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Master Thesis

## **European Union's Action for Gender Equality in its Foreign Policy: Normative Gender Power?**

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## ***Abstract***

*Gender equality is positioned by the European Union as one of its core values and legal principles. Over the last decade, the EU has increasingly been positioning itself as a gender policy entrepreneur, showing its ambition to challenge the status quo and incite policy change not only in the member states, but also beyond the EU borders. Applying the Normative Power Europe theoretical lens, the research paper seeks to understand whether and how the EU acts in its foreign policy as a normative gender power, focusing on the case of the EU's action towards Russia, which represents a challenging and contrasting setting for the EU's normative power. The research is methodologically based on process tracing and document analysis with the use of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. As follows from the analysis of the EU's assistance to NGOs, public diplomacy actions and joint action with other international actors, the effectiveness of the EU's gender equality promotion in Russia has been limited by the absence of gender equality as a full-fledged policy area within the EU's actions. Although gender equality agenda has been taken on board by the policy makers and the EU actors abroad, overall, gender equality promotion has received limited attention and lacked a systematic approach that would be mainstreamed in all areas of the EU's activity.*

## **Introduction**

Gender equality is one of the core values of the European Union (EU). As positioned by the EU's policymakers, since the beginning of the enhanced cooperation between the European states in 1950s, it has been a 'part of the European Union's DNA' (European Commission, 2015). Recognizing gender equality as one of its core legal principles, the EU has positioned itself as a gender policy entrepreneur, willing to challenge the status quo and incite policy change in the field of gender equality (David & Guerrina, 2013; Kingdon, 1984). With strengthening of the EU competences in this domain, the development of a more comprehensive understanding of equal opportunities for men and women and adoption of the principle of mainstreaming in the Treaty of Amsterdam, gender equality became a common commitment supposed to be incorporated in all the EU policies (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). Therefore, linking it to Manner's theorization of the EU's ambition and the ability to influence the outside actors based on its fundamental values and identity as a Normative Power Europe (NPE), the European Union is expected to advance the gender equality agenda not only within the internal policy agenda, but also in terms of promoting positive changes beyond the EU borders (Manners, 2002). As the European Commission puts it, 'through all relevant policies under its external action, the EU can exercise significant influence in fostering gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide' (European Commission, 2010).

Although the scholarship on gender mainstreaming in the European external action is extensive (see, for example: Debusscher, 2011; Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2016), only a few studies have scrutinized its gender dimension through the lens of normative power (see, for example: Guerrina & Wright, 2016). Furthermore, the existing research has mostly focused so far on European development policies and on EU's gender mainstreaming in relations with its near abroad, – particularly, within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy (see, for example: David & Guerrina, 2013; Giusti, 2017). Thus, although the European Union seeks to be a global 'norm entrepreneur', its role of a game-changer has so far been investigated to a large extent only in a regional context marked by a particular character of power relations where the states receiving different sorts of aid from the European Union or seeking an enhanced cooperation or membership a priori found themselves in a position of 'norm receivers'. Seeking to understand to what extent the EU is effective in promoting gender policy change beyond its 'natural' sphere of influence, this master thesis investigates the case of the EU's cooperation with Russia on gender equality in order to fill the two above-

mentioned gaps in the existing scholarship. Specifically, it asks the following overarching question:

*To what extent has the European Union acted as a normative gender power in Russia?*

The EU's cooperation with Russia, in contrast to the vast majority of cases studied so far in order to account for the EU's projection of gender equality in its foreign policy and role of a normative actor, represents a challenging setting in terms of both NPE as such and the current gender regime in Russia.

The latter case illustrates the difficulties and non-acceptance that the EU encounters in acting as a normative power in cooperation with its partners. Initially, the Russian political establishment sought to present the idea of European normative power as an argument designed by the EU to camouflage its realpolitik goals and criticized the EU for not being consistent in its implementation, developing instead an alternative normative platform that drew significantly on conservatism (Romanova, 2016). In subsequent years, Russian authorities increasingly promoted the principles of non-intervention and equality on the international arena, developing the second and third 'blocks' of criticisms of the NPE which were mostly related to human rights. Russia sought to demonstrate that the EU itself was not complying with the promoted standards and tried to find itself a niche as an alternative normative power (Romanova, 2016).

Regarding the gender order, the current situation in Russia is highly influenced by the combination of a complicated and contradictory legacy of the USSR policies and the upsurge of liberalism after 1991. Although the USSR pioneered the introduction of several gender equality policies, gender equality under the Soviet regime was more about rhetorical change and 'emancipation from above' (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015). It was largely characterized by a gender-based labour division in both private and public spheres, the absence of an independent women's movement and a state effort to publicly highlight the differences between men and women and depict feminism as a 'bourgeois' ideology (Temkina and Rothkirch, 2002). Despite the democratization and liberalization occurring since 1990s, the gender regime in today's Russia is determined by the co-existence of conservative and liberal attitudes. Furthermore, although since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been a shift in public opinion, in the recent years, Russia has experienced a 're-traditionalization' of gender roles (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015).

Currently, the situation of gender equality in Russia is hardly optimistic. In 2020 Russia has been ranked 122<sup>nd</sup> out of 153 countries, showing a 0,706 gender gap according to the Global Gender Gap Report and obtaining one of the weakest results among former Soviet states (World Economic Forum, 2020). Although Russia demonstrates progress and even leadership for some of the indicators involved, the improvements are rather cosmetic and, overall, they do not entail any substantial change in practice. For instance, while Russia is one of the world leaders in terms of gender parity in education, there is not only vertical but also persistent horizontal labour segregation, implying the existence of highly feminized and masculinized occupations, and the wage gaps between them amounting to 27,9% in average (ILO, 2018). Therefore, post-Soviet Russia proves to be a complicated and contradictory case in terms of gender equality which, given its position in terms of cooperation with the EU, constitutes an intriguing case to investigate and contribute to the existing scholarship.

This research paper seeks to understand whether the EU has been able so far to promote the values of gender equality in a challenging setting like Russia, acting as a normative power. Particularly, the following sub-questions are addressed:

- To what extent the gender equality agenda is embedded in cooperation and prioritized in comparison to other areas of the EU's action for support of human rights and democracy in Russia?
- What are the means through which the European Union advances gender equality in the Russian context? How effective those mechanisms are?

The research paper is structured as follows: I begin with a discussion of literature and the presentation of my theoretical framework, which is followed by the methods section. In the empirical analysis part I firstly overview the first two decades of the EU's programmes towards Russia after the collapse of the USSR, and then, focusing on the period between 2012 and 2019, I analyze the EU's assistance programmes to NGOs, people-to-people action programmes, and multilateral cooperation. I conclude with a summary of main findings and suggestions for further research.

