

The Future of the European Union – Feminist Perspectives from East-Central Europe

Summary by Eszter Turai

The event called “Future of the European Union – Feminist perspectives from East-Central Europe” took place on the 7th of November 2017, on the occasion of the newly published [volume](#) with the same title, organised by the regional gender project of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The book aims to connect the analysis of the current situation and processes in the EU to the most relevant or under-discussed feminist topics, from a leftist perspective. The participants – building on the volume – discussed these topics and tried to figure out their possible political consequences. After the opening speech two panels took place, the first consisted of three short presentations by authors of the chapters, the second was a panel debate with other authors. The discussion was moderated by Andrea Pető, Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University.

In her opening speech **Eszter Kováts**, the editor of the publication stressed two main aspects that inspired both the book and the event. The first one was creating some sort of dialogue between the spheres of academia and public life (activism and politics, media). To reach this, it is both necessary that on the one hand the academics need to take steps towards a language that is more understandable, but also the actors of the public life need to make an effort to translate scientific works to the language of real-life practices. The second aspect she stressed was that the Left shouldn't be afraid to address difficult topics, which are now mostly problematised by the Right. We need to have debates within the feminist discourse and try to give leftist feminist answers to conservative critics.

What is the relevance of discussing the European Union and feminism at the same time? Kováts pointed to the phenomenon that the current discussion about the EU and the discourse about feminism and women's rights are not interconnected at all. When discussing the main topics related to the EU – like the crisis of the euro zone, the Brexit or the idea of multi-speed Europe – there are rarely any voice that would problematize these issues from a feminist perspective or connect them to the situation of women or gender relations. Also vica versa: The EU and generally the global economic and geopolitical environment as a wider context are almost totally missing from the feminist discourse, apart from the expectation toward the institutions of the EU to haul the national governments up for implementing women's rights projects. The papers in this publication aspire to create this missing connection and show a bigger picture. They point to the feminist aspect of fields that are seemingly absolutely independent from gender issues, for example the regulation of financial transactions or the austerity measures after the crisis in 2008. Besides, a better understanding of the processes going on around gender related topics (e.g. reproductive rights, LGBT politics) can contribute, in this wider perspective, to a better understanding to the general problems of the EU.

The first panel contained the presentations of the authors of the papers that analysed the economic framework. First, two scholars of the Public School “Helyzet Műhely”, Gergely Csányi and Emília Barna held a presentation about feminist activism in East-Central Europe in the context of the uneven development in the European Union.

Gergely Csányi presented Helyzet Műhely, which is an independent group of young scholars, and the world system theory, which is their basic theoretical framework. This theory analyses the economic and social processes in different regions and countries embedded into the context of the dependency-relations of global capitalism – in contrast with the approach of mainstream sociology’s much narrower angle. The inner relations and events of a nation state are largely determined by the position of the country in the international division of labour: whether it belongs to the core, the semi-periphery or the periphery. The political events of the Eastern-European region should be analysed considering its semi-peripheral position, which causes the lack of capital and technology and also the strong dependence from economic relations with the West. Due to – among other things – the division of labour in Europe, the significance of informal work is bigger in East-Central Europe, which puts a greater pressure on women. **Emília Barna** continued presenting the paper by analysing the feminist movement in Hungary. The organizations born after the transition got in touch with Western-European activists, who wanted to spread their methods and approaches in the post-socialist countries. At first local feminists cooperated with them, but with reservations, and were perceptive of the differences and inequalities between the West and the East. It has changed in the midst of the 90’s, which was not independent from the growing dependency from the tenders financed from abroad. These tenders preferred the projects and organizations that built on the concepts, frameworks and topics of Western feminist movements (e.g. sexwork-approach instead of abolitionism; setting aside economic violence when problematizing gender-based violence). Finally the Hungarian feminist movement got characterized by – with Barna’s expression – „double blindness”: blindness not only in connection with class relations, but also with the semi-peripheral position of the country.

In her talk **Zuzana Uhde**, professor of Charles University in Prague focused on global inequalities and global justice from a feminist perspective. Her starting point was that a lot of problems, rooted in the mechanisms of global capitalism (e.g. global inequalities, environmental risks, wars) have been brought upon the surface by the migration crisis. The EU as a geopolitical actor needs to clarify its relation to this pile of problems, because now it contributes to sustaining this system in several aspects. **Uhde** builds on William Robinson and Leslie Sklair when analysing global capitalism and the transnational ruling class, which the EU is also a component in. She grasps the responsibility of developed countries and transnational organizations (e.g. transnational corporations, international institutions) through the concept of global justice. Criticizing the anti-globalist and nationalist movements she argues that it is not worth focusing on returning to the nation state; the proper strategy is pushing international geopolitics toward the greater fulfilment of global justice. Various appearances of global injustice are strongly interconnected with gender relations, therefore a feminist reform of the EU is imaginable only hand in hand with achievements in fighting against global inequalities. Uhde suggested widening the concept of the *extraterritorial obligations* approach. For instance we should continue and put into practice provisions like the protection of

economic and social rights beyond the state borders, which also occurs in the Maastricht Treaty. The clarification and severeness of international taxation regulations would also be an important action, namely the measures against offshore and other tax optimization strategies or accountability of the transnational corporations.

