

**“THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE  
SLOVAK REPUBLIC:  
OVERVIEW OF AN INNOVATIVE AND STRATEGIC PROCESS”**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A unique and innovative process to institutionalise gender equality has been underway in the Slovak Republic since the beginning of 2002. As part of the European Community enlargement process, Slovakia is among the ten countries poised to enter the EC in 2004. The conditions for EU membership were expanded for former Socialist state applicants in terms of the “Copenhagen criteria” introduced in 1993, which include: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy; and, ability to take on the obligations of membership. Gender equality criteria are integral components in the transition to democracy and the market economy. Furthermore, the promotion of gender equality is among the tasks of members of the Community and is thus among the obligations of membership. The Treaty of Amsterdam makes the promotion of gender equality a transversal objective<sup>1</sup>. Since the start of the accession process, the Slovak Republic has been under enormous pressure to harmonise its legislation in accordance with EC requirements and numerous Acts have passed through various sessions of Parliament. In November 2000 Slovakia signed the Protocol No.12 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, prohibiting discrimination on any grounds. However, the specific anti-discrimination legislation transposing the EC anti-discrimination *aquis* still remains to be adopted.

The Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MOLSAF), which is directly implicated by many of these EC requirements, approached the Netherlands government for project support through the MATRA Pre-accession Programme. More particularly, MOLSAF sought assistance for strengthening the implementation and enforcement of the principle of equal treatment in the Slovak Republic, with special reference to equal opportunities of men and women in employment. The Department of Equal Opportunities was established within MOLSAF in 1999 and subsequently participated in the formulation of terms of reference for the project “Equal Opportunities in the Slovak Republic”<sup>2</sup>. Within the Netherlands, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) submitted its tender and was awarded the contract at the end of 2001, and the two KIT experts<sup>3</sup> have been associated with the process throughout implementation.

Although the initial focus of support was defined in terms of creating an institutional environment for *gender equality in employment*, the actual project implementation strategy has adopted a wider, more strategic and flexible approach. This wider approach was formulated through consultations with the KIT experts during the inception phase in early 2002 and has proved to be essential for moving the process forward. This is particularly so since there was not the anticipated progress in some key areas such as the parliamentary process for adopting anti-discrimination legislation. It had been assumed that the anti-discrimination legislation, required as part of the *acqui*, would be adopted at an early stage of the project. At October 2003, however, there still has been no conclusive outcome. Nonetheless, there have been several related developments which are outcomes of the Matra project strategy and which, taken together, have helped to advance the agenda for gender equality in Slovakia.

There are several interesting aspects to this experience of institutionalisation of gender equality in Slovakia which will be highlighted in the paper. The first aspect concerns the

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<sup>1</sup> As spelt out in article 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> MAT01/SK/9/2.

<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Appel and Marni Pigott.

manner in which the understanding of EU frameworks for gender equality, and how this relates to the Slovakian context, has evolved over the two year period. It has become increasingly clear for instance that, while there is an accepted guiding EU framework, there is no single 'correct' approach to institutionalising gender equality. Member States have each had their own individual experiences in the institutionalisation of gender equality, and this is true too for the case of Slovakia. The process has thus evolved, and continues to evolve, in a manner specific to the Slovakian context. It is important to stress that the overall strategy developed and implemented through the Matra project in support of this process has had the recognition of the *specificity of the Slovakian context* at its core. There has been no attempt to apply a 'model'. Rather, different European experiences have been compared, drawn from and used where relevant. Whatever is emerging is being shaped by dynamics, priorities and possibilities which are distinctly Slovakian.

Another interesting aspect derives from the fact that elections were held mid-way in this process. The new political configuration after elections in September 2002 did not appear to be as conducive to the promotion of gender equality goals as the previous government and, in fact, extremely conservative views, political actions and outcomes are apparent both within Parliament and in public debates<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, despite these constraints it has still been possible to make some fairly significant gains since the beginning of 2003, in areas other than anti-discrimination legislation. This positive outcome in itself raises questions as to the approach of Matra project support and the form of strategies which had been developed prior to the elections. How has it been possible to proceed in spite of constraints in the overall political and institutional environment?

