Working Title: Gender Regime in Ukraine: The Subject Position of Woman in the Ukrainian Policy Discussions

Research project description

The focus of my doctoral research is on the discursive and institutional construction of the state gender regime in Ukraine. I analyze gender norms and women’s subject positions in social policy texts and policy discourses by investigating Ukrainian laws, legislative proposals and parliamentary discussions. The concept of gender regime serves as an underlying framework for the inquiry into gendered signs, norms, strategies and subject positions with a focus on institutional welfare provision and discursive meaning-making (Connell 1990; Adams & Padamsee 2001). Of principle interest are the following questions: how gender subjects are produced and negotiated in legal texts and in the policy-making; what gender norms are institutionalized in policies and manifested in debates. I analyse policy changes and policy debates in three broadly defined areas – state welfare provision, labour regulation and gender equality legislation – from 1991 to 2016. I rely on post-structuralist approach to policy analysis to guide my methodology, and more broadly on Foucauldian discourse theory, feminist scholarship on the welfare state, and feminist state anthropology in post-socialist region for theoretical and methodological considerations (Allan 2008; Bacchi 1990, 2000; Ball 1993; Haney 2003; Rivkin-Fish 2013, Zhurzhenko 2001).

Post-socialist ‘transition’ and following political and economic crises in Ukraine create the background for projects of nation- and state-building. Gender idea(l)s, norms and subjects become instrumental in legitimation of state politics and of the state itself. The perspective that I take in this research allows me to argue that reinvention of the ‘new’ Ukrainian state and ‘reviving’ of the nation are done in gendered terms through redefinition of what it means to be a woman, to be a mother and to be a family, and through construction of the state as the masculine paternal figure ‘protecting’ and ‘guiding’. Additionally, the case of Ukraine provides a rich landscape of political discourses. While Europeanization, nationalism, neoliberalization and attempts of dealing with the socialist past are common features for several countries in the region, in the Ukrainian case all of these discourses overlap and are centered in a distinctive way on the discussion of gender norms. In the wake of recent rise of the populist right in Western European countries, examination of the two dominant ideologies in Ukraine – nationalism and neoliberalism – gaining strength and leverage almost simultaneously and investigation of the gender regime this might bring about is beneficial for broader scholarship on conservative gender transformations.

I illustrate in the dissertation that through several policy areas and consistently throughout the whole period motherhood remains the central characteristic of the woman-subject in policy discourses, while different strategies are used to establish and legitimize that, given the socio-political transformations in Ukraine. I study the tension between the ‘mother’ and the ‘woman-worker’, understand how the meaning behind them changes through the years of ‘transition’ and how these subject positions are conceived of in relation to each other. I argue that the ‘regime of compulsory motherhood’ has been constructed relying on the discourse of ‘demographic crisis’, nationalist ideology dominating Ukrainian politics, and on the concept of ‘health’ used to legitimize state intervention. The strategy of ‘essentialising’ reproduction and emphasizing the connection between a mother and a child are used in welfare and labour policies to argue for long-term stay-at-home mother’s care. The reproducing body is further constructed as vulnerable in a variety of conditions, which legitimizes state protective
regulations at work, and the connection between pronatalist policies and poverty alleviation. A broad scope of themes and a wide temporal span allow me to investigate the state’s vision of a ‘proper’ family, motherhood and childcare, as well as a role that the state considers appropriate in its relation to families and citizens.

References:


