

Book review | Recenzija

Gender Equality on the Grand Tour around the Baltic Sea

Eva Blomberg, Yulia Gradszkova, Ylva Waldemarson and Alina Žvinklienė.
*Gender Equality on a Grand Tour. Politics and Institutions – the Nordic Council,
Sweden, Lithuania and Russia.* Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017. ISSN 0074-8684,
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The basic title of a recently published book *Gender Equality on a Grand Tour* inevitably will attract the attention of those readers who were raised in love of humanities and of history particularly.

In the 17–18th centuries, the Grand Tour, first of all, referred to an educational rite of passage of wealthy young British nobility and gentry in search of the roots of Western art and culture and inspiration in the available legacy of antiquity in Italy and, in rare cases, in Greece still under the Ottoman rule. Apart from personal fulfilment of curiosity and learning as well as the establishment of social prestige, the Grand Tour not only inspired the creation of intellectual Western ethnocentrism based on the development of national stereotypes, but also led to a dynamic knowledge transfer between the advanced North and backward South (Moe 2002) (later the West and East/Rest) of Europe and the world. In the course of time, the Grand Tour had been democratized, itineraries were extended and finally transformed into contemporary oversea travels for “must see” and, presumably, “must know.”

The ambition of the book is stimulation of the currently low political interest in gender equality issues in terms of equality between women and men in the context of the EU and its regions. The book focuses on the process of contemporary institutionalization of gender equality in the Baltic Sea region that lies in the relative periphery of the mainstream academic interests.

The diffusion of gender equality ideas and its consequences on national gender equality politics due to cooperation of Nordic countries with the Baltic States and Northwest Russia are the basic rationale for this academic inquiry. The rationale for the chosen cases of Lithuania, Russia and Sweden is justified by different political and socio-economic contexts of these countries during the launching of the first national gender equality policies and the creation of the first institutions to control the implementation of the *rule of law* in gender equality field. The Swedish invention of the institution of the (Equal Opportunities) Ombudsman based on the principle of separation of power that gives an individual possibility for complaint in case of violated human rights is among main rally points of the analyzed cases.

In fact, the authors invite us to this Grand Baltic Tour for the sake of curiosity – to learn of the roots and patterns of the EU's contemporary gender equality policy. At the same time, the authors promoting the Grand Baltic Tour in the introduction of the book reproduce the main weakness of the historical Grand Tour by constructing national stereotypes based on the North (West)-South (East) divide, fostering self-proclaimed Nordic (Swedish) exceptionalism, imposing Russian backwardness (despite the incorrect identification of Russia as northern European country), and by asking the traditional question "...where Lithuania is?"¹ (p. 1).

The book consists of an introduction dedicated to the overview of research questions and objectives, leading methodology, the state of the art in the field, main findings collectively written by all authors and four following chapters dedicated to the specified cases written separately.

The authors of the book aimed to explore politics of establishment, development and transformation of gender equality institutions and the role of the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers in these processes in the Nordic countries, the former communist countries located in the east of the Baltic Sea region and the northwestern part of Russia. Sweden, Lithuania and the northwestern part of Russia were chosen by authors as case studies.

In her chapter "Gender Equality the Nordic Way. The Nordic Council's and Nordic Council of Ministers' Cooperation with the Baltic States and Northwest Russia in the Political Field of Gender Equality 1999–2010," Ylva Waldemarson (Sweden) shows how the Nordic gender equality model was constructed, preserved and transferred outside the region in the early 1990s during the dissolution of the USSR. Stressing both the attractiveness of the Nordic gender equality model and the role it plays in making institutional changes in the countries under scrutiny as well as other countries,

1 See *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (HBO) on the eve of Brexit, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAgKHSNqxa8>.

Waldemarson also reveals its limitations and concludes that the model that seems coherent in practice is capable of changing the content and adapting to a different or/and changing socioeconomic and cultural context. Flexibility of the Nordic gender equality model means “impossibility to discuss the character of this model, without studying the political *use* of it as well as the context in which it is utilized” (p. 86). The chapters written by Yulia Gradskova and Alina Žvinklienė on the cases of Russia and Lithuania also conclude that the Nordic gender equality model is not easily transportable and adaptable to any cultural and political context.

In her chapter “Political Changes and Gender Equality in the Baltic States: The Case of Lithuania,” Alina Žvinklienė (Lithuania) reveals how gender equality politics were developed and implemented by permanent (re) construction of an adequate gender equality machinery in the Baltic states since 1940, i.e. since the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the USSR. The main conclusion that arises from her inquiry states that gender equality was formally institutionalized in Baltic States during the Soviet times and the process that we observe today is rather reinstitutionalization than institutionalization. However, in Lithuania institutionalized gender equality is based on the binary concept of gender and the broadened concept is far from being institutionalized (p. 168).

In her chapter “I am Just Looking for a Fair Assessment: The Equal Opportunities Ombudsman in Sweden 1980–2008,” Eva Blomberg (Sweden) describes the way the Swedish model that implies cooperation in the labor market between trade unions and employees as a means of guaranteeing generous government welfare provisions hindered for many years the institutionalization of anti-discrimination legislation and the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman Office (p. 14).