The aim of this short paper is to provide an overview of this process and to briefly describe the steps and actors which have been and are still involved in moving the gender equality agenda forward in Slovakia. Clearly, much remains to be done, and institutionalisation is an ongoing process. As the first phase of the overall strategic process gives rise to structures in various institutional sites - such as Parliament or individual ministries- so, simultaneously, procedures, roles and relationships need to be worked out between the actors involved both within and between these 'structures' and institutional sites. Strategic space is being defined in the political arena, which Slovak women are claiming and where they are exercising their rights giving voice to gender equality issues. There is, however, the concomitant and critical need for ongoing information and communication between the actors involved and awareness-raising among the public at large. The next phase will need to ensure that the process moves out of Bratislava and is de-centralised into the regions. These regional alliances will be necessary to lobby strategically for further and future progress in the gender equality agenda.

The process leading up to the current stage in the institutionalisation of gender equality in Slovakia is outlined in the pages which follow. The final section suggests several strategic areas, which will be crucial to develop and support in the future.

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<sup>4</sup> Concerning, for instance, the debates during 2003 surrounding proposed amendments to the abortion legislation.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: DEFINING PRELIMINARY STRATEGIES

### *The institutional actors for gender equality*

At the start of the process, the key institutional actors included the Department of Equal Opportunities (DEO) and the Co-ordination Committee for Women's Issues (CCWI) at MOLSAF, as well as the Section for Human Rights and Minorities (SHRM) at the Office of Government, which was responsible for drafting the Act on Equal Treatment. CCWI had played an important role in the post-Beijing process as the only body facilitating exchange of information and experiences between representatives from ministries, NGOs, research institutes and civil society groups. It was also the point for international contact and reporting on the National Action Plan. However, although it had continued to function as an information sharing forum, CCWI's original status as an advisory body to the government had changed to Ministry level within MOLSAF and its influence was limited.

### *The inception phase: undertaking an initial diagnosis*

At the outset it was important to gauge how gender equality issues were perceived and prioritised within different groups of Slovak society. Thus, during the inception phase in the first three months of 2002, an initial diagnosis of the institutional and political environment for promoting gender equality in Slovakia was undertaken with key resource persons from MOLSAF, other key sectors of government, NGOs and the political arena. The Government had earlier approved the "Concept on Equal Opportunities" in March 2001, which called on individual ministries to develop preliminary strategies. DEO had overall responsibility for monitoring implementation of the Concept. At the level of Parliament, however, the Concept had been submitted to only two Parliamentary Committees, no wide ranging discussions and debates had occurred, and there was no budget allocated for implementation. It was clear too that there were technical constraints and DEO lacked an implementation strategy. However, the overriding constraint was that there was no overall political or technical accountability for implementing the Concept within particular ministries. The "Concept" was essentially a non-binding document in an institutional and policy vacuum.

Concerning the political environment for promoting gender equality, the contacts and experiences of the 'sister' Matra project "Empowering Women in Politics and Public Life" provided relevant inputs to the diagnosis. An important lobbying process had been underway from the latter half of 2001, mobilising key constituencies in the NGO sector and some individuals in parliament through the platform of *Forum 2000* to secure changes in the electoral law. The proposal to introduce quotas for women as candidates in party lists was not endorsed by the governing coalition, due in part to the inclusion of other amendments which many political parties felt unable to approve given the short time before elections. Dialogue had started, however, and there was increased public awareness of the need for equal representation of women and men in the political process. Furthermore, some male politicians were responding publicly to the need to reflect gender equality issues in political platforms. However, in relation to the political environment for adopting the equal treatment legislation, required as part of the *aqui*, there were already concerns that this procedure would not be completed before the elections. This crucial finding would need to be reflected and addressed

in the implementation framework.

