990s. By women's movements we mean those movements which endeavour for social and political change involving more rights for and the greater participation of women (cf. Fuszara 2000, 1-4) and not the women's movement in general.

Civil society as a concept and a form of action was one of the most important sources of the transformation of some of communist systems. However, its power regarding active-citizenship potential diminished to a large extent after 1989 (Jalušič 1997). After the end of “socialist affirmative action” (Petö 1997: 158), the struggle for recognition of women's issues

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<sup>29</sup> For example Hungary and Slovenia: in Hungary the Department for Equal Opportunities had authorisation to cooperate internationally but the CEDAW report was prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the UNO hearing on the report, the Department on Equal Opportunities did not receive any information i.e. feedback from the Ministry. In Slovenia the Office for Women's Politics often has to struggle in order to obtain relevant information and documents from ministries (Biro, Szabo 1999, Interview with Kozmik).

<sup>30</sup> This was a pilot project conducted by the Office for Women's Politics from 1997 to 1999. It implied the training of state administration staff within three governmental sectors: the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs; the Ministry of the Interior; and the Ministry of Education and Sport. Interview with Kozmik.

became extremely unpopular, even in those countries where feminism was not totally absent and/or rejected. Only rare official institutions in some countries, and only in exceptional cases, were open to such initiatives. It became obvious that women, in an attempt to put certain issues such as representation on the political agenda, had had to use quite complicated and imaginative tactics.

In a way they were still forced to behave like the former socialist opposition<sup>31</sup>. They tried to form a “parallel system” or, in other words, a separate space where equality was self-evident and from where they could influence institutional politics. Political organising in the civic sector was less attractive for men than for women. Women preferred engaging in such alternative spaces. Empirical research shows that there they could act more freely than within traditional institutions, have more initiative, autonomy, a different power structure and thus more freedom within political action. They could use different political and social patterns and did not have to be as effective as in the formal political arena<sup>32</sup>. The public impact of their various activities was, in the short term, rather small. Their work was not perceived as “real”, earnest politics.

As a result of this, however, women's movements in Central and Eastern Europe might have the potential to bring the ‘new’ into politics, i.e. actors and new topics, and consequently transform the narrow, fixed notion of the political in the post-socialist era. This might also be the reason why they regard civil society as an important, if not the only, sphere for real change (Jalušič 1999). Of course this constitutes both an advantage and disadvantage for these women's movements. In the years following 1989, when new initiatives were still at the formation stage, CEE countries became pervaded by peculiar anti-state and anti-political sentiments that were probably a result of the communist legacy. The agendas drawn up by new women's or feminist organisations (who put forward equality issues) thus comprised mostly social issues and assistance to women, and to a lesser extent demands for the greater participation of women in politics. Since women missed the boat in being given their portion of power, they could hardly construct, at least in the beginning, anything apart from negative, defensive topics such as defending abortion. Topics such as “attention ... to the need for equal rights for women and men in political life and the principle of the representation of both sexes in all public institutions”<sup>33</sup> did not emerge until the mid-nineties.

It was feminists in the first place who, drawing on experience of the former system, rejected the model that supported merely the greater representation of women in politics as, in their opinion, it could not have changed much<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand in countries where authorities attempted to abolish (or even actually abolished) freedom of reproduction for women, the women's agenda became expressly defensive but nevertheless created a new public space for women. However, this is an additional reason why topics of political representation remained

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<sup>31</sup> In their study Butorova and Gyarfašova state that many women belonging to non-governmental organisations in Slovakia began their “careers” during the communist era as activists in environmental organisations that were independent in the 1980s (Butorova, Gyarfašova 2000: 13).

<sup>32</sup> In empirical research conducted by non-governmental organisations in Slovakia the respondents were of the opinion that the third sector was much more inclined to creativity and flexibility and that it offered opportunities for effective (though slow) change. Women stressed the communal character of non-governmental organisations, and the atmosphere of mutual help and support in contrast to the strong competition found in the field of party politics and business (Butorova, Gyarfašova 2000: 14).

<sup>33</sup> Polish Act Concerning the Equal Status of Women and Men, prepared by Polish feminists, 1996.

<sup>34</sup> When the percentage of women in the Czech parliament rose to 15% in 1996 without any special measures, Hana Havelková pointed out that the mere rise in the percentage did not mean much if female politicians did not endeavour to promote women's issues (McClune 1996).

in the background. One could even talk of “defensive” and “offensive” agendas developed in the region in relation to gender equality. The defensive agenda is taken to mean a defensive response to initiatives that attempted to restrict gender equality or even the fundamental rights of women (e.g. the prohibition of abortion). The “offensive agenda” is taken to mean those initiatives that shape new themes within public debate and attempt to improve the situation and women’s access to the mechanisms of ruling power.

Defensive agendas that only defended “past achievements” and rights did not necessarily have an entirely negative effect in the long run. The impacts of the campaign against abortion differed according to context. In Poland it contributed to the opening of a public debate and set off a democratic process and the restoration of public space (Fuszara 1993:241). Women's issues received more attention, which heightened awareness of the importance of women's rights. At the same time the number of women's groups increased which, in contrast to those that formerly existed, were organised from the bottom up and stirred up fresh enthusiasm for feminism (Fuszara 1997, 2000)<sup>35</sup>. In other countries where abortion was not such an important topic, women's movements did not turn out such mass organisations (Czech Republic and Hungary); other issues were, however, opened up (Havelková 1997). In Slovenia, where the debate on abortion preceded the adoption of the Constitution in 1991, relatively strong feminist groups were already operating in the 1980s thus providing for continuity. Only a few new organisations were formed.

### **Strategies of women's movements, agenda setting and equal opportunities policies**

What were the strategies of women's movements in civil society and how did they influence the topic of equal opportunities politics and the participation of women in institutional politics?

When talking of women's movements in CEE countries we should first mention their diversity both within each country and between them. As for their spheres of activity with regard to type, they can be divided into professional groups, groups that offer various kinds of professional assistance to women (e.g. legal, economic, social), then self-help groups and those concerned with women's rights. The latter focus on women's participation in public and political life, and attempt to increase the proportion of women in governmental institutions (Fuszara 2000: 9). They often proclaim themselves feminist, but they are few in number. Particularly in Poland many women's organisations concerned with women's rights evolved from organisations that struggled for the right to abortion. The emergence of this type of NGO in the region was decisively determined by grassroots strategies that defied threats to rights already achieved (Poland) or raised suppressed issues such as violence within the family or prostitution (Czech Republic, Slovakia). In the second half of the 1990s the issue of violence mobilised massive potentials within women's NGOs and thus contributed to the opening-up of the debate on the relationship between the public and private spheres, the responsibilities of the state institutions and the limits of privacy. Sexual harassment, sexism in the media and discriminatory employment policies were added to these topics.