## **Literature Review**

The research paper draws on the feminist international relations theory (for a detailed analysis see, for example: Sjoberg, 2010; Tickner, 1992; Ackerly & True, 2010). Challenging the underrepresentation of women in multiple facets of international relations and shedding light on the invisibility of gender, feminist IR theory is crucial for the foreign policy studies. In

contrast to mainstream IR theories, feminist theoretical framework puts into question classical categories of state, identities and others, considering them as socially constructed and conditioned by the existing power relations and various gendered practices. In this line, feminist IR theory implies attention to and analysis of gender binaries, masculinity and femininity constructions and their linkage to the main sites of power, (re)production of intersectionality, recognition of alternative social categories in the conduct of foreign policy, as well as focuses on the states' activities aimed at the advancement of particular issues on the global political agenda that are related to gender equality and intersectionality (Aggestam et al., 2018). Furthermore, feminist IR theoretical framework sheds light on and invites for a critical research on the connection between a domestic ethical setting and its global implications in foreign policy, as well as vice versa, it questions the degree to which a state's gender equality oriented foreign policy corresponds to the gender equality standards maintained in domestic policy (Aggestam et al., 2018).

Furthermore, I refer to the gender regime theory which represents a theoretical framework investigating how gender impregnates institutions, influencing social relations (Chappell & Guerrina, 2020). As Walby put it, 'gender regime is a set of inter-related gendered social relations and gendered institutions that constitute a system' (Walby, 2009). Stemming from Walby's theorization, gender regime theory focuses on analyzing the way that social hierarchies and practices determine policy outcomes. Walby's formulation of gender regimes is complemented by Connell's analysis, where she focuses on organizations as 'bearers of gender relations', looking at how particular gender relations are developing and being perpetuated in institutional practices (Connell, 2005). Although these theorizations do not pay particular attention to norms, as Chappell and Guerrina highlight, importantly for the study of the EU as a normative gender actor, norms represent the 'scaffolding upon which gender regimes rely' (Chappell & Guerrina, 2020).

The study of the European Union as an actor promoting gender equality through its foreign policy began to develop in the context of the EU introducing gender equality in other policy areas (Kronsell, 2012). Although already in the early 1990s the EU was an active participant of the global debate on gender mainstreaming and recognized the necessity to project the gender equality dimension in all of the policy domains, the emergence of the EU's way of advancing the principle of gender equality took place later (Kantola, 2010). Firstly, it was introduced in the Commission's Communication in 1996, which analyzed the EU's *acquis* in terms of gender equality and presented the fields for action in the upcoming years. Thus, the Communication highlighted the necessity to mainstream gender in six different areas, such as

labour markets and employment, education and training, external relations, people's rights and others (European Commission, 1996). Then, one year later, the member states agreed to reinforce in the Amsterdam Treaty previously existing article on equal pay for women and men and, most importantly, reviewed Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty, making as well the equality go far beyond the treatment of women and men at workplace or equal pay – equal opportunities were recognized as a principal goal of the European Union, being supposed to be mainstreamed henceforth in every policy area (European Parliament, 1997). Both documents constituted the basis for the European gender mainstreaming approach (GM).

Since then, a growing body of literature can be found on a wide range of policy areas, such as employment, science and research, competition policy, trade policy and others (see, for example: Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000; Woehl, 2011; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Fagan & Rubery, 2018). In this line, extensive scholarly inputs were published, which reflected on gender mainstreaming approach as such, its nature and scope, its opportunities and limitations (see, for example: O'Connor, 2014; Minto & Mergaert, 2018), the role of particular EU institutions in promoting gender equality and gender mainstreaming, as well as the analysis of the results of the EU's gender mainstreaming strategy and its implementation (see, for example: Rees, 2005; Squires, 2005; Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2009; Jasquot, 2010). Focusing on domestic policies, several studies sought to understand the lack of effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in the EU and showed that the core of the problem was rooted not in inherent flaws of gender mainstreaming as such, but that the problematic nature of its implementation, namely, in lack of 'hard', binding instruments and a well-defined strategy, deficits in gender training of EU policymakers and employees, as well as insufficient resources devoted to its implementation (Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2009).

Yet, scholarship covering gender mainstreaming by the EU in its foreign policy is less rich and revolves around three main strands. Firstly, a number of studies investigated mainstreaming gender dimension in the EU enlargement, focusing mainly on the analysis of policy change in the new member states in Eastern Europe and Balkans and the EU role as a game changer (see, for example: Sloomaeckers et al., 2016; Koldinska, 2007). Secondly, an extensive body of literature covers development policies (see, for example: Debusscher, 2011; True, 2008; Debusscher & Van der Vleuten, 2012). Overall, these studies reveal the existing gap between the EU's ambitions and policy implementation: although the gender equality dimension has been added to the core development policy documents at early stages, gender mainstreaming has been implemented with varying success (Woodward & Van der Vleuten, 2014). Thirdly, the EU's gender mainstreaming in external relations has been mostly

investigated in relation to its near abroad – the countries of European Neighbourhood Policy which partially covers post-socialist states, Northern Africa and some countries in the Middle East (see, for example: Giusti, 2017; David & Guerrina, 2013). However, the research on countries, having no connection to the enlargement policy, and which are not characterized by the same character of power relationships with the EU, is very scarce.

In this research paper, I seek to fill the above-mentioned gap using the theoretical lens of normative power Europe (for the detailed analysis of the concept, see, for example: Manners, 2002; Orbie, 2009). As Manners conceptualized it, normative power refers to the EU's capacity to 'shape conceptions of the 'normal' and implies that the EU 'places the norms of peace, idea of liberty, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights at the centre of its relations with the rest of the world', diffusing these norms through a variety of channels available in relations between the EU and third parties, should it be civil society, NGOs or direct state-to-state cooperation (Manners, 2002, p. 244). Once sparking the scholarly debates at the early 2000s, the concept of normative power not only gained a sound footing in the scholarly literature, but, importantly, is now a well-established category of the European policymakers' vocabulary (see, for example: EEAS, 2019a). It means that the ambition to be the world's 'force for good' and an actor setting the rules and standards worldwide is officially recognized and assumed by the EU. Given the EU's commitment to principle of gender equality and its continuous effort to make gender equality one of the pillars of its foreign action, the EU is expected to act as a normative gender power, influencing gender policy change through its international partnerships.

Research on the NPE is extensive and links the European norms and the EU's foreign policy, drawing on the crucial role of European identity in building its international influence and reputation (Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007; Whitman, 2011). At the same time, not many studies used the NPE lens to investigate gender mainstreaming in the EU and its capacity to accomplish its role of a norm entrepreneur, although, this body of literature is growing. Being situated at the crossroads between politics, culture and law, gender is naturally embedded in almost every policy area, which is why it is of particular importance to investigate how the principle of equality promoted by the EU influences the EU's external action (David & Guerrina, 2013). In this line, Guerrina, in her research on the application of the EU's gender equality norms within the European External Action Service (EEAS), makes a distinction between '*normative gender actors*' and '*gendered normative actors*' (Chappel & Guerrina, 2020, p. 3). While a normative gender actor is the one that actively advances gender mainstreaming and principles of equality as one of its full-fledged policy areas, a gendered



normative actor ‘co-opts gender narratives to promote the interests of the organisation’ (Chappel & Guerrina, 2020, p. 21). For the moment, empirical studies of the normative power Europe in relation to gender equality focus by and large on the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership (see, for example: Manners, 2010; David & Guerrina, 2013; Garcia & Masselot, 2015). Overall, with regard to gender mainstreaming in common foreign and security policy, many agree that it is so far applied to different policy areas with a different degree of effectiveness, and when it comes to foreign affairs, it is categorized as a policy area where gender mainstreaming is still not well embedded (Kronsell, 2016).

