

What would a Feminist Foreign Policy look like in ESEE Region?¹



Motto:

“A feminist foreign policy or a feminist policy, a feminist government is really a part of strengthening democracy because women make up half of the population on this planet. And without women participating fully, enjoying fully human rights, democracy will not thrive.”

Margot Wallström, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden

Planned during a period when Eastern and South-Eastern Europe were engulfed in uncertainty and turmoil brought by the global pandemic and by the general geopolitical disarrangements, such as the energy crisis, the Russia-Ukraine-NATO strife, the delayed EU membership of the Western Balkan countries, the growing illiberal tendencies, the webinar aimed to discuss the dimensions of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and its possible implementation in the region.

Key-note speakers:

- **H.E. Mrs. Therese HYDEN**, Ambassador of Sweden in Romania
- **Mrs. Miheia DICULESCU-BLEBEA**, director for Diplomatic Strategy and Policy Planning, ROU MFA;
- **Mrs. Luminița POPESCU**, State Secretary, Head of the Head of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men, Romania;
- **Prof. Agnieszka GRAFF**, Ph.D. (dr hab.), professor at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, feminist activist/scholar;
- **Prof. Zuhâl YEŞİLYURT-GÜNDÜZ**, Ph.D. professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, TED University, Turkey;
- **Dr. Ekatherina ZHUKOVA**, Senior lecturer at Department of Political Science, Lund University.

Moderator: Mrs. Ramona AVRAMESCU, Journalist, Romanian Public television TVR

Host: Prof. Liliana POPESCU, Vice-Rector for International Relations, The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), President of the ESEE Fanel Network

¹ Summary prepared a team of ESEE Fanel Network Research assistant volunteers: **Diana Grigore**, BA student, **Rebeca Bașuț** and **Alexia Costin**, MA students, coordinated by: **Ioana Iulia Blaga**, PhD student.

During these very difficult times, amidst President Putin's swift full-scale military invasion into Ukraine that led to the gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security since the Second World War, **Professor Liliana POPESCU** welcomed the participants, as host of the event and as Project Manager of ESEE FANEL, highlighting the relevance of having more feminist voices and Feminist Foreign Policy amid conflicts.

Mrs. Ramona AVRAMESCU, Journalist, Romanian Public television TVR, as moderator of the webinar, welcomed the opportunity to have a good change from her breaking news stories about the Russian invasion into Ukraine.

Mrs. Miheia DICULESCU-BLEBEA, director of the Diplomatic Strategies and Policy Planning Unit, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), stated that the situation in the Eastern and South-Eastern Europe is exceptionally dramatic. With regards to FFP, Mrs. Diculescu-Blebea argued that the role of women in foreign policy these days is crucial and highly relevant. In order to establish a framework that addresses the implication of Romanian women in Foreign Affairs, she offered an institutional overview of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with regard to gender balance and women's presence in the foreign affairs area.

The gender equilibrium within the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs contributes to a smarter, more creative and sophisticated environment in the foreign policy area.

Prior to 1989 in Romania, women were almost completely absent from foreign policy, as they rather occupied functions of secretaries or assistants for male decision-makers. For example, in the late '80s, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Romania, only one woman held the position of Ambassador of diplomatic ranking. After 1989, the number of women in foreign affairs has constantly increased.

Nowadays, the Romanian MFA consists of 49.49% of women employees, while women account for 53.6% of all management positions in the Bucharest headquarters, at all levels and in all divisions. At the same time, 2 of the 5 State Secretary posts and the Secretary-General position within the MFA are held by women. Furthermore, both Government Agents for the European Union's Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights are women. Besides the headquarters situation, women diplomats represent 33.7% of the total number of people selected as heads of missions in the Foreign Service. Mrs. Diculescu-Blebea believes that the quantitative overview demonstrates the gender equilibrium of the Romanian MFA, contributing to a smarter, more creative and sophisticated environment in the foreign policy area.