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<sup>35</sup> Poland has the highest number of women’s non-governmental organisations of the CEE countries (see Directory of Women's Organisations 1997), and probably also the strongest feminist organisations. In this respect it is, according to M. Fuszara, comparable to the US, as they must continually fight for the right to abortion against right-wingers who advocate its outlawing (Fuszara 1997, 2000).

Even though a large number of new organisations emerged and, among them, quite many non-traditional women groups that endeavour to abolish stereotypes about the sexes and strive for the greater representation of women in political institutions, we could readily agree with the view that, rather than being a rule, they are “rare enclaves”. This holds true of Slovakia (Butorova, Gyarfašova 2000: 17) as well as the Czech Republic and Slovenia. In the Czech

Republic for example, only 5% of women's organisations are concerned with politics in the narrower sense of the word, while there is no “women's or feminist movement that would be interconnected in terms of strategies towards achieving equal opportunities policies, women's rights, and relevant legislative and institutional tools” (Jedličkova 2000: 5-6). Women's groups are to a large extent concerned with “social issues”, which does not in itself imply that these issues are not political or do not constructively contribute to the transformation of policies, but problems emerge if they remain on the social margins and do not become part of mainstream debates on structural discrimination<sup>36</sup>.

One of the main obstacles barring the way to the inclusion of women in public and political life is their apparent “apoliticality” and the largely related fact that “they do not feel the public sphere to be their own” (Butorova, Gyarfašova 2000: 15), that is, they do not feel quite at home in politics<sup>37</sup>. Given this fact, the opinion that it is precisely the greater participation of women in the “third sector” that will represent a stage on the way to the more active participation of women in state institutional politics seems understandable and correct (ibid.). Some non-governmental women's organisations in CEE countries began to devote special attention to the topic of the political participation of women and equal opportunities policies, thus stimulating a public political debate. Others began to work towards the advancement of women in politics either by putting forward demands and initiatives addressed to governments, parties and other political institutions, or by providing training for women candidates at elections.

We can point to more than one instance of educational activities organised by NGOs. In Poland for example, there existed an organisation called “Women As Well”; it drew on the Norwegian social democrats’ “Women Can Do It” educational model in organising support for women candidates at the 1994 elections (arranging meetings with local media, propagating the idea of the greater representation of women in governmental bodies, training candidates for public appearances, self-presentation, greater self-confidence, and so on). Even though the group was informal, it became a permanent initiative as regards the organisation of seminars and assistance to women at the local level, with its own publications and educational programme (Fuszara 2000: 10, Interview with Kopinska 2000). The MONA group in Hungary and the Office for Women's Politics in Slovenia engage in similar activities (Interview with Zentai 1999, Interview with Kozmik 2000); the latter works with members of non-governmental women's organisations and various parties. It is interesting that the educational programmes mentioned above drew primarily on Scandinavian models, which might be understood as the inclination of post-socialist countries towards the model of the “politics of difference” which mobilises women's different potentials and experience (Bacchi: 141-158). In the Czech Republic a similar training (*Ženi to dokazi*) was organised by the

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<sup>36</sup> In Slovenia feminists became divided on the question of whether any feminist social work could exist at all, i.e. the disputed question was whether feminist “social” work could be political in the wider sense, i.e. in terms of changing the political agenda (cf. Dobnikar 1997).

<sup>37</sup> The leader of one of the largest women's organisations in the Czech Republic said: “We are still dissidents since we have not achieved more significance and power for women on the political scene” (Jedličkova, 2000: 9).

Social Democratic Party and again through cooperation with the Norwegian Social Democrats and Socialist International. The most promising projects were, however, carried out at the local level, which is in line with the assumption that women can more easily gain political recognition at the local rather than the national level and that, especially at the local level, an “expanding of the political space” for women can be reinforced (Regulska 1997).

Women’s groups struggling for equal opportunities policies and for the greater participation and representation of women have mostly used the following methods and forms of action:

- a) non-governmental monitoring of women's status, which often coincided with the general operating strategy through the UN
- b) independent support for women candidates at elections, and training and education
- c) links with political parties and national institutions
- d) international links (e.g. the KARAT coalition<sup>38</sup>) and links with international donors
- e) promotion of gender equality topics, and work with the media

The strongest non-governmental monitoring (with regard to existing circumstances) has been developed by non-governmental women's organisations in Poland, while the strongest links with parties and institutions can be observed in countries where social-democratic parties are at least partly favourably disposed towards the greater representation of women in politics (Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic). After the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, international cooperation between non-governmental organisations became closer (such examples are the links established in Beijing and afterwards, e.g. the KARAT coalition). Despite this it is possible to conclude that consistent efforts towards equal opportunities policies on the part of non-governmental women's organisations can hardly be found in any CEE country. The most consistent attempt might have been the Bill on Gender Equality in Poland, which was prepared jointly by women's groups within and outside political parties, and women in academia. Obviously, non-governmental women's organisations in CEE countries favour “soft” reform over “hard”, i.e. a soft version of equal opportunities politics. “Soft” reform primarily comprises attempts to eliminate the structural obstacles that bar the way to equal participation and the formation of strategies (such as training) designed to help a discriminated group compete more effectively (Bacchi 1996: 16). On the other hand “hard” reform implies stronger identity politics which precisely defines the group (in our case, women). This is one of the reasons why non-governmental organisations and women themselves often reject such a strategy, as it usually includes quotas.

### **Public debates: conclusion**

Recent public debates or discussions in the media that evolved as a result of certain proposals or actions for the increased representation of women in the institutional politics of CEE countries to a great extent reflect a new spirit among the majority of the population, which points to the fact that the greater participation of women in public and political life does enjoy some support, as do changes in the political agenda itself<sup>39</sup>. Havelková observed that in the

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<sup>38</sup> The KARAT coalition was a NGO regional action network which included NGOs from Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine. They prepared the Regional Report on Institutional Mechanisms in 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Roughly 60% of respondents would support the introduction of special mechanisms for the advancement of women in politics in Slovenia. Similarly, in the Czech Republic 70% of respondents thought that it would be beneficial for society if more women participated in politics. In Slovakia 60% of women and 37% of men would

Czech Republic “politics started to be regarded by the population as the sphere of the greatest gender inequality...” (Havelková 1999a: 7). The “women in politics” issue thus became one of the subjects of pre-electoral discussions and found its place in the media, but usually not early enough to influence election results<sup>40</sup>. However, we find it interesting that the topic of women's participation was not brought up by women's organisations in the Czech Republic or

Slovenia; rather, they left these issues to parties and the media. The situation in these countries suggests an increase in interest in “what women can contribute to changes in politics (cultivation and refinement)”, while the question of how to change the status of women (and men) through politics has been neglected (Havelková 1999a: 162).