To investigate the EU’s action as a normative gender power, I refer to Manner’s theorization of the normative power approach with regard to the modes by which the norm diffusion is realized: contagion (unintentional diffusion by ‘value interpreters’), informational mode (through strategic communications), procedural mode (comprises the institutionalized agreements with third parties), transference (includes aid, trade, technical assistance and so forth), overt diffusion (implies physical presence of and action by the EU abroad) and so-called cultural filter (transmission of knowledge by the third parties, e.g. democracy promotion foundations) (Manners, 2002). In this study, I focus on transference and overt diffusion.

Finally, with regard to Russia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a wide range of scholarly literature has focused on the Soviet gender regime and its role in socialist political construct (see, for example: Temkina & Rothkirch, 2002; Ashwin, 2000; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003). Gender regime in the post-Soviet Russia, beginning with rapid liberalization in the early 1990s until re-traditionalization of the recent years, has also received significant scholarly attention (see, for example: Kondakov, 2012; Sperling, 1999; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). However, not many studies within this strand of literature have focused on the international partnerships and cooperation on gender equality with most of them dating by the mid- or late 2000s, which is mainly explained by the relative decline of interest among, first and foremost, European and American organizations in cooperation with Russia after the European Union’s Eastern enlargement in 2004 (Gradskova, 2017; Johnson & Saarinen, 2011). Yet, there are still various mutual initiatives and channels of cooperation, for instance, regional cooperation between the Northwest Russia and Nordic countries via regional institutions, such as Nordic Council (Gradskova, 2015).

Therefore, this research paper makes a contribution to three strands of scholarly literature – first of all, to the studies on gendering the European normative power, secondly, to the scholarship on gender regime in Russia and, finally, to the studies on the EU-Russia

cooperation on gender equality, which remain limited. Last but not least, the voices of Russian scholars appear to be underrepresented in the scholarly literature on gender, and, therefore, the present research paper addresses this citation gap, as well as ensures the diversification of the resources used for this study in general.

## **Data & Methods**

In the analysis I use the case study research design focusing on the case of the EU's cooperation on gender equality with Russia which represents a contrasting setting in comparison to the most of the existing studies of the gender equality dimension of the EU's foreign policy and its role of a normative gender power. As for the time frame, the research includes the whole post-1991 period and contains two sections. In the first section of the empirical analysis I overview the cooperation programmes of the first two decades after the collapse of the USSR. The second section investigates the time span between 2012 and 2019, which is the main focus of the study.

The research paper is methodologically based on within-case process tracing drawing on systems understanding of causal mechanisms, which aims to 'unpack explicitly the causal process that occurs in-between a cause (or set of causes) and an outcome and trace each of its constituent parts empirically' (Beach, 2017). In this way, entities, such as actors, organizations, structures, are understood as parts of the causal mechanisms (see, for example: Machamer, 2004). Those entities are the factors that engage in activities, which, in their turn, are the 'producers of change': the activities make the causal mechanisms work, exhibiting productive continuity and leading from an initial condition to an outcome through the mechanisms' constitutive parts (Beach, 2017).

As a data collection technique, I used document analysis of more than 70 documents, which include EU-Russia bilateral agreements, legislative acts of both Russia and the EU, Gender Action Plans and the reports on their implementation, the EU's strategies towards Russia, EU's annual reports on human rights, strategic documents and application guidelines of various EU's programmes, such as European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Civil Society Programme, Non-State Actors programme, public diplomacy activities within the Partnership Instrument, documents on multilateral cooperation on gender equality, as well as minutes of meetings, conferences and other documents. Although document analysis cannot provide insights into informal aspects of the policymaking, it is a crucial instrument for evaluation of gender mainstreaming in the foreign policy as a formal framework and minimum standards set for the external action.

The documents were analyzed from a two-fold perspective. First of all, I looked at the formal side of gender mainstreaming, focusing on manifest content of the policy documents: in this way, I looked at the inclusion of such categories as women, girls, mother, female, domestic violence, gender, sex, feminist/feminism and others, as well as assessed whether gender is mainstreamed in all parts of the text. Secondly, I focused on a deeper content of the documents, using qualitative content analysis. In this respect, I looked at how gender equality issues were framed and positioned along with a broader human rights agenda advanced by the EU in Russia, which issues and groups were prioritized or ignored, as well as at framings of the ‘calls for action’ and outcome expectations. In this way, such an approach allows to examine to what extent the EU’s activity as a normative actor included gender equality dimension encompassing both ‘diagnosis’ and ‘prognosis’ sides of the issue, what constituted gender equality promotion, as well as to what extent it was prioritized.

### **Two decades of cooperation in post-Soviet era: first programmes and changing circumstances**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, already in the early 1990s, one could find in Russia a nascent network of feminist organizations that attempted to tackle various issues related to gender equality and women’s rights in Russia, such as political rights, domestic violence, income gap, unemployment and others. Being a civil society initiative, these feminist organizations lacked financial resources and therefore were in need of support which was mainly provided by the international actors (Gradszkova, 2017). In this way, right after the collapse of the USSR, the European Union launched development programmes in Russia and, together with other international organizations, such as the Eurasia Foundation, MacArthur and Ford Foundations, Global Foundation for Women and others, it became an important source of support for the nascent Russian civil society and its agenda, making it possible for them to survive and grow amid the hardships of the economic crisis of 1990s. Undoubtedly, such cooperation quickly began to receive harsh criticisms in Russia as a form of intervention from abroad ‘made in a feminist spirit’ (Saarinen et al., 2014, p.9). The pioneer feminist organizations were therefore widely associated with ‘capitalist countries’ and ‘perestroika’ process (Azhgikhina, 2008; Gradszkova, 2020).

The main instrument of the EU’s interaction with women’s rights movement in Russia during these years was the programme of Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) which was initiated in 1991. The overarching purpose of the programme was the assistance to the newly independent post-Soviet states in their transition to the democratic rule and market-based economies, private ownership and pluralism (European Commission,

1992). In this line, via TACIS framework, the EU provided its know-how and expertise, involving national political elites in the decision-making process, as well as engaged in cooperation and provided funding to the developing actors of civil society (European Commission, 1992). Although the initial emphasis of the programme was largely put on transition to market economy rather than development of civil society, the importance of human rights and democracy development has been explicitly recognized during the subsequent years as well (Klitsounova, 2008). For these purposes, the EU established various mechanisms of cooperation, comprising programmes to be conducted on a national level on the basis of Multiannual Indicative Programmes, regional level and programmes targeting particular groups – thus, for example, the EU launched the LIEN Programme which was supposed to give an impetus for development of cooperation between European and Russian NGOs (Raik, 2006).