To conclude, Mrs. Diculescu-Blebea highlighted that, **within the Romanian MFA, women and men work together at all levels of decision-making, a fact that is both a matter of normality and routine. It is also important to note that the Minister of Foreign Affairs himself, Mr. Bogdan Aurescu, is preoccupied with ensuring the compliance of the principle of equal access of women and men to a fully-fledged diplomatic career.**

H.E. Mrs. Therese HYDEN, Ambassador of Sweden in Romania, addressed a few words on the situation in Ukraine and strongly condemned the unjust attacks which impact the entire population, not only children and women. The Ambassador also praised Romania and other countries for their support and solidarity with Ukraine, stating that these assaults are against democratic ideals and against Europe as a whole. Mrs. Ambassador Hyden noted that only men participated in the negotiations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, which represents another reason to support the significance of the FFP.

Feminist Foreign Policy is not just another foreign policy, but a distinct perspective that includes the mobilization of gender equality and the role of women in this domain.

Sweden is famous for its FFP introduced by Margot Wallström, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2014, and reiterated in the Foreign Policy Declaration in the Swedish Parliament, by Ann Linde, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs. Other states followed Sweden's example, such as Canada, France, Luxemburg, Spain, Mexico and Germany. For H.E. Mrs. Hyden, FFP is not just another foreign policy, but a distinct perspective that includes the mobilization of gender equality and the role of women in this domain.

There are three main reasons why FFP became successful in Sweden: human rights as a means against violence and discrimination, women's representation at all levels, as well as resources available to all women while promoting gender equality. All these three aspects are included in materials such as handbooks and action plans. Another key for a successful FFP is scientific data which allows the development of clear targets. Based on these criteria, the Ambassador presented how Sweden manages to promote the feminist point of view: a considerable number of women were invited to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to discuss highly relevant topics; Sweden has a feminist trade policy; they created a network of female mediators in conflictual contexts. The Swedish Government also directly supports women organizations through financial assistance. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides mandatory training and a specialized Ambassador on FFP domain for future women diplomats. Swedish politicians, regardless of their party affiliation, are always supportive of the feminist approach. It was not a novel concept in 2014 when Margot Wallström proposed a FFP for Sweden, because its core idea has always been present.

H.E. Mrs. Hyden expressed appreciation to ESEE-Fanel for advocating for the implementation of FFP in the security sphere, since this approach has much to offer in all sectors and does not exclude other topics from developing on the diplomatic agenda. Although many people joked about Sweden's FFP at the time, now it is the world's leading example on the matter. Mrs. Ambassador concluded by advising strong female foreign policy leaders to be patient and courageous, as well as unambiguous and contextually precise.

Mrs. Luminița POPESCU, State Secretary, Head of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men, Romania, focused on the topic of “*Why the voice of women is important in International Relations*”. Unfortunately, even nowadays, Romanian society is still governed by patriarchal and traditional perspectives based on stereotypical principles. As a result of this mentality, women are not found suitable for occupying positions or sharing their own knowledge and experiences in the International Relations discipline.

The feminist contribution in the field of International Relations emphasizes that, not only during wars or conflicts, but also in peacetime, the security of individuals, especially women, is threatened and should represent a priority.

Considering the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is important to note that women and children account for around 90% of civilian losses in current wars. Furthermore, in post-conflict situations starvation and sickness disproportionately harm women and children. They are also the ones who become refugees and displaced people, and they must manage to gather basic essentials for survival, not only for themselves but also for any children or old people who may be in their care. To clarify, Mrs. Popescu presented a couple of examples of factors that impact women’s lives during and after the war, such as inadequate resources, which may exacerbate payment disparities and property regulation, the responsibilities of single parenthood and caring for military invalids. Therefore, the feminist contribution in the field of International Relations emphasizes that, not only during wars or conflicts, but also in peacetime, the security of individuals, especially women, is threatened and should represent a priority. It is essential to notice that female victims are globally affected, even in their daily lives, by gender-based violence.

Mrs. Popescu also discussed the consequences of violence on the states’ security and individuals’ well-being, especially considering that states are responsible to protect their citizens. She also drew a comparison between the symbolic construction of nation and state and noted the need to rethink and transform the nation's symbolic status as “homeland”, “home” and “motherland” vs. the state as a masculine space defined as “strength” “violence” and “firmness”.

The National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men was involved in numerous activities during the past year to implement the measures and meet the indicators set out in the thematic strategy, by participating in webinars and international seminars and being involved in the Women Peace and Security (WPS) National Plan. **In order to fulfil Romania's foreign policy objectives regarding equal opportunities and treatment for women and girls, as well as preventing and combating domestic violence, the National Agency joined the Action Coalition on Gender-based Violence, and the Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership.**

Mrs. Luminița Popescu concluded by reaffirming her commitment to promoting and supporting gender equality, which is critical in any democratic society, as well as addressing gender inequities.