The situation points to another fact too: political parties themselves started to be apprehensive about their appeal and their image if they failed to work towards the greater participation of women in political institutions, once these issues became important for the public and were included in EU directives. Anne Phillips called this change “pragmatic conversion” (Phillips 1988: 225), which could contribute to this issue making its way onto the political agenda and changing party policies. It nevertheless seems that we are still rather far from this breakthrough, especially if we take a closer look at political parties, electoral systems and prospects for equal opportunities politics within them.

### **Political parties and women**

When we consider the politics of equal opportunity for women and men in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and, within that frame of reference, the representation of women in the parliaments of these countries, the primary and most frequently addressed issues are the roles of electoral systems and party politics.

The findings of a number of studies (Stark, Thomas, Wilckox 1999; Matland 2000, Rule 1996, Norris and Lovenduski 1993) conducted in countries with longer traditions of democratic institutions lead us to the following conclusions:

- that the entry of women into politics receives greater support in those countries where gender equality is largely agreed upon; some researchers believe that egalitarian viewpoints may have a similar impact in Central and Eastern Europe too<sup>41</sup>
- that public support for gender equality is greater in regions where: i) the share of women in the labour force is high<sup>42</sup>; ii) there is a strong second wave of feminist movements<sup>43</sup>; iii) political parties provide opportunities for women to enter the world of politics;<sup>44</sup> iv) the Catholic population is less numerous.<sup>45</sup>

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support the introduction of a law that would set aside a certain number of parliamentary seats for women. These are obvious signs of a pragmatic attitude on the part of the public towards party politics with regard to the sexes.

<sup>40</sup> The topic acquired considerable weight at the last elections in Slovenia, mostly thanks to the media. It is true that women-only lists appeared at the elections but did not win seats in parliament, while another party boasted that more than half its candidates were women, but it did not reach the required threshold.

<sup>41</sup> This is most evident from Stark, Thomas and Wilckox 1999.

<sup>42</sup> That this is an important factor has been established in particular in Rule 1996.

<sup>43</sup> This is stressed most strongly in Matland 2000.

<sup>44</sup> This can be found in Norris and Lovenduski 1993.

<sup>45</sup> These findings are common to all the above-mentioned studies.

Can the following conclusions be applied to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe? What can we conclude from a comparison of the viewpoints of women living in Western countries and those living in Central and Eastern Europe? The findings of the World Values Study 1990-93, which included the CEE countries, could be summarised as follows<sup>46</sup>: a) Central and East European women are more approving of the right to abortion at the woman's request either for medical or social reasons; b) Central and East European women are more convinced that employment has an important influence on their equal status within the family; c) at the same time, however, they more readily agree with the standpoint that if employment poses a problem, men should be given priority; d) women in CEE are more concerned about the fate of children whose mothers work; e) they are more convinced that motherhood is a prerequisite for their personal realisation (85% of Central and East European women compared to 43% of women in Western countries); f) Central and East European women are more favourably disposed towards women's movements.

It is obvious that some of these viewpoints are contradictory (e.g. views relating to employment and women's movements), but the differences between individual countries should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, what conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the findings mentioned above? Roughly speaking, it is possible to conclude that: a) women in Central and Eastern Europe have mixed feelings regarding employment; b) they are strongly oriented towards motherhood, which could prove to be a problem when it comes to reconciling profession, politics and motherhood; c) there is evidently a lack of organised and strong feminist groups or organisations which are necessary to create a public need for women to enter politics in greater numbers (and thus influence public opinion).

### **The role of the electoral system**

Researchers in Western countries<sup>47</sup> have concluded that proportional representation (PR) systems (especially the one with party-lists) are more favourable to women's electoral prospects than majority systems.<sup>48</sup> The same studies showed that women stand better chances of being elected in multi-member constituencies than if voters choose from among a small number of candidates or one candidate only. Some researchers (Darcy 1994) have observed that women's chances of being elected increase with the rising of the threshold. In his opinion this method leads to the exclusion of smaller parties, meaning that more candidates (male and female) of one party will be elected, which in turn increases women's chances since they are usually concentrated roughly halfway down the candidate lists or lower. The provision incorporated within some electoral systems that a vacated seat in parliament be filled by the next candidate on the list gives a similar boost to women's prospects. The reason why this provision is regarded as favourable is the above-mentioned ranking of women on party lists.

Our comparison of circumstances in Central and East European countries shows that none of them use the majority system for parliamentary elections but, rather, some variation of the mixed (i.e. proportional electoral) system. In Hungary, for example, they use a mixed system (single-member constituencies, county lists, and national or compensatory party lists); the Czech Republic and Slovakia use party-list PR systems; Poland uses the PR system with multiparty-member constituencies (391 seats altogether), with 69 seats being filled on the basis of

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<sup>46</sup> The conclusions are taken from Stark, Thomas, Wilcox 1999.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Lijphart 1994, Rae 1967, Rule 1996, Matland 2000, Darcy, Welch, Clark 1994, etc.

<sup>48</sup> This is dealt with explicitly in the aforementioned texts by Rule 1996 and Matland 2000.



parties' share of the vote nationally, they use d'Hont's formula and only parties that receive 7% of the total votes at the national level can win seats, and the electorate has the option of preferential vote (Gibson 1999); Slovenia uses the PR system with multi-member constituencies and electoral districts within them.

We can thus conclude that none of these countries use an electoral system that would be expressly unfavourable for women. Of these, however, the least conducive to women's election chances are the systems used in Hungary and Slovenia. In Hungary the reason for this is that the highest number of parliamentary seats are filled from single-member constituencies (176 and 175), somewhat fewer from county lists (119, 125, 128), and the least from national party lists (90, 85, 82). In Slovenia the reason is that eight constituencies are further split into 11 electoral districts, where parties nominate individual candidates who first compete for votes with other parties' candidates and then with their own party colleagues; this has proved unfavourable for women candidates.<sup>49</sup>

As for elections in Hungary, Ilonszki says that in the founding elections "the consequences of the electoral system were more obvious and straightforward than in the second and third ones" (Ilonszki 2000). The share of women elected from national lists fell from one election to the next. In 1990 their share was 50%, in 1994 it was almost halved (28%), and in 1998 it amounted to a mere 22% (Ilonszki 2000).

In Slovenia the division of constituencies into voting districts presents an element that radically changes the logic of elections and diminishes women's chances of becoming a party's candidates. The result of such a system is that parties act similar as in majority electoral systems where they have to select and submit one candidate per voting district. The analysis of the 1996 election shows that parties learned a lot from previous election. They established which candidates stood best chances of being elected in specific voting districts, and which candidates had less or no chances to be elected but could gather votes for the party. The analysis of the 1996 elections also shows that we can not say that women candidates were generally selected for less electable positions than men. But we can also conclude that the parties which significantly increased the number of seats in parliament put forward a significantly smaller number of women in the 'winnable' voting districts than the parties which were losing the support of voters or the parties which were not able to pass the threshold. Furthermore, we have observed that the parties which (significantly) improved their election performance had significantly smaller number of women both nominated and elected. This is contrary to the experience of established democracies which shows that when a party gets votes women benefit from this - and are elected in greater numbers. In Slovenia the voting districts syndrome had as an effect a significant number of male, middle class mayors in the parliament (Antić 2000).