At the same time, although TACIS policy framework and TACIS-based programmes contained some references to women's rights and importance of equal opportunities, they were rather sporadic and no particular attention was paid to the necessity of gender mainstreaming and gender equality issues, which was clearly reflected on practice (Particip, 2003). Overall, women's rights were not given special priority within the EU's strategy in Russia during these years and were largely considered as a part of a broader human rights agenda (Gradszkova, 2017). Therefore, although the EU's support contributed to the development of Russian women's rights movement of 1990s, the EU's institutions in this matter were not as influential as other international organizations, such as Ford Foundation, MacArthur or American Bar Association which had a particular focus on women's rights (Gradszkova, 2017).

In parallel, during these years, the EU developed the overall framework for its cooperation with Russia which resulted in signing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1994. The Agreement entered in force in 1997 and, being amended and renewed, until nowadays constitutes the legal basis of cooperation between Russia and the European Union (EUR-lex, 1997). The Agreement largely reflected the EU's general vision of its neighbourhood policy and explicitly stressed the importance of human rights which were supposed to serve as a core element of the partnership. Thus, the Agreement emphasizes the 'paramount importance of the rule of law and respect for human rights, particularly those of minorities' and confirms the parties' 'respect for democratic principles and human rights as defined in particular in the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris for a new Europe'

(EUR-lex, 1997). At the same time, the Agreement was not conditionality-based, rather being an example of 'soft coordination' and did not contain any binding provisions in this respect.

Furthermore, in 1997, the EU launched in Russia the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), a project of the European Parliament that had been initiated three years beforehand. By this time, the first few years of EU's cooperation with Russia within new framework and programmes, namely, TACIS which had been functioning for more than five years already, brought the first results, making the EU policy-makers review the strategies in use. In particular, it became clear that the existing mechanisms of cooperation did not suffice to bring any substantial changes in terms of situation with human rights in Russia and necessitated a more intense and close cooperation with civil society rather than on governmental level (Klitsounova, 2008). In this context, the EIDHR was supposed to offer a greater support to local NGOs and develop a focus on particular areas within the human rights field. Importantly, the EIDHR became a unique instrument for the EU to have an impact on human rights situation without a need of any government's approval of its support, which meant that, if needed, the EU enabled itself to act even in opposition to a government (Klitsounova, 2008). In subsequent years, after the programme was launched, the European Commission highlighted the necessity to mainstream gender equality in all the actions within the EIDHR (European Commission, 2001). At the same time, although some of the EIDHR country-based guidelines for Russia indeed required the applicants to include in the projects' design an explanation of how it would influence the situation of women's and children's needs (European Commission, 2006), most of them referred to gender equality only as to a 'value-added element' for one of the project assessment criteria (see, for example: European Commission, 2008, p. 17).

Thus, thanks to international assistance provided to a different extent by international organizations, the pioneer feminist organizations expanded their activities over the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as became more sensitive to the local context and demands rather than following the mainstream international gender equality agenda promoted by the donor organizations (McIntosh Sundstrom, 2006). Due to the enhanced international attention, Russian women's organizations were involved in various international conferences and trainings for NGOs and closely cooperated with a range of research centres (Salmenniemi, 2008). Overall, democratization processes taking place in Russia and open cooperation with Western countries created a fruitful ground for the activity of NGOs over these years until the early 2000s, when their activity became particularly visible. Probably, one of the most important outcomes brought about during these years was

the project of the first law on gender equality in Russia, which fairly was a breakthrough at that time (Federal Law, 2003). In 2003, the Russian Parliament initiated the discussions on the draft of the law and, after the first round of discussions which was successful, was supposed to be further discussed on the next stage of legislative process. However, due to changed political conjuncture, it was almost not discussed in the subsequent 15 years, until it was definitely rejected by the State Duma as ‘no more up-to-date’ (Shumilina, 2017; TASS, 2018).

The gender equality law of 2003 became the apogee of reviviscence of civil activism on women’s rights and enhanced international assistance to Russian organizations, which was caused by multiple reasons. The situation started to change gradually after a few years after the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s first presidency, which was mainly influenced by oil price crisis at the end of 2000s and unsuccessful modernization (Gradszkova, 2000). During these years, the first premises of rise of authoritarianism emerged and were followed by worsening of the relations with European Union and the US (Kosto & Blakkerud, 2016). The new policies weakened the influence of Russian NGOs, feminist organizations included, dissolved the recently established bodies within the state dealing with women’s rights issues and suspended the initiatives of the previous years. In this line, new legislation on NGOs was adopted in 2006, which restricted the possibility of obtaining foreign funding, as well as imposed tougher conditions for registration of such organizations (Federal Law, 2006; Gradszkova, 2017). All things considered, the international actors previously supporting the Russian NGOs, became much less interested in cooperation with many of them leaving Russia during these years. The European Union, in its turn, similarly experienced a sort of disillusionment and decrease in interest which was additionally connected to the Eastern enlargement taking place at the same time (Gradszkova, 2020). Over these years, the focus of EU’s attention shifted to policies within the Eastern Neighbourhood which had a much more promising setting for cooperation.

Summarizing the results of more than a decade of cooperation that took place after the collapse of the USSR, it can be concluded that the EU institutions, along with other international organizations, played an important role in boosting the development of the Russian women’s rights organizations, even though support given by the EU with respect to women’s rights agenda was neither as generous as it was the case of other actors operating in Russia during these years nor specifically aimed at tackling the women’s issues. As can be seen from the core documents on EU-Russia cooperation of these years, such as the PCA agreement and TACIS policy framework, women’s rights were merely a part of a general

human rights agenda and were not given specific attention. Last but not least, given a more complicated political setting due to authoritarian tendencies in Russia, as well as unsatisfactory results of the first years of the EU's attempts to transfer its norms and influence the human rights situation, the EU's strategy gradually shifted towards a direct and more comprehensive support of NGOs and civil society at large – particularly, it was the case of EIDHR programme which enabled the EU to cooperate with Russian NGOs without governmental approval.

Overall, the results of the EU's action for support of Russian human rights NGOs, gender equality ones included, met harsh criticisms. Over more than a decade of assistance to NGOs, the EU has largely failed to use its potential of transferring European norms and values to Russian organizations. In this way, the EU's actions were criticized for the lack of coherence and clear strategy, representing 'ad-hoc project-based financing rather than a coherent policy of building NGO capacity to extend Europeanisation into Russia' (Klitsounova, 2008, p.17). Moreover, across a wide variety of programmes, there were no clear priorities defined across different areas of the human rights field. Finally, intending to exercise a stricter control over the programmes' funding, the EU complexified the requirements and the application process, which became a serious obstacle to obtain financial support for a lot of small NGOs that lacked experience and expert knowledge in dealing with the EU mechanisms (Klitsounova, 2008). Thus, bigger NGOs that proved to be better prepared for international cooperation and knew how to operationalize the EU agenda were the main beneficiaries of the EU assistance projects.