Prof. Agnieszka GRAFF, professor at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, highlighted the links between gender and militarisation, as well as the importance of the implication of feminism within foreign policy, referring to Cynthia Enloe's book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. Nowadays, the feminist movement faces numerous and difficult challenges, such as the presence of an "anti-feminist foreign policy" phenomenon on a global scale, a fact that makes the feminists' work and endeavours even more arduous.

As Prof. Graff acknowledged, the concept of "gender" is widely understood to refer primarily to women. **In some respects, the use of gender as a reference to women may be characterized as a misunderstanding, while in others, it may be quite beneficial. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it has also generated significant issues, alluding to the global phenomena of "anti-gender" efforts, implying that such campaigns have been particularly prominent in Eastern Europe. Along with "anti-gender" rhetoric, narratives claiming that "gender" is a "movement" or an "ideology" through which institutions are attempting to "sexualise" children and endanger the traditional family and its values are widespread.**

In line with the "anti-gender" rhetoric, Prof. Graff considers the attack on the Istanbul Convention (which aims to combat violence against women and domestic violence) a good example for this narrative. Massive campaigns have unfolded, claiming that the Istanbul Convention is a mechanism through which the West is trying to impose its values on other countries (specifically in Eastern Europe), and is a threat to national sovereignty and identity. The campaign against the Istanbul Convention was more successful in some countries than in others, as it managed to make countries (e.g. Turkey) withdraw from the Convention. Other states were close to withdrawing but did not withdraw (e.g. Romania and Poland). The intense propaganda these campaigns made linked resistance to gender inequality and the realm of violence with the threat to national sovereignty. In Prof. Graff's view, the attack on the Istanbul Convention is not an exception, as there are hundreds of examples. In fact, we are dealing with is a massive worldwide campaign, which has a structure, a history and clear goals, which can be also linked to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. She underlined the fact that anti-gender campaigns are a state policy in Russia.

The broad case for the relevance of a Feminist Foreign Policy is that we should not take gender equality for granted, we should never stop fighting for liberal rights, since the opposing argument of the anti-gender movement appears to be tremendously powerful, intimidating, and even successful.

According to Prof. Graff, there is a set of worldwide organizations, all of which have local branches, involved in the vilification of gender, attacking specific laws that concern the equality of women. The organizations which work within the service of anti-gender movements include the Citizen Goal (extensive online platform with over 50 million participants), the World Congress of Families (founded in the mid-'90s by Russians and Americans), and Agenda Europe (the major aims of this European diplomats' group are to dismantle the European Union's policy on gender equality, to oppose LGBT rights and to promote conservative extreme ideas). **All these organisations are closely linked with right-wing populist parties throughout the world, through "opportunistic synergy" (as labelled by Prof. Graff), since they collaborate to achieve a shared goal which, although framed as religious, is clearly political. Furthermore, the overarching objective of these groups is to**

destabilize the European Union, to make people believe that liberal democracy is a threat to their families and normal lives, implying that the elites and the democratically elected governments are essentially the enemies of Christians.

Prof. Graff described the anti-gender movements and organizations as opportunistic, arguing that each organization and player inside the organization has a vested interest, particularly in terms of power. They want to be involved in decision-making positions, to influence the rhetoric of human rights (for example, the “unborn babies” that improve the case for anti-abortion measures, which is a power issue). Prof. Graff argued that the politicians and the political groups that utilize anti-gender speech are not religious or fighting for a “cause”, but rather nationalistic parties whose philosophy is too weak to captivate the electorate, so they use propaganda, panic, and fear to obtain political power. Prof. Graff argued that the broad case for the relevance of a FFP is that we shouldn’t take gender equality for granted, we should never stop fighting for liberal rights, since the opposing argument of the anti-gender movement appears to be tremendously powerful, intimidating, and even successful.

Prof. Zuhal YEŞILYURT-GÜNDÜZ, Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, TED University, Turkey, began her presentation by describing and highlighting sections from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's acclaimed play „Faust”. Prof. Yeşilyurt-Gündüz thinks that a peaceful and safe society is impossible to achieve as long as violence and strife exist elsewhere. The persistence of violence and armed wars simply adds to the confusion and pushes the democratic ideal of peace for all further away.