An additional element of electoral law in Slovenia which could have a positive impact on women's electoral prospects is a national party's list for the distribution of seats in the second round, on which party can put the candidates who it wants to see in the Parliament. But the national lists were discredited in public as the way to partitocracy and they are mainly not used any more.

As for countries that use the party-list PR system (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland), it has been concluded that the electoral prospects for women depend on their position on the

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<sup>49</sup> For more on this, see Antić 1998.

list. The higher they are ranked on the list, the greater their chances of being elected. However, not many women are found in the top portions of the lists, so the percentage of elected women is accordingly low (Filadelfiová & Gurán 2000). A comparison between the 1993 and 1997 elections in Poland shows that at the latter the two strong parties, the UW (Freedom Union) and SLD (Democratic Left), nominated fewer women, but voters behaved differently and in all districts, save for those with a small number of seats, they “exercised their preference to increase the number of women in parliament beyond that planned by the political parties” (Gibson 1999).

In general the share of women on party lists for national elections in these countries is small, averaging between 13 and 16%. We may therefore conclude that their election results are quite good, since the percentage of elected women compared to that of women candidates is lower by only a few percentage points.

Moreover an analysis of the electoral prospects of women that focused on concrete candidate lists (Ilonszki 2000, Siemienska 2000, Havelková 2000) mainly showed that when women do appear on candidate lists they stand a good chance of being elected. Furthermore these studies have shown that women candidates are elected several times in succession and that the share of women who have been re-elected is greater than the share of re-elected men (Siemienska 2000).

In all countries the election results are additionally corrected by setting a threshold for entry into parliament, i.e. winning seats in parliament. The threshold varies: in Slovenia it is three seats (changed to 4% at the 2000 elections), while in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia the threshold is 5%. In Hungary there is a provision specifying that a national list may be presented by the party which has drawn up lists in at least seven territorial constituencies. These rules help to exclude smaller parties from election competition, so their votes get distributed among the larger parties. According to some interpretations (Matland 1999), the women members of larger parties thus stand a better chance of being elected - if they are selected as candidates of course.

We can thus conclude that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe do not use electoral systems for parliamentary elections that are unfavourable to women, and that the reasons for the low share of women in their parliaments should be sought elsewhere. Where?

## The role of political parties

Women in parliaments in CEE countries after the last election in each country\*

Country	Lower house/parliament			Upper house/senate**		
	Total	number of W	Share of W	Total	Number of W	Share of W
Czech Rep.	200	30	15.0	81	9	11.1
Poland	460	60	13.0	100	12	12.0
Slovakia	150	19	12.0			
Hungary	386	32	8.3			
Slovenia	90	7(12)***	7.8(13.3)	40	5	12.5

\*Situation at the election day of the last election in each country

\*\* National Council in Slovenia

\*\*\* Election 1996 and (in brackets) 2000

Source: Interparliamentary Union, [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)

The above table shows that the share of women in the parliaments of CEE countries ranges from 7.8 to 15%, thus placing them at the bottom end of the European ladder. If we take a look at individual countries and elections following the first multi-party elections, we can conclude that the share of elected women varies slightly. The percentage is most stable in Poland, where it steadied – if we ignore for a moment the first elections in 1991 – at 13%, and in Slovakia, where it varies by two percentage points. The percentage of women in the Slovenian and Hungarian parliaments is least stable, with variations of more than three percentage points in Hungary and 5.5 percentage points in Slovenia. In both countries the share of women fell significantly at the last elections – by 2.8 percentage points in Hungary and 5.5 percentage points in Slovenia, but at the last increased again for the same amount.

## General characteristics of party systems in CEE countries

### a) Large number of parties

In contrast to countries with longer histories of multi-party systems<sup>50</sup>, in which just a handful of parties dominate the political scene, CEE countries are characterised by a large number of parties. There are between 20 and 30 parties competing at elections, and many more small parties registered (e.g. 200 parties in Poland in 1991). The party system is still unclear: the transition period has been characterised by parties with similar names, parties with almost the same names but a different ideological orientation, followed by many small parties oriented towards a specific social group, or regional parties (Antić 2000)<sup>51</sup>. At the beginning of the 1990s in Poland there was a real dispersion of parties, especially on the right, while at the end of the 1990s they seem to have consolidated to form two blocs/coalitions: the left, post-communist wing (Democratic Left Alliance) and the right wing (Election Action Solidarity). In addition to these two strong coalitions there is a series of small parties whose political influence is negligible (Siemienska 2000).

<sup>50</sup> For more on studies of the relationship between parties and women in Western democracies, see Norris and Lovenduski 1993.

<sup>51</sup> For more on Slovenian political parties, see Fink-Hafner 1996 and Fink-Hafner 1997.

#### b) Unstable party system

The party system has not yet stabilised. New parties are still being formed and (smaller) parties form coalitions in order to secure a more advantageous position at elections. The electorate is similarly unsteady, so shifts within it are significant and they substantially influence changes in the strength of political parties between two elections (a typical example would be the Hungarian Free Democrats party).

#### c) Relatively large number of parliamentary parties

There are still many parties competing at elections and many parties in parliament, but their numbers are falling. In Poland the decline in the number of parliamentary parties (29 in 1991) was influenced among other things by the introduction of a threshold in 1993 (5% for parties and 8% for coalitions). The fall in the number of competing parties in Slovenia at the 2000 elections (from 23 to 11) was due to the threshold being raised to 4%. The number of parliamentary parties in Slovenia did not decrease after the 2000 elections although one could expect so.

#### d) Domination of men in political parties

Political parties are dominated by men in all the countries covered by our comparative study. Christian democratic parties are an exception as they estimate that half or more of their members are women, or else have strong women's organisations (e.g. 61% of the members of the Christian democratic party in Slovenia are women; 52.3% of the members of the Christian democrats in the Czech Republic are women (Saxonberg 1999); and the Hungarian Christian democrats assert that they have a strong women's section numbering 8,000 members (Fodor 1998). However, men hold virtually all leading positions in parties, and decide on parties' programmes and statutes, which undoubtedly has an impact on parties' attitudes towards gender equality. Women are not found in leading positions within parties, while in other

important party bodies women do not even reach a critical mass of representation (one-third). The least discrepancy between women's shares in membership and party leadership has been observed in liberal and socialist parties, i.e. social-democratic and Green parties.