### **Authoritarian turn and re-traditionalization in Russia: shrinking channels of cooperation and the EU's gender equality promotion**

At the beginning of 2010s, the human rights agenda and importance of advancing democratic values was largely integrated in the core EU documents, as well as in its strategies of cooperation with Russia in particular (see, for example: EEAS, 2007). In this way, the EU attempted to make changes in the format of the EU-Russia Consultations on human rights, regular meetings between the political authorities, by involving a bigger number of Russian government's representatives, as well as to organize such meetings in a less formal way – namely, involving Russian and international NGOs (Klitsounova, 2008). The initiative was not met enthusiastically by the Russian officials and finally was not implemented, although regular meetings continued to take place for several years until they were frozen with the Crimean crisis in 2014. During these years, the EU also actively fostered cooperation between

its institutions and Russian NGOs working on human rights, continued to provide financial support via the previously mentioned instruments, such as EIDHR and sought to include human rights NGOs in decision making process by developing their cooperation with local authorities – previously existing TACIS-based programme LIEN has been replaced by the Institution Building Partnership Programme (IBPP).

In the same way as a broader human rights agenda, at the late 2000s, gender equality had already been taken on board by the EU policy-makers as a full-fledged area of external action, resulting in the adoption of the first Gender Action Plan (GAP I) for 2010-2015, which constituted a strategy for advancing gender equality worldwide, beyond the enlargement countries and the EU neighbourhood countries involved in enhanced cooperation (Council of the European Union, 2010). In this line, in the first years of GAP's implementation, the EU started to monitor gender mainstreaming results in projects conducted by the EU Delegation in Russia, highlighting the areas for further development (EU, 2013). The second gender action plan, GAP II, which was adopted in 2015, reaffirmed and strengthened the EU's commitment to women's empowerment in third countries and envisaged a 'systematic monitoring and accountability framework against which to measure progress on gender equality and girls' and women's rights and empowerment in third countries', as well as obliged the EU actors to produce sex- and age-disaggregated information about their activities in yearly reports (Council of the EU, 2015, p. 5). The GAP II included specific thematic priorities, such as women's physical and psychological integrity, economic and social rights, voice and participation (Council of the EU, 2015). The three thematic priorities were supposed to be promoted by the EU actors abroad, however, there was no obligation for them to report against all the objectives. Moreover, although gender equality promotion was included as one of the policy priorities for cooperation with third countries already in 2010, the EU Delegation in Russia did not provide any reports on its activities in this respect until 2017, which reveals a lack of supervision and control from the EU side (EU, 2016). When a more detailed account on the Delegation's activity in relation to gender became available with the 2018 report, the number of activities put into practice and themes covered was a rather limited success in comparison with other post-Soviet states. In 2018, the EU Delegation reported to have conducted only four activities, all of which focused on 'physical and psychological integrity of women' dimension, thematic priority B of the GAP II (EU, 2018).

In parallel, at the beginning of 2010, political conjuncture in Russia underwent dramatic changes. Together with more and more manifest authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin's rule of the late 2000s, these years became a period of re-masculinization of the country and rise of



propaganda for traditional values after liberalization in 1990s: Russian authorities increasingly employed masculine rhetoric in their discourses on national identity, making the president a ‘cultural icon of national masculinity’ in order to legitimize power (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 32). This was also accompanied by the adoption of a range of new laws that significantly restricted conditions for activity of human rights NGOs and negatively affected their cooperation with international actors which for many of them were a vital source of funding. Firstly, continuing the logic of the 2006 law on NGOs, in 2012, despite the strong opposition of NGOs, higher education and wide range of other organizations, Russian parliament adopted a law on so-called ‘foreign agents’ further limiting the possibility to receive foreign funding and making it a priori a negatively seen practice (Federal Law, 2012). According to the law, all non-profit organizations conducting political activity in Russia and receiving any kind of assistance from abroad – from other states, organizations or even foreign citizens – were supposed to register as functioning as ‘foreign agents’ and call themselves publicly in this way (Federal Law, 2012). Secondly, the situation became more complicated with the adoption of another bill in 2013 known as ‘gay propaganda law’, which was supposed to prevent homosexuality from being established as a ‘norm’ in Russian society (Federal Law, 2013). Thus, the new law criminalized the propaganda of ‘non-traditional sexual relationship’ among minors as negating family values, ‘raising interest’ in such relationships and forming a ‘wrong idea about traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships as socially equal’ (Federal Law, 2013). Thirdly, in 2015, existing legislation on NGOs was completed by a new law on ‘foreign and international undesirable organizations’: according to the new bill, Russian judicial authorities were enabled to consider ‘undesirable’ any foreign or international non-governmental organization that ‘poses a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state’ (Federal Law, 2015). Consequently, once declared ‘undesired’, such an organization is supposed to stop operating in Russia immediately. Finally, the effect of these laws was coupled with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was followed by a significant degradation of relations between Russia and Western countries.

All things considered, the above-mentioned laws and crisis in Russia’s relations on the international arena considerably shrank the space for civil activism and levelled the achievements of previous years in terms of human rights. Thus, it concerned the situation with the freedom of expression, assembly, as well as religion and belief. In subsequent years, Russia faced a massive retreat of international donors cooperating with Russian civil society organizations, depriving them of vital sources of financial support. Already between 2012 and

2015, the number of registered NGOs decreased by 33% (EEAS, 2016). Following the 2015 law on NGOs, already in 2017 there were 11 organizations declared ‘undesirable’; in March 2020, the European Endowment for Democracy, an NGO created and funded by the EU for supporting pro-democracy movements in Russia and independent media, was put on the list (EEAS, 2017; TASS, 2020). Expectedly, most of cooperation initiatives implemented on the governmental level between Russia and the EU, including those related to the human rights agenda, were suspended. In this context, the EU’s action in terms of gender equality promotion in Russia concentrated around three following channels: assistance to human rights NGOs, public diplomacy actions and fostering the implementation of gender equality initiatives via multilateral cooperation with participation of other international organizations.

*EU’s assistance to NGOs as actors of policy change: gender equality in the focus of the EIDHR and CSOs programme*

In parallel with rise of authoritarian tendencies in Russia at the beginning of 2010s and the adoption of restrictive laws, the EU’s democracy promotion strategy has been renewed in light of the increased influence of citizens’ movements all over the world and their role in engendering political and social change. In this way, the EU recognized the importance of engaging in cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs), which were increasingly seen as ‘agents for change’ (European Commission, 2012, p.4). As a core idea of the new strategic approach, the EU opted for an enhanced cooperation with various CSOs in different regions of the world in order ‘to build stronger democratic processes and accountability systems and to achieve better development outcomes’ (European Commission, 2012, p.4). Within this framework, the EU continued the implementation of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), as well as launched in 2014 the Civil Society Organizations programme (CSO programme). The two programmes represent a ‘bottom-up’ approach to democracy promotion and encourage organized civil society initiatives to bring changes in their countries, becoming a particularly important means of cooperation in times of political tensions and impotence of state-to-state diplomacy, which was the case of the EU-Russia relations after 2014 crisis.