In the third presentation Zofia Łapniewska, (Jagellonian University from Cracow) evaluated the current situation of the EU in the global context from the perspective of feminist economics. According to her, one of the most important economic tendency is automatization and the robotization of low added value jobs, which threatens the workplace of a lot of people. There is overproduction and the must of constant economic growth in the developed countries of the world. Meanwhile the catching up of most of the developing countries hasn't happened and the global inequalities are constantly growing. Łapniewska's proposition is twofold: job guarantee and unconditional basic income (UBI). Care jobs (e.g. care for children and elderly), that are typically done by women, play an important role in this idea, because these jobs cannot be replaced by robots, but there is a permanently growing need for them. Investing into this sector would result not only in the well-known advantages of the Keynesian model (new workplaces, multiplier effect), but it would also bring improvement in the field of gender equality. There is already a rich literature about the possible positive outcomes of UBI, but its assumed effect on women is still a controversial topic. In her talk Łapniewska – referring to Caitlin McLean – argued that UBI would help the emancipation of women by granting stable income for the most vulnerable groups of women (e.g. single mothers, migrant and disabled women), offering financial autonomy for women, which would help preventing exploitation and abuse. It could be financed from taxing the work of robots, abolition of tax benefits for transnational corporations and tax. This conception would lean more on corporate taxes than the types of taxes like VAT.

The participants of the panel debate were authors of the first part if the series. **Anikó Gregor**, assistant professor of the Faculty of Social Sciences of ELTE, **György Mészáros**, associate professor of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology of ELTE and **Elena Zacharenko**, policy expert. Several topics came up from the issue of surrogacy through the feminist movement in Gambia to the situation of the Muslim community in the Soviet Union, but there were a few central topics.

In her first comment **Anikó Gregor** emphatically warned against the illusion of automatically considering the EU a feminist institution. Referring to the previous [publication](#) of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung titled *Solidarity in Struggle – Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism from East-Central Europe*, she argued that the market-focused feminism of the EU doesn't really help feminism in general. The symbolic example of the Romanian women working in Italy in terrible circumstances repeatedly came up during the discussion. These women have to leave their homes because of the core-periphery relation within Europe, and the cause, why the Italian authorities ignore the economic and sexual exploitation of them is the economic interest of the region. She referred back to the presentation of Emília Barna: mainstream feminism, which is typical of the EU institutions, is sensitive neither to the class relations, nor to the core-periphery hierarchy.

György Mészáros stressed that we need to analyse capitalism and patriarchy together, with regard to their interdependences, and using this approach would be fruitful for LGBT and feminist movements.

He would be happy to see an LGBT movement in Hungary that practices the critique of the current economic, social and political system and doesn't ignore the material conditions that follow from it. By now the movement has shifted in the reverse direction: to identity politics and individualization, so instead of collective group interests it rather problematizes and represents plenty of subjective, individual interests. This tendency restrains the discussion about problems on a systemic level, for example because those who wants to criticise the LGBT movement or identity politics from a perspective like this is often labelled homophobic or transphobic. According to Mészáros there is an especially hysterical atmosphere in Hungary, in which you can easily get into the false dichotomy, that depicts the tolerant, progressive, pro-West liberals on the one side, and the homophobic, nationalist Orbán-fanatics on the other. One of the participants from the audience argued that intersectional activism – in which the recognition of several individual identity categories plays an important role – and the approach suggested by Mészáros are not mutually exclusive, they shouldn't be handled as opposites of each other. Mészáros and Gregor contested this argument, emphasizing the negative outcomes of identity politics, for example the neoliberalized gay identity, which – due to its intertwining with consumer culture – can cause a serious crisis to somebody with a poor background.

Another topic that repeatedly comes up is the question of coalitions: with whom we should make a coalition as a feminist/gay-right activist and with whom we shouldn't? Mészáros and Gregor both stressed that it's time to reconsider the traditional liberal-leftist and liberal-feminist coalitions. Instead of them, we should cooperate with groups that address also the bases of our social and economic system (e.g. the event, when Buzi Újhullám, a leftist gay organization met a group organized from people indebted after the crisis, who were traditionally attached to the far-right). According to Gregor, there is a positive tendency on this field, she perceives more and more cooperation or at least solidarity gestures in the Hungarian activism. She thinks that it would be a new, fruitful coalition, if trade unions mainly with woman participants (nurses, teachers) would cooperate. Women's issues should be (re)politicised in general. What can an individual do for preventing these analyses from staying only on the level of theory? Gregor brought up teaching as her own example: she tries to show the students in the gender studies MA approaches that differ from the mainstream.

Elena Zacharenko also emphasized the importance of the (re)politicisation, underlining that if Leftists won't do this, than the Right-wing will, actually it is already in process. Movements that build upon the enemy image of „gender ideology” gain popularity by reacting to the harmful effects of neoliberal regimes – even though this reaction is quite inadequate and very different from a leftist answer. At the same time Zacharenko surprised the participants with saying that she is quite optimistic about the situation in Poland, because in her view the activity of the right-wing government calls more and more self-organizing groups into being, and there is a general left-wing shift in the civil sphere. She emphasized in general that we need leftist feminist movements, whose activity is not about overreacting issues of small elite groups (e.g. low proportion of women amongst top managers), but movements that are able to give voice to the oppressed and their material problems.