### **The direct influence of parties on women's election prospects**

#### a) Parties as gatekeepers

Various studies (Ilonszki, Siemienska, Havelková) of parties with regard to the electoral prospects of women have shown that parties act as important gatekeepers (to parliamentary office). Ilonszki additionally states that the political party variable plays a stronger role in assessing women's prospects in politics than the electoral system variable (Ilonszki, 2000). Furthermore, as Siemienska has observed, women MPs estimate that it is harder for a woman to secure a place on a candidate list since the lists are drawn up by parties' bodies composed mainly of men, while male MPs think that candidature in the first place depends on the economic and cultural capital of individual candidates. In her 1992-93 study Siemienska shows that women, when speaking about the reasons for placing a person on the party candidate lists, "more frequently pointed to 'efficiency' resources, which characterised them as individuals. At the same time, however, they spoke of their less measurable resources, such

as personality traits (being intelligent, knowledgeable, honest, etc.) less frequently than men” (Siemienska 2000). They also spoke less about the “popularity, sympathy and confidence among voters”. This is, in Siemienska’s view, “once again confirming observations that they are more frequently characterised by a lower level of assertiveness” (ibid.). In addition she states that both men and women think that inclusion and ranking on candidate lists are often dependent on the “sweet will of gatekeepers”.

b) Important characteristics of parties that influence women’s presence in politics: organisation, ideology

Ilonszki has identified several characteristics of parties that present obstacles to the greater participation of women in politics – for example, organisation of the party, its ideology, party rules and women’s activism (Ilonszki, 2000). It seems that the ideological orientation of a party is one of the important indicators of its inclination towards women’s participation in politics, as has been concluded on the basis of several studies (Ilonszki 2000, Siemienska 2000, Havelková 2000, Antić 2000). It is possible to conclude that centrist and leftist parties (liberal, socialist, democratic and Green)<sup>52</sup> are more inclined towards women’s participation than right-wing parties (people’s parties, Christian parties, parties of free enterprise, etc.). The former see women as men’s potential equals in politics (even though they do not do enough to make this real); the latter think that a woman’s place is in the private sphere and that if they have to meddle with the public sphere they should remain in the background, engage in charitable activities and offer support to their male colleagues. These parties do not encourage any special measures that would make it easier for women to enter politics.<sup>53</sup>

c) Party programmes and equal opportunities policies

Political parties’ programmes continue to be preoccupied with the so-called grand themes relating to the nation and economy. Focusing on big issues is still present in all countries concerned. In Slovenia for example the following issues came to the fore after a decade: consolidation of the economy, integration into the European Union, becoming a member of NATO. The equality of men and women is not “the issue” which politics and politicians think is worth dealing with to gain voters’ support. Political parties do not consider women to be serious political agents. Women are perceived as a relatively significant part of the electorate whose support has to be enlisted at certain decisive moments, particularly during the run-up to elections. Party programmes do not devote much attention to women’s issues. Their programmes provide evidence that none of them have tackled the issue of women seriously and thoroughly. The objectives and principles of parties’ programmes regarding the situation of women differ: they range from those that do not mention women at all to those that advocate that the status of a woman as a mother and a housewife be equal to the status of an employed woman.

d) Parties do not nominate many women as candidates

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<sup>52</sup> This conclusion no longer holds true for, say, Scandinavian countries. The breakthrough in this field was indeed made by left and left-of-centre parties, but others followed in their wake, so at the moment no party would dare deviate from this too much.

<sup>53</sup> In Slovenia the efforts that preceded the 1996 elections to accept a cross-party initiative to introduce mechanisms for the easier entry of women into politics failed precisely because of opposition from women from right-wing parties.

In all countries the number of women candidates for national parliaments is extremely low, making up as little as 20% of all candidates. This means that the share of women on candidate lists does not come anywhere close to their proportion in party membership, let alone in the population as a whole. On the other hand, analyses show that women's election results are very good in comparison to their share on candidate lists. The success of women candidates at elections is therefore above the average; they are far from "unelectable" as some parties would have it (which makes them afraid of nominating women). However, from one election to the next, leading party figures select women candidates for positions that are ever harder to win. This has been obvious in Hungary, where women appear in single-member electoral districts, and in Slovenia, where national lists have been virtually abandoned, meaning that yet another path that presented an easier road to parliament for women was closed. In countries that use national party lists, women candidates are rarely found in top positions where they would stand the best chance of being elected (Siemienska 2000). In the Czech Republic, according to Saxonberg, the least discriminatory attitude towards women has been exhibited by the Communist Party: 20% of women, who made up 16% of all candidates, were selected for electable positions. The next is the social democratic party, on whose candidate lists women make up 14%, with 17.6% of them being selected for electable positions, while the Christian democrats and the liberal party allocated a smaller number of electable positions to women: the former only 8% of a total of 12.8%, and the latter 11.8% of a total of 17.4% (Saxonberg 1999).

In order to achieve a balance on candidate lists, some parties proposed the introduction of mandatory proportions of both sexes on candidate lists, but these initiatives were not widely supported.

#### e) Parties disapprove of quotas

When we come to strategies that enable parties to nominate more women for elections, it is widely recognised that quotas are among the most successful. Quotas are known as a mechanism whereby underprivileged or marginalised social groups, national minorities or other important social groups can be present on the lists of candidates for parliamentary elections. But after the collapse of the socialist system the bad experiences led certain countries to reject quotas as being an inappropriate means of ensuring the participation of women in politics.<sup>54</sup>

In public this mechanism is often perceived as a means of forced participation, the establishment of inequality and/or the placing one of the sexes (the male sex) in an unequal position. Although discussions regarding quotas are not a total novelty, quotas as a mechanism for the more appropriate representation of women in politics are still being rejected by most political parties in the region.

Quotas as an alternative measure was rejected by all parties in the Czech Republic; only the social-democratic party uses some kind of quota for elections to internal party bodies (25%).<sup>55</sup> The same happened in Poland, and only the post-communist left wing is inclined to quota. The Parliamentary Group of Women proposed 30% quotas, but their proposal did not gain sufficient support in parliament (Siemienska 2000). The Slovak Republic likewise tried to

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<sup>54</sup> One such example is the renowned Czech author Jiriná Šiklová. For more, see Funk and Mueller 1993, and Buturova et al. 1996.

<sup>55</sup> For more, see Havelková 2000.

establish quotas but failed, with the Party of the Democratic Left being the only one that adopted 25% quotas (Filadelfiová, Gurán, 2000). In Hungary only the socialist party uses a 20% quota that applies to women and party members under 35 years of age (Ilonszki, 2000). In Slovenia centre-left parties are inclined to special measures for gender equality: the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia currently uses a 25% quota; this will be raised by three percentage points at each election, the final objective being a 40% share of men and women. The Greens have put down a provision regarding the equal representation of both sexes, while the United List of Social Democrats does not have a statutory provision but observes party politics that women should make up at least one-third of candidate lists<sup>56</sup>.