Designed as a means of bringing democratic change, strengthening the rule of law and respect for human rights in third countries in line with the EU’s policies, the EIDHR initiative was inter alia a source of financial support for gender equality projects in Russia, however, for years no specific emphasis on this policy area was introduced in the core official documents. Despite gender equality being recognized as one of EIDHR’s priorities already in early 2000s,

for more than fifteen subsequent years women's rights and gender equality appeared in country-based guidelines for Russia either as merely one of possible areas of grant applicants' activities listed in the 'inclusiveness and pluralism' section, either as a minor requirement mentioned in the evaluation descriptors (see, for example: European Commission, 2013, 2014b). In 2014, the European Commission adopted a new regulation on the EIDHR for the first time after 2006, which constituted an updated framework for action worldwide. Thus, in comparison to the previous regulation, the new legislation made a greater emphasis on gender equality issues over the whole document as one of the core components in the focus of the EU's assistance to the third countries (EUR-lex, 2014). At the same time, when it comes to the guidelines for Russian organizations, only since 2017 the country-based EIDHR documents explicitly encouraged the applicants to give specific attention to the issues related to women's rights and gender equality, gave explanations on the existing room for action, as well as obliged all the selected projects to report against SMART sex-disaggregated indicators in accordance to the Gender Action Plan 2016-2020 (European Commission, 2017a, 2019b).

Another EU instrument, the Civil Society Organizations programme initiated in 2014, became a successor of another programme, the 'Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development' (NSA programme) which was implemented between 2007 and 2013. The NSA programme's objectives were similar to those of the EIDHR, however, the programme was aimed specifically at empowering civil society organizations and emphasized the importance of their cooperation with the stakeholders, which would allow the most vulnerable groups of population to have an impact on decision-making process (EEAS, 2016). The NSA programme guidelines did not include specific sections for women rights and gender equality projects or gender-related requirements, however, strengthening of women's NGOs was among the areas of programme's activity. In this way, within the framework of the NSA programme, the EU realized a two-year project in partnership with 'ANNA' organization, a Russian NGO working on prevention of domestic violence (EEAS, 2016). As a result, five women's NGOs developed as regional resource centres in a range of Russian cities (Nizhny Novgorod, Tomsk, Izhevsk and others). Also, the programme resulted in construction of a range of women's refuges and the first private shelter for the victims of domestic violence and included awareness-raising activities. (EEAS, 2016, p.41).

In the same way, with the CSO programme, the EU sought to strengthen the non-governmental actors and amplify their contribution to policy change in Russia by encouraging them to ensure transparency of governance and accountability of stakeholders, to engage in partnership with local authorities in elaboration and implementation of social policies,

remaining independent actors, as well as to promote sustainable growth and prevent unlawful practices (European Commission, 2014a). Along with children, migrants, persons with disabilities, women constituted a target group of the first Call for proposals of the CSO programme, thus, the grant applicants had to ensure the inclusion of these target groups in their projects (European Commission, 2014a). In comparison to the first funding period of the CSO programme, the guidelines for second one which covered the 2018-2020 span of time, were explicitly aligned with the second EU Gender Action Plan (GAP II) and a new framework of gender equality and women's empowerment in EU's external relations, as well as confirmed the commitment to the National Strategy in the Interests of Women for 2017-2022 adopted by the Russian government (European Commission, 2019a). Under the second funding period, the CSO programme guidelines for Russia introduced two large thematic sections ('lots') for the applicants depending on particular objectives of the programme. For the first time, the guidelines decoupled women from the other disadvantaged social groups (disabled, children, elderly and others), making one out of three objectives of the Call for proposals entirely dedicated to the empowerment of women and protection of their rights (European Commission, 2019). Such objectives were obligatory to cover depending on the lot: in this way, the applicants for the second lot were obliged to include women's empowerment activities in the project. As stated in the guidelines, the EU supported activities enhancing women's participation in the labour market, their access to resources, equal pay and decent work conditions (European Commission, 2019).

Thus, despite a range of differences in programmes' priorities, the logic of both instruments – EIDHR and CSO programme – is largely the same: non-state actors receiving the EU's financial support are supposed to act with a goal of diffusing the European views on governance, democratic reforms and human rights and ultimately shaping the perceptions of those among Russian population accordingly. Both programmes used the procedure of so-called 'calls for proposals' which defined the EU's priorities in Russia for each funding period, the forms of organizations' activities and set particular conditions for accessing the EU funds. In this way, on the one hand, the EU supports Russian activists and ensures that the democracy promotion activities are conducted by the local actors, and, at the same time, with conditional aid, the EU promotes policies which are aligned with its policy agenda and priorities as defined in its own strategies and policy documents, thus supporting the 'right' projects and organizations that are able to assume and implement these policies. In other words, the calls for proposals represent a form of EU's control over the recipient organizations that, in their turn, are in critical need of support and the way in which they put

their projects in practice. Therefore, theoretically, the policy conducted by the EU in relation to Russian non-governmental actors as ‘agents of change’ a channel of diffusion and transfer of European norms and values to Russian society, is in consonance with the conceptualization of the EU as a normative power.

At the same time, in practice, until 2017, gender equality has almost not been mainstreamed into both assistance programmes and did not constitute a separate full-fledged area of action. Moreover, a range of more general limiting factors for the EU’s action as a normative power can be named. First of all, for such a transfer of norms to occur properly, there is a crucial need for the recipients of the EU’s assistance to be able to challenge the status quo and authoritarian practices (Kurki, 2011). According to the EU’s conception of NGOs as ‘agents of change’, it is assumed that civil society organizations have an adequate room for action in order to engender policy change. Nevertheless, it is often not the case in the context of authoritarian regimes, including Russia with its shrinking space for civil society action after the adoption of restrictive laws and a general authoritarian turn during the third presidential mandate of Vladimir Putin. Thus, all things considered, Russian civil society organizations do not have the same influence as they used to have at the beginning of 2000s. The second limitation is the reverse side of the EU’s practice of imposition of particular agenda that the NGOs have to assume in order to increase their chances of receiving funding: priority areas of action indicated in the EU’s calls for proposals may not necessarily coincide with the actual issues existing within a country’s context, which may lead to a situation where the organizations financed by the EU lose credibility among population (Klitsounova, 2008). Third factor is linked to the EU increasingly employing market logic when it comes to its cooperation with non-state actors: in calls for proposals the NGOs are required to possess management capacities and be able to make their projects ‘measurable’ and ‘effective’ (see, for example: European Commission, 2019b; Kurki, 2011). Although it makes more feasible the control over the organizations and increases their accountability, it requires them to act as ‘entrepreneurs’ and be able to operationalize the EU criteria, while many organizations, especially regional ones, lack the necessary knowledge for it and, thus, a priori find themselves disadvantaged. Finally, continuing the ‘market’ argument, the way of awarding grants employed by the EU fosters severe competition between the existing NGOs instead of favorizing cooperation between them (Klitsounova, 2008). Thus, in a longer term, such a strategy may be counterproductive, given than the potential influence of the organizations acting separately decreases.