Focusing on the case of women’s NGOs in her chapter “Russia—A ‘Difficult Case’ for Gender Equality? The Transnational Politics of Women’s Rights and Northwest Russia: The Case of Nordic-Russian Cooperation,” Yulia Gradskova (Sweden) analyzes how political changes in Russia from democratization in the 1990s to the growing authoritarianism of the late 2000s influenced interpretations of gender equality (p. 16). She concludes that the quite successful institutionalization of gender equality in the 1990s was blocked by growing authoritarianism and lack of motivation to be visible in the European political arena in the mid-2000s (p. 13). Currently, the gender equality is not institutionalized in Russia (p. 315).

It is fair to say that the book explores processes of gender equality institutionalization from a historical perspective and perhaps this fact explains the descriptive character of the book, although sometimes an excessively detailed description of the topic is enriched by the data extracted from

in-depth interviews that help us to understand political processes from the emic perspective.

As authors inform readers in the introductory part of the volume, the theoretical assumptions of the study are based on the theories of institutionalization, political change and transfer of knowledge (p. 4). However, the interpretation of main ideas of the institutionalism approach that constitute the dominant theoretical and empirical framework of the book seems too narrow. The application of the new institutionalism approach in Russia is the case in point: “Russia continues to be one of those post-Communist countries where gender equality is far from institutionalization” (p. 315). In fact, this statement that gender equality is not institutionalized in contemporary Russia does not pay enough attention to the main principles and postulates of the new institutionalism approach; therefore, it contradicts the content of the presented Russian case and, to some degree, the Lithuanian case.

At the same time, the concepts of gender equality, institutions and institutionalization are not clearly formulated in the book and the contemporary structure of Russian gender equality machinery is not sufficiently clarified to explain a “specific” Russian case. If it was done, the outcomes related to institutionalization issues in contemporary Russia might have been adequately formulated and justified. The history of contemporary feminism and feminist scholarship (studies/research) clearly demonstrates how gender-structured culture and society skillfully challenge the formally institutionalized gender equality.

It is a hardly credible assumption that, in the Russian case, the institutionalization of gender equality policy is still conceptualized in a narrow legal context of the adoption of anti-discriminative (equal opportunities) law and the establishment of a separate independent institution, for instance, the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman dealing with possible (gender) discrimination. However, both the analysis of the Swedish case and conclusion of the book support the assumption that gender equality policy is institutionalized via the Ombudsman (p. 221).

Thus, it could be argued that “good-ism”, i.e. stressing the good will of Nordic governmental and non-governmental organizations in the diffusion of ideas of Nordic gender equality is an important feature of the book. Despite critical reflections on the hegemonic aspirations of the Nordic partners in the Baltic Sea region and some ongoing tensions between partners of the Nordic co-operation, the Nordic “good-ism” still predominates in the book. Nonetheless, the authors succeed in conveying a sense of democratic polemics when minority views have the right to be expressed but not adopted and finally the majority ignores them, including the promotion of the Grand

Baltic Tour. It is related, first of all, to the Soviet legacy in contemporary European gender equality politics, particularly in post-Soviet Lithuania and Russia. From the political and social points of view, the inclusion of a reconstructed Soviet template of contemporary gender equality machinery in Lithuania reminds of non-conformist Soviet dissidents who expressed their intellectual disobedience by deconstructing the regime's mythologies. Readers would undoubtedly be curious about the concept of "gender mainstreaming" as a kind of re-formulation of the previous "women's advancement." But they would also be interested in the concept of "woman mainstreaming" that, described in the "value-free/neutral" principle, corresponds to the main postulates of new institutionalism approaches (new institutions are created or adopted by using existing templates; "path dependent" social causations, etc.).

Secondly, "good-ism" is related to some concealment of the center-periphery (West-East) perspective and, therefore, the lack of critical reflections on Nordic uniqueness in the institutionalization of gender equality. Thus, a sketch of the common ideological roots of contemporary gender equality politics including the origin of the ideal model of two breadwinners/providers family and some similarities between the Nordic and Soviet gender equality models that challenge Nordic uniqueness are overlooked in the description of the Lithuanian case (p. 158–169).

It seems that in analyzing and interpreting power relations among the actors of cooperation, particularly on the highest political levels including the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers, authors avoided uncovering power relations among them.

In the context of Lithuanian-Swedish relations, the unlawful dismissal of a Lithuanian national Mrs. S. N. from the Swedish Embassy in Vilnius at the end of 2005 should be recalled. It is doubtful whether the Lithuanian member of the Grand Baltic Tour and, possibly, its Swedish members were not aware of this case. In 2005-2007, it was broadcast in both Lithuania and Sweden and it reappeared in the Lithuanian media at the end of 2016. The internet site of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions also subsequently mentioned this dismissal as one of the mistreatments that took place in 2005.