One further area of diagnosis focused on employment policy, reflecting the original terms of reference for project support. The continuing sources of gender inequality in the labour market had been highlighted in the joint assessment of employment priorities undertaken by MOLSAF and the European Commission. This key document sets out employment and labour market objectives necessary to advance labour market transformation and make progress in adapting the employment system so as to prepare for accession to the EU<sup>5</sup>. The National Employment Plan for the Slovak Republic has four pillars with supporting measures designed in accordance with the European Employment Strategy. The fourth pillar deals with strengthening policies for equal opportunities, and gender equality is to be mainstreamed into the other three pillars of the plan. Some of the critical impacts of transformation on women's employment, such as the withdrawal of subsidised child-care support systems and the need for family-friendly patterns of employment were highlighted through the diagnosis. The promotion of gender equality in employment involves the social partners directly, thus the Federation of Trade Unions (KOZ) and the employers' association were seen as key actors in this crucial area.

#### *The outcome of the inception phase*

It was clear at the conclusion of the inception phase that project support would need to focus not only on the *institutional environment* for gender equality (as originally intended) but, very importantly given the constraints and potentials identified, support would also need to focus on the *political arena* for gender equality. Furthermore, Matra project support had a role to play in helping to clarify both the distinction between, and the mutually reinforcing aspects of, increased representation of women in political structures and the representation of gender equality issues, which can be taken up and lobbied for by both men and women. This twin focus, with an emphasis on the importance of the latter, has been central in the project's approach, in order to complement and reinforce initiatives, which aim specifically at enhancing the participation of women in politics and public life.

At the conclusion of the inception phase, key points, which would orientate the overall implementation strategy over the ensuing months, included the following:

- Recognising the *process-orientated* nature of the project and the *specificity of the context* in Slovakia, support needed to be provided through a *flexible framework*, enabling support to be targeted to *strategic areas* which would emerge during the process and which would move the gender equality agenda forward;
- Recognising the possible impact which elections in September 2002 could have for the *continuity of the process*, in terms of changes in the political arena, the project would adopt a two-phased approach. The diagnosis undertaken at the inception phase would be part of the *ongoing process* and would need to be repeated regularly in the post-elections phase to identify constraints and potentials and *the room-for manoeuvre* for furthering gender equality goals;
- There was a need to *raise the profile* of gender equality in the Slovakian context through explicit links to EU frameworks and to build a *common understanding* for discussion and debate;

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<sup>5</sup> "Joint Assessment of Employment Priorities in the Slovak Republic", November 26, 2001. See Section 3.3.6 in particular. This document was prepared jointly by MOLSAF and the Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission.

- There was a need for support to *strategy development* in key areas and the building of *strategic alliances* in order to work with structures and processes in both the institutional environment and political arena to facilitate the adoption and implementation of gender equality legislation;
- Wherever possible and strategically relevant, gender equality would be *mainstreamed* into other existing project initiatives within MOLSAF, such as the Social Dialogue project involving KOZ and employers.
- *Information sharing, communication and networking*, which is essential for *effective strategy coherence*, is also necessary for increasing public awareness and acceptance of gender equality goals.





### 3. SHAPING THE CONTEXT: FOCUS AREAS FOR STRATEGIC EMPHASIS

As defined at the outset, the project's aim was to contribute to the creation of an institutional environment which supports the principle of equal treatment in economic life. The diagnosis had highlighted the role of a broad range of institutional and political actors as well as the social partners, in key areas which are directly concerned with this aim. The draft framework for project implementation reflected these as three focus areas for strategic emphasis, namely: the political arena for gender equality; the institutional environment for gender equality; and, gender equality in social dialogue. Key operational objectives were defined for each focus area and the overall framework was discussed and agreed with representatives of key constituencies (excluding employers) at a consultative meeting at MOLSAF on 21 March 2002.

The next step in the process involved the establishment of small Expert Groups in each focus area. On the basis of clearly defined criteria, which included CCWI representation and NGOs involved with the Matra Women in Politics project, the Expert Groups were convened by the State Secretary for MOLSAF, Ms Edith Bauer. The Expert Groups were tasked with undertaking more in-depth analyses of constraints and potentials in each focus area, and identifying priorities for action.