*People-to-people action: what place for gender equality?*

Another important channel of European action towards Russia addressing the issues of human rights and gender equality in particular is public diplomacy. Since Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent crisis in EU-Russia relations, the EU recognized the crucial role of people-to-people action in a situation where in the context of sanctions Russian public opinion about the EU degraded substantially (see, for example: European Commission, 2017b). The core actor currently operating in this area is the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF) established in 2011 as a platform connecting in cooperation Russian and European civil society organizations. As stated in its Charter, the Forum is supposed to ‘contribute to the integration between Russia and the EU, based on common values of pluralistic democracy, rule of law, human rights and social justice’, as well as to articulate common positions and influence governmental policies and relations between decision-makers (CSF, 2011, p.1). Besides support of democracy and human rights, the Forum’s activity covers a wide range of areas, such as climate change and sustainable development, digital inequality and technological development, free media and others (CSF, 2020b). Although the Charter of the CSF highlights the Forum’s independence from the governments, the initiative is largely supported by the EU with annual grants as a part of Partnership Instrument: in this way, in 2016, the Forum received 1,2 million euros of financial support from the EU (EEAS, 2016).

Confirming the Forum’s commitment to the promotion of human rights and tackling social inequalities, the CSF’s strategic documents do not contain any references to gender equality or women’s rights as such. Over the years of Forum’s activity, gender equality has not constituted a separate thematic section in the programmes for discussion of the General Assembly, the highest decision-making body of the CSF held yearly, as well as has not been mainstreamed in other thematic sections (see, for example: CSF, 2017, 2018). In the same way, gender equality dimension is not given attention at all in so-called State of Civil Society Reports produced every year by the CSF, a study supposed to provide the member organizations of the Forum with a systematized evaluation of civil society development in Russia and EU countries (see, for example: CSF 2019, 2020a). At the same time, gender-related activities appear across some of the programmes organized within the Forum along with human rights and democracy promotion issues.

One of such CSF programmes which highlighted gender equality and women’s rights as one of its main areas of action is the EU-Russia Legal Dialogue which has been established in 2015 as a platform for exchange of legal practices and approaches towards civil societies in Russia and the EU. One of the core Dialogue’s documents, the booklet ‘Voices from Civil Society’ which reflected a joint position on Dialogue’s priorities and outlined the possible

formats for future actions, included gender equality under particular thematic unit, focusing on the issues of marital rape and domestic violence (CSF, 2015). Another programme with a manifest commitment to gender equality promotion is the Study Tours programme which is focused on a sort of professional trainings for the CSF members' in order to strengthen their organizational skills and practical knowledge by organizing workshops, study trips, exchanges and networking activities. The establishment of the Study Tours entailed formalization of a range of working and expert groups bringing together the member organizations around their areas of activity: in this way, a working group on gender equality has been created within the programme that brings together the experts from both Russia and the EU in promotion and protection of gender rights (CSF, 2020c).

Another instrument of EU's people-to-people activity is the 'Public Diplomacy. EU and Russia project' project initiated in 2017 which, in a similar way as the Civil Society Forum, offers various platforms to the Russian and European NGOs, experts and policy-makers in order to achieve a better understanding of persisting issues in bilateral relations and exchange effective practices for tackling common problems. Thus, within the framework of the EU-Russia Public Diplomacy project was created the EU-Russia Expert Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN) for exchange of expert views and opinions, as well as were organized study visits, participation of the EU speakers at Russian public events and roundtables. Gender equality was taken on board by the programme together with other topics 'representing core values of the European Union', such as climate change and ethics of journalism (EEAS, 2019b, p. 4). In this way, the EU-Russia Public Diplomacy project launched the organization of events on gender roles, such as the international symposium 'Women, Men and the Brave New World – Gender Roles in Russia and in the EU' and the conference 'Preventing and Combatting Gender Violence' both of which took place in 2018 (EEAS, 2019b, p. 4).

Thus, assessing public diplomacy projects as the EU's instrument of influencing women's rights and gender equality situation in Russia, it can be clearly seen that although there is a range of gender-related activities conducted as a part of these projects, which appeared mostly after 2017, the EU's action with regard to the promotion of gender equality agenda has a number of significant flaws. Most importantly, as follows from the analysis of the legislation that constitutes a framework for all the projects implemented within the public diplomacy area, such as the regulation on the Partnership Instrument for cooperation with third countries (EUR-lex, 2014a), as well as the core documents establishing those projects, gender is not mainstreamed in people-to-people action as a full-fledged area of activity at a very basic level with gender equality issues considered a part of human rights agenda by default. In other

words, via these projects the EU does not position itself as a gender equality promoter in the first place. Therefore, as can be seen from the documents, there is no obligation of including gender equality dimension in all of the initiatives put into practice and, consequently, the gender-related activities prove to be very sporadic and do not take place systematically.

### *Multilateral cooperation for gender equality*

In a complicated context where the vast majority of political cooperation programmes previously existing between Russia and the EU have been frozen, multilateral cooperation became the most appropriate way for the EU to maintain dialogue with the Russian authorities on the issues of interest. During this period of post-2014 political tensions, the joint project ‘Cooperation on the implementation of the Russian Federation National Action Strategy for Women (2017-2022)’ became a prominent example of such interaction. The project reunited in cooperation the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Russian Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, as well as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Within the framework of its Partnership Instrument, the EU provided a large share of funding for the project’s realization.

The National Strategy for Action in the Interests of Women for 2017-2022 adopted by the Russian government was developed in cooperation with local NGOs, think tanks, public organizations and international actors. The strategy set the main policy directions in relation to ‘implementation of the principle of equal rights and freedoms for men and women and creation of equal opportunities’ (Russian Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2017). As indicated in the document, the strategy focused on the issues of equal pay, medical care for women, the empowerment of women and domestic violence (Government of the Russian Federation, 2017). The strategy implied a two-phased implementation: firstly, the development of mechanisms of putting the reforms into practice in 2017-2018, and secondly, the implementation of reforms in 2019-2022, to the first stage of which applied the joint programme of the Council of Europe and the EU.

The goal of the joint project was to raise the awareness and enhance the level of expertise and competencies of the governing bodies and institutions involved in the implementation of the Strategy in order to increase the effectiveness of the reforms. In this way, the cooperation project provided technical assistance in conducting activities within various thematic areas of the Strategy, such as prevention of domestic violence and increasing women’s political and public participation, as well as ensured the compliance of these activities with international commitments of Russia, such as the document ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda



for Sustainable Development’ and the ‘Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the United Nations’ (COE, 2018).

A great number of activities within the project covered the issue of domestic violence. Thus, within the framework of ‘Prevention of social ill-being of and violence against women’ sub-project was conducted a research project that analyzed Russian legislative practices of the prevention of and combatting the problem of violence against women. At a practical level, informative and analytical materials on the issue were distributed among the Russian local authorities in 2018 as a part of their professional training. In the same line, vocational trainings developing the necessary skills for tackling the issue of domestic violence were provided for the officers of correctional system (COE, 2019).