No one lives in peace until everyone lives in peace

Prof. Yeşilyurt-Gündüz presented her viewpoints on the following major issues: foreign policy and FFP, human security, International Relations, and military spending. A country’s “foreign policy” is defined as its relations with other countries, in which it aims to preserve “national interests” (mainly economic, military, and cultural), as well as govern its participation in international activities, such as trade agreements or humanitarian relief initiatives. **Prof. Yeşilyurt-Gündüz, on the other hand, pointed out various flaws in contemporary foreign policy management, such as the emphasis on military strength and aggression, as well as the threat and dominance of people and states. It is based on the protection and expansion of neoliberal economic parties, despite the implications of increased poverty, community erosion, and environmental destruction. Women and other vulnerable groups are adversely and disproportionately affected by such foreign policy approaches.**

Prof. Yeşilyurt-Gündüz advocates FFP as a way to address these flaws in the foreign policy process. **FFP is defined as a paradigm for International Relations that prioritizes the social and economic well-being of marginalized people and communities. Developing such policies forces governments to reconsider the notion of security from the perspective of the world’s most vulnerable people, as well as the role of countries in fostering a safer, healthier, and more peaceful world for all.** As a result, the outcome could lead to rights-based policies that work toward gender equality, such as intersectional inclusion of women and other historically oppressed populations in multilateral decision-making spaces; advancing human security and dignity through

de-escalation of conflict, disarmament, demilitarization, and peacebuilding efforts that focus on the experiences of women and marginalised individuals.

The feminist contribution can also be seen in the field of International Relations. The goal of International Relations as a discipline was to create a body of knowledge that could be used to promote peace. Unfortunately, even at the highest echelons of international politics, women are underrepresented. It is critical to use gendered lenses in all domains, as global politics can only progress if a gender viewpoint and women's experiences are included.

Prof. Yeşilyurt-Gündüz concluded with the personal message that "No one lives in peace until everyone lives in peace".

Dr. Ekatherina ZHUKOVA, Senior lecturer at Department of Political Science, Lund University, pointed out that FFP, a policy of peace, dignity, and cooperation, is exactly the opposite of what the Russian Federation is doing through the invasion of Ukraine.

Dr. Zhukova researched six of the countries that have already adopted FFPs, such as **Sweden** (2014 – Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy), **Canada** (2017 – Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy), **France** (2018 – France's Feminist Diplomacy), **Luxemburg** (2018 – Luxembourg's Feminist Foreign Policy), **Mexico** (2020 – Mexico's Feminist Foreign Policy), and **Spain** (2020 – Spain's Feminist Foreign Policy) and has found some similarities between them.

Feminist Foreign Policies are not the same in every nation and should not be, because they come in a variety of flavours, should not be all-inclusive.

To begin, Dr. Zhukova identified that **all of the countries studied have social democratic or left-leaning governments, arguing that feminism is still an issue that "divides" left and right in those states**, implying that there is a need to normalize the concept of feminism and gender, rather than providing it as part of a specific doctrine.

Second, another point of consistency across the nations studied is **leadership and responsible political behaviour in the implementation of FFPs**.

Third, the **internal policies that have been undertaken in all of the investigated states are similar, not identical, but with nearly the same goal in mind, namely to improve gender equality**.

Another related feature is that all six nations studied have used **FFPs to achieve international commitments** such as the SDGs – the UN Agenda 2030 and others. Additionally, a major commonality amongst the identified states is **their partnership with civil society, where feminist and human rights organizations are pushing their priorities on the agendas of the governments**, and the general reaction is openness and consideration for mutual advancement.

Dr. Zhukova concluded by emphasizing that FFPs are not the same in every nation and should not be, because they come in a variety of flavours, and should not be all-inclusive. For example, a state can implement a feminist trade policy, a feminist climate policy, a feminist migration policy, a feminist humanitarian policy (which, in light of the situation in Ukraine, is the right policy to have implemented), or a feminist communication policy (including a look at the language used for talking about gender in our daily lives). It is critical for a country to attempt to implement feminist policies until it achieves strong and comprehensive FFPs.