In this way, the initial diagnosis undertaken in the inception phase was not seen as a static, once-off exercise, but has been part of an *ongoing process*, undertaken regularly through meetings of the three Expert Groups. Over a six-month period, regular working sessions were conducted to assess the room-for manoeuvre for furthering gender equality goals in each focus area. Finally, in mid-September 2002 just prior to the elections, the Expert Groups came together in a joint mid-term review and strategy development workshop. Reviewing developments and the slow pace of institutionalisation, the analyses resulted in the following assessments of the political arena and institutional environment for gender equality, and the scope for gender equality in social dialogue.

#### *Political arena for gender equality*

As expected, the draft equal treatment legislation had not come before Parliament in its final session in July 2002. The inadequate representation of gender equality issues in Parliament resulted primarily from two key causes: lack of appropriate structures/bodies and the absence or inadequate integration of gender equality and EO in strategic policy materials. Several critical issues related to these two points were apparent, including *i.a.*: low status of the Parliamentary women's commission compared with a Permanent Committee; absence of a strategic lobbying group within Parliament; no clear links or strategic alliances between Parliament and NGOs working with women in the political process; no political accountability for Ministers to report on gender equality/equal opportunities.

#### *Institutional environment for gender equality*

The 'institutional vacuum' exists because there was neither legislation nor policy for gender equality/equal opportunities in the Slovak Republic which identifies institutions and defines responsibilities for implementing and monitoring gender equality/equal opportunities within ministries. Efforts to promote gender equality through measures such as DEO implementing

the 'Concept', or CCWI secretariat reporting on the National Action Plan, were taking place in this overall 'policy vacuum' and being implemented at a level where they had no strategic or political relevance as instruments or mechanisms.

#### *Gender Equality in social dialogue*

Similar constraints were identified in the area of social dialogue. Although a Women's Committee existed within KOZ, there was no policy or procedures for promoting equal opportunities or gender equality. Gender issues were not being sufficiently integrated into processes and structures for collective bargaining. Furthermore, the process of transition to a market economy with the withdrawal of state support in areas such as childcare had had considerable impacts on the lives of women workers in particular, trying to reconcile work and family life.

#### *Shaping the Context: a draft institutional and policy framework for Slovakia*

The above conclusions had important consequences, suggesting that efforts needed to be concentrated on strategies which would lead to the establishment of a coherent policy framework and clarify institutional responsibilities and accountability for gender equality and equal opportunities in Slovakia. Important preparatory work had already been undertaken, as the Expert Groups had started reviewing the structure and functions of the CCWI in the light of the changing political context. By the end of the mid-term review and strategy development workshop, a draft institutional and policy framework based on these analytical assessments and reflecting priorities for strategic action had been formulated. Thereafter, the three smaller Expert Groups came together and have since been known as the *Matra Expert Group*, which began to be seen and heard as an important voice in the unfolding institutionalisation process after the elections.

Essentially, the draft institutional and policy framework identified the types of structures required to promote equal opportunities and gender equality in the Slovak Republic in the three spheres of *Parliament, Government and Civil Society*, and illustrated some of the relations and linkages between them. Furthermore, it included reference to the regional level, which will be crucial when new structures for local self-government start being established. The draft institutional and policy framework was discussed within MOLSAF and endorsed in principle by the Strategic Steering Committee of the Matra project. It was acknowledged that full implementation was a long-term process and that capacity would need to be built in the different structures suggested in the framework, but in the short-term it provided a guiding framework for efforts to support the institutionalisation of gender equality in Slovakia.

#### 4. THE CHANGED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE – AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 2002 ELECTIONS

As had been anticipated during the inception phase, there were several significant changes following the elections, which had impacts on the process of institutionalisation of gender equality in the Slovakian context. There were impacts in each of the three focus areas targeted for support through the Matra project. In the political arena, there were 28 women Parliamentarians (18,6% of the National Council, compared with 19.4% previously). However, the new political configuration had resulted in an all-male Government and equal opportunities and gender equality were not high on the list of political priorities. Within MOLSAF, the previous State Secretary who, as a key member of the Strategic Steering Group, had been closely involved with the Matra project's strategic support to institutionalisation, moved to Parliament. The immediate priorities of the new Minister and two State Secretaries were to embark on a significant restructuring of MOLSAF. Very different policy priorities became apparent by the end of 2002, such as the emphasis on reducing registered unemployment, pensions and social reform. While these have critical gender implications, they were not made explicit and there were concerns that the agenda for gender equality and equal opportunities could not be moved forward in this context. There also ensued a difficult few months for social dialogue, as MOLSAF's new policy emphasis was made known to the social partners. The overall political climate in the immediate post-election period in Slovakia did not appear to be conducive to the promotion of gender equality issues.