In brief, Mrs. S. N.'s dismissal took place in the turmoil surrounding the trade-union activities at the Swedish Embassy in Vilnius in 2005². The trade-union aimed to sign a collective agreement between the locally employed staff and the Embassy in an attempt to solve issues related to

2 The brief description is based on the information from the *Case of Naku v. Lithuania and Sweden*, Application no. 26126/07, Judgment. Strasbourg: European Court of Human Rights, 8 November 2016.

deteriorating and oppressive working conditions and unfair treatment of the local personnel at the Swedish Embassy. In 2005, the Swedish radio and other media broadcast a report by the Swedish Labor Inspector that the locally employed staff at Swedish embassies received less pay and had worse working conditions than their Swedish colleagues. The Swedish trade unions also stated that although there was no lack of legal regulation, locally employed staff would often not assert their rights for fear of losing their jobs.

It has to be pointed out that Mrs. S. N. was also the chairperson of the trade union for locally employed staff at the Embassy registered in 1999. Arguing unlawful dismissal, Mrs. S. N. brought proceedings against the Swedish Embassy in the Lithuanian courts. In response, the Swedish government claimed immunity from the jurisdiction of the Lithuanian courts. Three levels of Lithuanian courts granted this request and refused to examine Mrs. S. N.'s complaint of unlawful dismissal. In 2016, the European Court of Human Rights as the “last word in law” found that the Lithuanian authorities had failed to secure Mrs. S. N.'s right to access the court under the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and decided that the Republic of Lithuania was to pay her non-pecuniary damage and costs and expenses.

Sociologically, this case raises at least two questions, first of all, the question about a dominant power in the Lithuanian-Swedish relationship, and, secondly, the question about the limits of Nordic “good-ism” in applying the principle of equal treatment in labor relations to the local Lithuanian context. And last but not least question relates to the “oblivion” of this case that can be regarded as a missed opportunity, in the book, to emphasize that civil (trade-unions) initiatives may be articulated from below but decisions (enforcement and institutionalization) always come from above (p. 124).

The case devoted to Swedish Equal Opportunities Ombudsman clearly describes how legal “citizen-friendly” institutions handle complaints about gender discrimination. The detailed analysis of a sexual harassment case as an example of successful claim management (p. 209) is very relevant to Lithuania. Two sexual harassment scandals rocked the country since March 8, 2017³. The first one is related to an alleged sexual harassment by the Member of the Lithuanian Parliament during the recruitment of an assistant,⁴ the second one – to a sexual harassment of the young actress by the overage

3 March 8 is the International Women's Day, a public holiday that was abolished in Lithuania after 1990.

4 See *Pasipylė merginų pasakojimai apie K. Pūką: Seimo nario pageidavimai buvo itin išskirtiniai*. Available at www.delfi.lt (March 9, 2017).

theatre director⁵. Both stories are far from finished because of the complexity of legal proceedings. However, it is clear that these complaints of sexual harassment brought to the public attention at least have a significant but rather negative impact on the careers of the complainants.

Surprisingly, the book is open ended and general conclusions are absent. Therefore, it is difficult to understand the hidden agenda of this academic inquiry. Does it aim to challenge or confirm the Nordic exceptionalism of gender equality in its Swedish version? It is possible to interpret the book as a good example of (ethno)centric-confirmation of the Nordic (Swedish) exceptionalism in the field of gender equality.

First, the chosen institutional approach is marred by clear reductionism since the institution of Equal Opportunities Ombudsman is taken as a single criterion for identification of institutionalization/non-institutionalization of gender equality in different countries. Second, the conclusion that discrimination barely exists in Sweden based on the quantitative data of the proven discrimination cases by Swedish Gender Ombudsman (10–20% per annum of submitted 100–150 cases annually, p. 236) is overoptimistic. This conclusion can be easily challenged by the Eurobarometer research conducted at the time of this academic inquiry. Although gender discrimination is the least widespread form of discrimination in the EU, 50% of Swedish respondents in 2008 and 53 % in 2015 thought that gender discrimination was widespread in the country. The Swedish opinion on gender discrimination was shared only by 30% of Lithuanians in 2008 and 25% in 2015 and on average by 36% of Europeans in 2008 and 37% in 2015 (Discrimination in the EU 2008; Discrimination in the EU 2015). Most importantly, this overoptimistic conclusion does not take into account the widespread assumption about a significant gap between the amount of actual discrimination and its official reporting to the relevant institutions in Sweden.

Nonetheless, the uniqueness of the book in international and interdisciplinary gender equality scholarship should be emphasized. It not only analyzes different aspects of Europeanization of gender equality from the Northern perspective but also describes the role of the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers in (re)actualization and (re)institutionalization of gender equality in the Baltic Sea region after political changes of the 1990s.

The book will be interesting to both international and national scholars, particularly those of the new generation. A detailed and comprehensive information on the establishment of gender equality in the Baltic States, Sweden and Russia provided in the study is an excellent reference source for

5 See *Policija kol kas netirs galimo seksualinio priekabiavimo Panevėžio teatre*. Available at www.delfi.lt (May 24, 2017).

researchers, policy practitioners and students. The diverse material collected in the book allows us to enjoy the variety of insights directly and indirectly related to gender equality issues.

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