Importantly, the activities within the joint project included the organization of large-scale conferences and workshops involving a wide range of stakeholders. Thus, for instance, in April 2019 and in February 2020, a workshop ‘Inter-agency cooperation: models of preventing and combatting violence against women in the regions’ was organized in Astrakhan’ and then in Ekaterinburg, which reunited the representatives from the Council of Europe, Russian government officials, the representatives of the State Duma, ombudspersons, deputy heads of regions, NGOs and scholars. The workshop’s participants exchanged the best practices of tackling the domestic violence issue at a regional level and had an opportunity to discuss the inter-agency cooperation models. In the same way, consultation meetings with the representatives of NGOs, such as Centre ‘ANNA’, ‘Women’s View’, ‘W-Project’ and others, were organized in February 2019, which enabled the civil society activists to interact with international experts from the Netherlands, Sweden and Bulgaria (COE, 2019). Finally, in June 2019, a training on ‘How to report the topics of violence against women’ was organized for the Russian media managers and journalists from the regions, covering the issues of gender stereotypes, gender-neutral language and many others.

A range of activities has been organized in support of the empowerment of women. In this line, within the framework of the project, in October 2019, was organized a conference ‘Taking action to improve women’s participation in public and political decision-making’, which, as the above-mentioned events, was marked by an active participation of public authorities and high-level parliamentary officials. Finally, the project’s activities in this area included the mentoring events aimed at exchanging experiences between female leaders and young activists: overall, more than 300 women and 92 men attended the trainings (COE, 2020).

Although it is still premature to draw conclusions regarding the project, overall, such format of cooperation involving international organizations that are politically ‘neutral’ and enjoy a greater degree of trust from the Russian authorities, such as the Council of Europe, proves to be the only channel through which the EU is enabled to directly engage in cooperation with Russian public authorities and thus have a more direct impact on policy-making. In comparison to the activities conducted as a part of the EU’s people-to-people action, such as the Civil Society Forum events which are very rarely attended by public authorities, the joint project has a much bigger potential in attracting high-level officials. Although through these projects the EU does not have the same power over participants as it is the case of NGOs assistance programmes, the EU, as one of the core financial donors, is still exerting influence on the policy agenda. At the same time, as can be seen from the example of the joint project with the Council of Europe, the greater involvement of governmental officials often imposes significant limitations on a range of issues discussed: in this way, project’s activities covering the issue of domestic violence largely prevailed over the empowerment of women which was as well declared a priority of the project; other pressing issues in Russia, such as LGBT rights, were not covered at all, as well as the term of ‘gender equality’ was not mentioned. Interestingly, very little information on the joint project can be found on the EU websites, and, in the same way, the EU’s participation in the project is almost not mentioned in Russian sources, which speaks loudly about cross-cutting tensions in the bilateral relations and conjuncture for cooperation. Overall, although such cooperation format shrinks in a way the room for action, in the existing setting of cooperation, it is probably the only way accessible to the EU to stimulate accountability and policy responses from the Russian authorities.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the EU's role of a gender equality policy entrepreneur in its relations with third countries and understand to what extent the EU actually behaves as a gender normative power on the international arena, as positioned by the EU policymakers. In contrast to the existing studies which mainly focused on European development policies and the EU's action towards its neighbourhood, this research paper draws on the case of Russia which represents a challenging setting for the EU as a normative actor.

As follows from the overview of the EU-Russia cooperation in the first two decades after the collapse of the USSR, at the very early stages, the EU sought to embed the human rights dimension in its relations with post-1991 Russia and, together with other international actors, played an important role in maintaining and enhancing Russian civil society activism, including development of women's organizations. At the same time, in the first fifteen years after 1991 which were an unprecedented window of opportunity for policy changes and transfer of European values, women's rights and gender equality issues were not given any specific attention by the EU, being dissolved in the general human rights agenda, as it was the case of the PCA agreement constituting the legal framework for the EU-Russia cooperation and TACIS policy framework. Moreover, the human rights policy goals were blurred – neither in governmental agreements, nor in its civil society assistance programmes, the EU defined priority fields and goals, thus acting rather on an ad-hoc basis. Therefore, in line with the existing studies, I conclude that over these years, the EU has largely failed to promote gender equality and engender any policy change. With the adoption of the new laws since mid-2000s and authoritarian turn of Russia, the room for cooperation and policy change shrunk considerably, and the EU's support for human rights and gender equality as a part of it largely shifted to the NGOs assistance, public diplomacy and multilateral cooperation.

The findings suggest that post-2012 EU's actions through the three above-mentioned channels of cooperation were mainly focused on support of NGOs which, given substantial changes in political climate in Russia and in the EU-Russia relations, were supposed to act as 'agents of change' and became the main way for the EU to project its influence, which was done by providing conditional financial aid. However, when it comes to gender policy entrepreneurship, gender equality has hardly been among the key policy fields across all the three above-mentioned directions. In this way, the guidelines for participation in competition for the EU grants (EIDHR, CSO programme) did not include gender equality as a priority area until 2017 and did not envisage any separate calls targeting specifically gender equality-

related projects, while already in 2010 the GAP I recognized it as one of the core fields in the EU's cooperation with the third countries. The same applies to the activities conducted by the EU actors abroad – until 2017, the EU Delegation in Russia did not issue any reports on its action for gender equality at all, which speaks loudly about the lack of supervision and evaluation. Moreover, as follows from the 2018 Report, the number of actions, as well as the variety of issues covered, significantly fell behind other post-Soviet states. In the same line, even though the EU's public diplomacy towards Russia (such as EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, Public Diplomacy. EU and Russia project) includes actions on gender equality, this is still not done on a regular basis, as well as the core documents related to public diplomacy projects are not gender mainstreamed. The third channel, multilateral cooperation, was the one that influenced the most the real decision-making and involved in participation Russian authorities, however, due to the crisis in the EU-Russia relations, it included only one large-scale project where the EU's role was almost made invisible by both Russian and EU sides.

Overall, although gender equality has been increasingly integrated in the EU strategies as one of the core elements of cooperation with third countries, the transposition of the declared policy priorities to country-related activities has been slow and incomplete – gender equality promotion has not become a full-fledged area of the EU's action abroad. As follows from the case of cooperation with Russia, the EU's potential to cause gender policy change is significantly limited by the fact that gender equality is still not decoupled from the human rights agenda and is poorly mainstreamed in the core cooperation documents, as well as by the absence of a clearly defined systematic approach and strategy that would be mainstreamed in all areas of the EU's activity in the country. Consequently, it can be concluded that even though the EU exercises influence on the non-governmental actors operating in Russia, gender equality does not constitute one of the key pillars of the EU's action, which is at odds with the core idea of a normative power as understood by Manners. In line with Chappel's and Guerrina's analysis of gender mainstreaming in the EEAS, despite the EU's self-positioning as a *normative gender actor*, for the moment, the EU is rather a *gendered normative actor*, strategically employing gender equality narrative to promote the organization's interests.

This study has provided a foundation for further research on the EU's action for gender equality promotion in third countries which are not part of partnership or development programmes and Russia in particular, which has been scarcely covered by the scholarly literature so far. In particular, further research is needed in order to develop a better understanding of the perspective of state- and non-state actors' involved in cooperation with

the EU on gender equality and their perception of the EU's action, as well as to deeper analyze how this action is converted into real policy and legislative changes. Further research would not only bring a better understanding of the EU as a normative actor, but also would help policy makers to improve the existing mechanisms of cooperation, better adapt policies to the local context and engender policy change.

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