Quotas alone cannot solve the problem of women's representation in politics, of course. They may, however, have a positive influence on shifts within parties' operations and their endeavours towards women's advancement in politics. They may also have positive effects on those women who are preparing to enter party politics. And finally, all of this together could represent a step forward towards a higher number of women in politics.

### **Parties and women: an unhappy relationship**

It seems that after ten years of transition the political scene in Central and Eastern Europe is still rather stormy but undergoing a stabilisation process. As for women, we could say that they have "become involved in politics" but have not yet become common political actors. They still remain on the margins of developments. That is the reason why women's participation in politics is still discussed separately, as a problem in its own right.

At the moment it seems that (in the eyes of the established political ruling class) women represent an "unavoidable evil": they cannot do without them, but it is difficult to do anything with them either. They cannot do without women because certain norms were already established which are, among other things, used to assess the progress of countries in the process of joining the European Union. Parties in Central and Eastern Europe have recently begun to recognise this.<sup>57</sup> The difficulties arise from the fact that parties and politicians remember women only a few months before the elections, when they start to look for potential candidates for their lists. When they do not find candidates that can compete on an equal basis with their male colleagues, they "resignedly" conclude that they made an effort but failed to find quality women candidates, so they select men again. Even though at the 2000 elections in Slovenia, for example, the share of women candidates (23%) was higher by 4 percentage points than at previous elections, we must not forget that their share on candidate lists did not come anywhere close to the critical mass of representation, while the share of elected women candidates is even further from it. In the meantime (which is the time for true politics), the policy-making is in the hands of men sitting in the government, parliament and parties.

Women are not satisfied with parties or their policies. Parties are still dominated by men, so women cannot find means of expression, save for the few who have been admitted to the men's club. However, they know that they need parties in order to achieve their political objectives, because under political plurality parties create political space and adopt political decisions. Isolated individual endeavours (which are rarely realised) to achieve this through

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<sup>56</sup> At the 2000 elections their share exceeded 32%.

<sup>57</sup> At the last Slovenian election (2000) women's candidature and issues were given much more attention (but it was still too little and late).

women's party or candidate lists have not (yet) been successful here (or anywhere else). This gives meaning to our definition of an unhappy relationship between women and parties. The relationship is being maintained even though the protagonists are not satisfied. How long they will hold out like this without radical changes remains to be seen in the years and decades to come.

## **Conclusion**

The point of departure for our study was the hypothesis that for the formulation of equal opportunities policies and particularly for efforts towards the greater participation and representation of women in direct political decision-making, the cooperation and mutual influence of at least two levels of political action are necessary. These two levels are party politics, and civil society or independent women's organisations and groups. Our study of these levels in CEE countries led us to the following conclusions relating to existing and potential action strategies:

- A) Our study of existing mechanisms that are used to support equal opportunities policies in CEE countries reveals above all that their role is formal and representative. They are being constituted, to a large extent, in relation to EU accession policies. We identified a relative weakness within political systems themselves, concluding that these mechanisms depended on the momentary will of the political establishment or parties. The position and role of these mechanisms indicate the strong interdependence of these two spheres of political action (institutional and civil society), and point to the role of various strategies used in efforts to establish equal opportunities policies. We can therefore assert that without a general awareness of the need for gender equality, any equal opportunities strategy can gain recognition only with difficulty. The non-participation of women in institutional politics and their absence from top government and party bodies is the result of a lack of strategy. This creates a situation in which gender equality is not perceived as a problem at all, and as such the status quo leaves no room for new issues. Awareness of the problem of structural discrimination cannot be created overnight; nor can it evolve spontaneously. The fact that the absence of systematic equal opportunities policies and the low participation of women are still not perceived to be the result of systematic discriminatory practices, but rather as an accidental occurrence or a question of the "personal" problems faced by individual women, is an important frame of reference that should be taken into account when attempting to raise awareness of this problem (Gyarfašova 2000). This is why initiatives, studies, and publications that call into question existing discourse and practices, drawing attention to the discriminatory practices that are not visible at first sight, and to the problem of the absence of opportunities for participation, are very important. Such initiatives may be formulated by national institutions or independent actors, or may be a product of their joint work. Similarly, they may stem – depending on the source – from academic or political spheres. It has happened that one of the important areas of cooperation between government and academic spheres is the introduction of gender-differentiated statistical data that provides a serious basis for expert and political work in the area of equal opportunities. A good example of the cooperation between various actors attempting to establish a mechanism of equal opportunities was the Polish initiative to introduce an equal opportunities law, which successfully united both non-governmental women's groups and groups within political parties, even though they did not achieve their objective (cf. Interview with Nowakowska 2000). For the formulation of equal opportunities policies it is undoubtedly necessary to have a political debate that includes parties and representative institutions alike. Even



though there is a tendency, especially pronounced in lawyers' circles, to present this question as a purely legal issue, we would like to point out that such a debate is above all a political one about the content and nature of democratic order and the ensuring of equality.

- B) One problem we encounter when considering the relationship between civil society, or rather women's movements, and the formulation of equal opportunities politics arises in the first place from the fact that in most CEE countries feminist political activism is still quite unsystematic, or in the words of P. Jedličková: "Political activism in Czech women's NGOs is very rare and has an individualistic rather than a systematic character, while major achievements on the political scene (changes in legislation) have been achieved thanks to international support" (Jedličková 2000: 9). Women's movements have extraordinary transformational potentials. When it comes to equal opportunities and the participation and representation of women, their weakness is not simply a result of political impotence or financial deprivation but of a singular rejection of collective action on the part of women holding different political views. This rejection stems from fears that the greater political representation (higher number) of women in itself will not change the structure of the political themes under discussion, and that conservative women in politics will in the first place revive the traditional role of women. As a result arguments such as "we should not care about numbers, but individuals" usually prevail. Despite the fact that many female politicians today not only display a lack of any real interest in women's issues but are also inclined to "minimise the relevance of a political agenda for women" as a sign of loyalty to their parties (Havelková 1999b; Vodražka 1996), we assume that the opening-up of questions and debates about the political participation of women will lead to changes in the political agenda. The problem to which Hana Havelková points when she asserts that there exists a "rupture between issues of the political participation of women as such and a lack of awareness of the problems of women, which makes the arguments in favour of the increased number of female politicians not persuasive and pressing enough", cannot be resolved at the "political level". The awareness that women's problems are structurally conditioned will probably be heightened through an increase in the number of campaigns and in arguments stating that the current representation of women in politics is unjust<sup>58</sup>. At the same time NGOs point out the problem of cooperation between governmental and non-governmental spheres: it is insufficient and too often takes place under circumstances in which responsibilities are not clearly distributed. NGOs thus often accomplish some of the work that should be the responsibility of governmental institutions<sup>59</sup>.
- C) The public political agenda is an area that should definitely be treated separately when considering equal opportunities policies. A crucial question here is who launches the debate on equal opportunities policies and the political participation of women, and how and when this is done. Public debates on the importance of women's participation and representation in politics have become part of pre-election debates in most of the countries

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<sup>58</sup> The "higher number argument" needs further checking. This became evident in Slovenia through the development of the programme of the Government Office for Women's Politics that encouraged the greater participation of women in local councils: only after the question of low number had been addressed did follow questions about the reasons for low participation and the logic behind structural discrimination. The women that attended these training sessions (local female politicians) created a strong collective awareness and solidarity with regard to the urgency of mutual support and the introduction of a women's agenda neglected on all levels.

