

Report  
Veronika Mrštáková

### **Expert Round Table: Academic Freedom, Gender and Democracy**

November 16, 2018

Anglo-American University, Prague. In cooperation with the Institute of International Relations, Prague

In October 2018, the Hungarian government issued a decree prohibiting gender studies courses in all universities across the country. Vast national and international protests and petitions followed, from both the general public, as well as academic and professional communities, including numerous universities and scientific organizations.

The Political Studies Association (PSA) confirmed that gender studies form an integral part of understanding the complexities of social interaction, the impact of policy, and the dynamics of the economy. Similarly, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) maintains that gender studies is an internationally recognized discipline and an established multi-disciplinary area of research and teaching in the social sciences, which helps to understand dynamics and power relations in our society.

The aim of the event was to contribute to this conversation and to discuss the place and role of gender studies in education and research, as well as the importance of academic freedom for the functioning of democratic societies.

**Zuzana Fellegi** (Researcher and lecturer on gender, human rights and European policies, Institute of International Relations and Anglo-American University, Prague) opened the debate with stress on gender studies as an internationally recognized discipline and proposed the main topics of the event to be: 1) the situation in Hungary and its possible spillover to other Central European countries, and 2) the legitimacy and legality of external regulation of academic curricula in universities in general.

The keynote speaker **Andrea Pető** (Professor, Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Budapest) started her speech with an alarming general question: whether “we are ready to die for science.” She shared her personal experience, when she as a publisher in the field of gender studies, received life threatening anonymous email messages and numerous hateful comments under her posts. She notified the university as well as the police, but the investigators claimed to be unable to resolve her case. Not only the situation remained unresolved, but other colleagues of hers from the gender studies community in Budapest received similar messages.

According to professor Pető, the anti-gender studies movement aimed at scientists, educators and thinkers has spread all over Hungary and become a new phenomenon, connected with the emergence of public hate speech. Along with her colleagues, she analysed this situation in the article *Gender as Symbolic Glue: How ‘Gender’ Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo) Liberal Order*, and noted the emergence of a new form of polypore state, characterised by state financed NGOs, stress on traditional family,

securitisation of gender topics and assaults on academia and their curriculum. As her main claim, Pető concluded that: *“Anti-gender movement is a fundamentally new phenomenon that was launched for the sake of establishing a new world order. [...] It is a nationalist and neo-conservative response to the crisis of the global neoliberal order. [...] It attacks liberalism, therefore democracy.”* Thus, her final suggestion is for the institutions to protect work, independence as well as safety of academics, educators and researchers and for the legal system to respond to new threats such as online harassment.

The situation in the Czech Republic was described by **Blanka Nyklová** (Researcher, National Contact Centre - Gender and Science, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague), who at the beginning pointed out that we need to understand the role of the state in higher education, which has been increasingly invasive in recent years. In 2004, the first BA gender studies programme was opened at Masaryk University in Brno followed by a Master's programme at Charles University in Prague. However, gender studies in Brno has been recently closed due to lack of demand. Moreover, the programme in Prague will be undergoing accreditation consideration next year, and therefore the future of gender studies in Czech higher education is uncertain.

Nyklová sees the biggest problem in the fact that gender studies is now only a specialisation of sociology. For the future, this may mean that it will be difficult to foster the development of independent, truly interdisciplinary scholarship in the field, let alone the education of scholars primarily educated in the field of GS. At the end of her speech, she returned to the case in Brno and explained that the closure of gender studies programme and its transfer to become part of the instruction in sociology is a result of more complex reasons than in Hungary. Mostly, it was due to a neoliberal logic of measurability, which in reality means that the lack of students enrolling in this programme caused its inefficiency and subsequent closure. The problems here are: 1) that the drop in enrollment had causes at least partly external to the programme, and 2) universities should not be driven entirely by market logic.

**Tamás Lattmann** (Senior Researcher, Institute of International Relations, Prague) was invited to bring the issue to a wider scale of current trends. What happened in Hungary was according to Lattmann a “coward solution” since the government refused to hold a conversation about gender studies in academia and society; it simply erased the field of studies from the list of accredited programmes to be offered by Hungarian higher education institutions (even on a tuition fee basis), which was a dangerous move against freedom of education and democracy. Another major problem is the defective way in which media present gender to public as an issue only of gender-neutral toilets, transgender people, or third gender, which does not represent the majority of actual interests of gender studies. Lattmann pointed out the disturbing matter of politicization of gender and its utilisation to deflect the public's attention from the government. He concluded his speech by saying: “Gender issue in Hungary is a part of a bigger political battle.”

After speakers' presentations, a Q&A part followed and several questions were proposed. The first one was related to Russian influence on the gender debate in Hungary and the Czech Republic. The consensus seen in answers was that it is not a topic of interest because as Nyklová pointed out, although Russian funding plays a role, it is key to understand how come the debate resonates locally. Lattman added that even though Russia is involved in many different spheres in Hungary, the country is not concerned in pressing on gender issues, and added that "we have to deal with this ourselves." Pető referred to *The Geopolitics of Nordic and Russian Gender Research 1975–2005* by Dahl, Ulrika; Liljeström, Marianne; Manns, Ulla, about developments in gender studies in Russia in the recent years where many gender studies centres were simply renamed family studies centers. There was also a huge emergence of such centres in Kazakhstan, many of them educational, teaching ancient Greek philosophers and whose funding is in question. She pointed out the importance of asking questions about the consequences of interconnection between institutionalisation of gender studies and neo-liberalisation of Russia after 1990s.

The second question regarded American influence, specifically evangelical NGOs. We need to understand that there are different political actors engaging in this debate financed from various sources, Nyklová stressed. She also drew attention to questions such as "What future do we want? What kind of democracy do we want? Do we want equality? What does it actually mean? And why do certain people find these questions threatening?" Pető added that these groups involved in gender studies have different organisations, different sources of financing and political influence. Lattman connected this topic to the propaganda strategy of the Hungarian government. They created an "alternative reality" on uncomfortable issues. The media is censored and serves the purposes of this reality. Moreover, the government is likely to find new topics, such as migration, to bring attention to, even if these issues have never been discussed before.

Another listener asked about challenges and trends in Central Europe in the gender debate. As agreed, a common determinant is the history of communism, which had a great impact on how society perceives gender in public discussion even today. Pető referred to the award winning book *Anti-Gender Campaign in Europe* edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte about the situation in gender across European countries that concludes quite similar topics, but with different reactions and resistance. However, we do not know what is really happening, which seems to be the worst scenario. Nyklová referred to a special issue of the Serbian journal *Sociologija* (vol. 60, no. 1, 2018), which focused on the anti-gender campaigns in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Personal interests represent a significant determinant since they form movements and foes we are fighting against. The final question on solutions was briefly answered by Lattman: solutions certainly exist, but unfortunately they are ignored by the government. However, the only realistic solution is to hold an open conversation about gender studies in higher education.

The chair Zuzana Fellegi closed the discussion with expressing her hope in continuance of the debate about gender issues, its importance in academia and society and wished for a thriving future for gender studies.