<sup>59</sup> For example, the Women's Rights Centre in Poland translated EU directives and other relevant documents on gender equality into Polish (Women's Rights Center Report 2000).

included in our study, but they have not extended beyond the question of “why politics needs women at all” (Havelková 1999a). It is generally assumed that women would create a better and less corrupted politics that is closer to people, therefore their greater participation is important and parties should support them for this reason<sup>60</sup>. In short it is assumed that women would introduce into politics some pre-existing and specific trait intrinsic to their gender, would be more committed to content and would less strive for power for the sake of power itself (which is another gender-differentiated and unrealistic assumption). At the same time debates in many countries revolve around the issue of quotas, whereby a quasi-liberal argument that biological characteristics such as gender cannot be a criterion for the introduction of a quota has prevailed in many instances. Opinion polls and the publication of results have played an important role in debates on the structural negligence of women in institutional politics (they show that people are largely aware that something is wrong with a politics composed predominantly of one sex), yet the “will of the people” expressed through opinion polls has been mostly ignored by governments and important leaders. As a result the debates themselves have not been linked to potential actors. Neither governmental organisations nor women's organisations within parties inclined towards equal opportunities policies have succeeded in keeping these topics permanently on the political agenda in the sense of a sustained debate or even actions that would extend beyond an election period. The equal opportunities agenda is partly created by ongoing debates and procedures relating to the harmonisation of legislation with the requirements of the European Union. This is a primary mechanism through which equal opportunities issues penetrate government agendas. The accession process can thus become an important external source of legitimisation for systematic equal opportunities policies. Regrettably the current systematisation concentrates on the formal sides of the approach in the first place, meaning that public administration in CEE countries is primarily concerned with the formal and legal aspects of alignment with the EU and the question of administrative efficiency rather than with the actual content of the issues. Directives are thus delegated from the top and often do not take into account the specific context of individual policies, which could cause problems in post-communist environments.

- D) Our study of political representation showed that parties, through their programmes and election strategies, contribute greatly to the relevance of equal opportunities politics and to the promotion of mechanisms conducive to the advancement of women. One point at issue is of course whether they will include this theme in their programmes and whether they will promote women politicians in their parties (through quotas or in some other way) meaning that they would truly contribute to the creation of a democratic electoral system enabling fairer representation. The rejection of “mere” representation, and consequently of quotas, by numerous NGOs and parties in CEE countries is a factor that has an important impact on debates on equal opportunities policies. In their view equal opportunities issues are a matter of the “new quality” needed in political debate and in institutional political action. This is precisely the reason why representation cannot be treated in isolation from specific contexts or from the question of other mechanisms of sexual division in public, private and political spheres. These mechanisms pertain primarily to the division of labour within the family and the reconciliation of professional, public and family life for both women and men. The issue of representation is thus connected with the restructuring of the relationship between public and private spheres, so

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<sup>60</sup> Hana Havelková writes that gender-contrasted images of politicians often appeared in the media: between immature, frivolous men behaving as they would have done in puberty and striving for pure power; and wise and prudent women who, however, do not have enough self-confidence (Havelková 1999a).

in this respect greater representation is just one step towards an inclusive system of participation. Accordingly the factors that have a significant effect on debates on representation are parliamentary and other debates on legislation regulating everyday issues – for example, labour relations (including sexual harassment), retirement (working life), parental and maternity leave (non-transferable part of leave for fathers), and so on. The greater representation of women in legislative bodies could contribute to a more balanced and higher-quality debate. Redirecting the public debate towards issues “beyond representation” would be sensible, but it is a difficult task.

We could say in conclusion that prospects for the formulation of equal opportunities policies in CEE countries – policies that would extend beyond general debates on non-representation and would generate effective political mechanisms for the advancement of the representation and participation of women in politics – lie in the unity and strengthening of existing plural strategies of political action at various levels. The central effort of such strategies should be the promotion of political participation and the representation of women; this would contribute decisively to the opening-up of new topics and to changes in the political agenda. They should be non-exclusive – that is to say, they should endeavour to include the results of the joint work of various parties, groups and interests.

There are three common dominant strategies in Central and Eastern Europe that could contribute to the greater participation and influence of women on politics. Let us use the names suggested by Sharon L. Wolchik: bureaucratic, common-interest (or civil society) and electoral strategies (Jacquette & Wolchik 1998). Bureaucratic strategy is that embodied by state institutions and offices within individual ministries (so-called “mechanisms”) in order to create elements of an equal opportunities politics. Electoral strategy pertains to parties and their mechanisms but also to NGOs. Common-interest or civil society strategy is connected with the existence and support of civic and other organisations. The first and second strategies (bureaucratic and electoral) are usually weak without the third. In our case we could say that even where all three strategies are present, the links between them are weak; the priority task in promoting equal opportunities politics would therefore be to improve the extent to which they are interconnected.

## **Recommendations**

### **General Recommendations**

**a) Launch a general debate on equal opportunities. CEE countries are probably more familiar with the Scandinavian model of equal opportunities politics that stresses the importance of transformation in politics aimed at gender balance and the politics of solidarity:**

- It is important to devote attention to various dimensions of gender equality and differences, thus facilitating the process of “making man visible”, and at the same time to point out that equal opportunities politics is not directed against men but that the action is positive for both sexes (though in different ways).
- Promote and present the issue of equal opportunities as a move that would be beneficial to individuals belonging to various groups and to present it against the background of active citizenship and the welfare state.
- Present experience of successful equal opportunities politics practices and their impacts.

## **b) Legitimise equal opportunities policies using a variety of sources:**

- The enlargement of the European Union and the critical and creative application of EU regulations, especially with regard to the establishment of national mechanisms. It is important to draw attention here to existing mechanisms in candidate countries that are of a higher quality than their counterparts in the EU, as such examples do exist (e.g. various segments of social policies).
- Other international documents, primarily those of the UN (even though it seems that this source is somewhat limited, owing to the not-very-consistent implementation of national action plans in individual countries).
- Various historical sources, e.g. specific traditions and women's achievements in political history.
- New expert political analyses that would take into account gender aspects could stop social scientists' debates on the transition process that block discussions on equal opportunities policies.
- The creation of statistical databases as the basis for comparative analyses and policies that would take into account gender aspects.

## **Recommendations for Specific Segments**

### **a) National Mechanisms**

- Establish a general legal framework that would be the basis for building new institutional mechanisms and equal opportunities legislation; the operationalisation of constitutional provisions regarding equal opportunities laws.
- Strengthen existing elements of national mechanisms.
- Introduce new institutes that would provide effective control of various forms of discrimination, and to define the responsibilities and domains of national governmental bodies.
- Make specific demands regarding gender mainstreaming in governmental institutions (maybe the initial steps should be taken at the local level).
- Implement mechanisms in those places where the decision-making process actually takes place.
- Determine the methods of informing the public and NGOs on how national mechanisms function.

### **b) Electoral Systems and Parties**

- Relate debates on electoral systems (if they exist) to the issue of the political "inclusivity" of the system.
- Exert pressure on parties to work towards the advancement of women.
- Use electoral campaigns to change the political agenda (introduce the issue of women's participation into pre-electoral debates).
- Initiate a debate on quotas.
- Relate the issue of quotas to changes in the very nature of politics and political debate.
- Achieve gender-balanced party candidate lists and bodies.
- Ensure ongoing training for female politicians.
- Introduce mentoring as one of the effective methods of training.

### **c) Political Agenda and Civil society**

- Combine the work of women in civil society organisations with national and party institutions.
- Relate the equal opportunities topic to other issues.
- Draw attention to and establish links between “non-political” themes, equal opportunities policies and the greater participation of women in politics; this would be of special importance.
- Create formal organisational structures for cooperation between state and civil society sectors, and women's NGOs.
- Increase the capacities of NGOs in the area of education relating to political participation.
- Monitor media policies and make efforts towards incorporating the issue of equal opportunities.
- Initiate new public campaigns that would promote equal opportunities policies.
- Create a “glossary” of the use of various political categories in the area of equal opportunities.
- International exchange.

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Interview with Urszula Nowakowska, Women's Rights Centre, Warsaw, September 2000.

Interview with Violetta Zentai, MONA Hungary, Budapest, September 1999.

Interview with Jirina Šiklova, Center for Gender studies Prague, September 2000.

Interview with Grazyna Kopinska, Informal Group 'Women Also', Warsaw, September 2000.

## Summary

The point of departure for *Prospects for Gender Equality Policies in Central and Eastern Europe –Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia* was the fact that even though sexual discrimination persists in these countries and the transitional period is now a decade old, mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality are still weak and initiatives for the greater participation of women are thin on the ground. We therefore focused on the elements of existing equal opportunities policies and efforts towards the greater participation of women in politics, and on their sources, characteristics and problems. The findings of the study provide the basis for our recommendations concerning possible changes and future strategies in this area. We analysed the liberal-market political culture in these countries, which involves non-participation and is thus not inclined towards equal opportunities policies. Furthermore the political culture is embedded in an environment characterised by three structural and historical elements: anti-politics, anti-feminism and powerful liberal discourse. For these reasons the problems of structural discrimination are concealed and equal opportunities issues cannot become an important part of the political agenda. Our main hypothesis was that the formulation of equal opportunities policies necessitates the reinforcement of efforts towards the greater participation of women in institutional politics and the promotion of a new political agenda. We found that cooperation between two spheres of politics - national and institutional (including party) politics and civil society initiatives - is very important here.

The theoretical part of the study concentrated primarily on the issue of active citizenship and the status and understanding of politics in CEE countries. They are seen as being essential components needed for an understanding of women's participation and representation in politics and for the formulation of a political agenda that would incorporate equal opportunities policies.

The empirical part of the study was dedicated to a comparative analysis of two basic areas relating to the possibility of introducing equal opportunities policies in the countries under examination. These areas comprise two groups of subjects engaging in institutional party politics and non-governmental organisations - in other words, the state in the narrow sense of the word and the organised part of civil society. In analysing institutional politics we compared the status of women in constitutions and pertaining legislation, existing mechanisms for the advancement of women, parties and their attitude towards equal opportunities policies, and electoral systems and options women have within them. As for NGOs and civil society we analysed the political power of women's groups in civil society and their attitude towards equal opportunities policies, particularly with regard to the advancement of women in politics. We further studied the attitude of the general public towards equal opportunities policies and the political agenda in recent years. At this stage, in addition to gathering materials and documents, we organised a scientific workshop, with experts from CEE countries taking part. We also held a number of interviews with researchers and activists from a variety of countries.

We identified three strategies used in formulating equal opportunities policies: bureaucratic, civil society and electoral strategies. These strategies are interconnected only weakly and do not constitute a systematic or effective approach.

Our basic conclusions are as follows:

1. Legislation and elements of national mechanisms supporting equal opportunities mainly exist but are weak, unstable and ineffective. Their formal and representative role is manifested primarily through demands from the EU for the introduction of equal opportunities policies.
2. Feminist political activism within NGOs in CEE countries is rare. There is an aversion to collective action and institutional measures for increasing political participation. Some organisations nevertheless support these measures while others provide training for the greater participation of women.
3. As for party politics with regard to equal opportunities, structural solutions seem to be most important despite the fact that a party's inclination towards the greater participation of women in politics largely depends on its ideological orientation, the number of women activists, organisational traits, candidate selection procedures and so on. However, structural solutions in CEE countries are not welcome for the time being. On the other hand structural solutions (mechanisms for the advancement of women, e.g. quotas) cannot be established outside specific contexts or in isolation from the question of how greater participation would affect other mechanisms of sexual division in public, private and political life.
4. As far as the political agenda and the public's attitude towards equal opportunities policies are concerned, an awareness of gender inequality in various areas, particularly politics, is evident. According to the findings of many opinion polls, a large part of the public thinks that the systematic equalisation of opportunities would create a balance of unjust differences. Even so there is a lack of general support for equal opportunities, while debates are mostly confined to pre-election periods.

We could nevertheless conclude that the constitution of an effective lobby for the introduction of equal opportunities policies and mechanisms, combined with efforts towards a re-definition of the public agenda, would probably succeed, especially if, at the same time, education and training mechanisms for women's participation were formulated and themes relating to equal opportunities policies legitimised with the help of requirements imposed by the EU. In order for the debate to reach beyond general topics such as non-representation and discrimination, it would be necessary to unite and reinforce existing pluralist strategies at various levels (connect "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies). This could provide room for NGOs to use such activities to stimulate and influence party politics and the system of values prevailing in modern society. This would certainly necessitate cooperation between various women's organisations that come into contact through political activism; such cooperation might involve education, the provision of information and advice, the struggle against private and public violence against women, control of the promotion of women's rights, etc. Effectiveness is largely dependent on international links, funds and cooperation with the state, which is still weak in most countries under examination. In these countries the state traditionally sees civil society as a potential competitor rather than a partner, and vice versa.