These political and institutional changes were significant and quite dramatic. But there was also some continuity in the political arena, which provided some potential for room-for-manoeuve. The Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and National Minorities remained in place. As a member of the Strategic Steering Group for the project, the Committee Chairperson had been regularly consulted by the Matra Expert Group, and was accessible to lobby groups from other women's NGOs. In the period preceding elections, collaboration between the two Matra projects and other women's NGOs had resulted in intensified pressure on leaders of political parties and increased public awareness of the need for establishing a structure in Parliament, mandated with the responsibility for equal opportunities in Slovakia.

The outcome of earlier and intensive lobbying was that the National Council agreed on the expansion of the mandate of this Parliamentary Committee to include the "Status of Women". While this outcome reflected a political compromise, it provided an additional element in the context and a structure around which further strategies could be developed.

##### *Reshaping the context: refining strategies in early 2003*

In early 2003, the overall context for promoting gender equality in Slovakia was further clarified with developments in the political arena (Parliament) and institutional environment (MOLSAF). As concerned the political arena, the expanded Parliamentary Committee intended to establish three Commissions/sub-Committees and one of these Commissions would be dealing specifically with equal opportunities and women's rights. This outcome

reflected intensive consultations with NGOs dealing with women's issues and strategic networking among them, with the Matra Expert Group combining with other voices from the women's movement. In terms of strategy, the proposal provided a key 'entry point' for participation in shaping the composition, agendas and functioning of the Commission. Through working sessions in early 2003, criteria for representation and nomination of experts to serve on the Commission, as well as priorities for its immediate focus of work, were developed and submitted to the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee. The eventual nomination of the Chairperson of the Commission was a decision endorsed by the Matra Expert Group.

Concerning the institutional environment, the final outcome of MOLSAF's restructuring reflected several aspects, which had in fact been proposed in the draft institutional and policy framework. The mandate and capacity of the DEO was expanded to a new Department of Equal Opportunities and Anti-Discrimination, with three additional staff members including legal expertise and with strong links to the NGO sector. The CCWI secretariat was also incorporated within the Department pending a satisfactory resolution on its status and role in the changing institutional context for gender equality. This outcome within MOLSAF, where the new Department was in fact the only department to receive additional resources in the restructuring process, indicated an institutional commitment. At the rhetorical and political level, equal opportunities and gender equality issues were not articulated in the discourse of the new decision-makers. However, the department was still able to attract institutional resources. And in terms of strategy, this institutional commitment was extremely significant, and was perceived as such and welcomed by experts and activists in the women's movement.

Clearly these developments were important. Evolving strategies needed to reflect how this new 'space' for women's voices in the political arena could best be used. The new Department within MOLSAF needed to develop its relationships with relevant structures, such as the new Parliamentary Commission, as well as with groups in civil society such as NGOs dealing with women's issues and gender equality. And, in turn, the Commission needed to define its role and relationships with partners in government and civil society.

The impression should not be gained, however, that the overall climate for promoting gender equality in Slovakia is positive. On the contrary, the coalition was soon undergoing a severe political crisis, which was provoked by the submission of a draft amendment to the abortion law<sup>6</sup>. This topic was on the agenda of the first meetings of the Commission, which are conducted in open public forum. However, the increased politisation and polarisation around the abortion issue, with intense pressure from the Catholic Church and the Vatican exerted on Slovak citizens, gave cause for concern. The developments, processes and reactions to this draft amendment provided an indicator of how discussions on the anti-discrimination legislation can be expected to proceed. Despite sustained pressure from the EU for Slovakia to comply with this requirement before entry in 2004, when the bill eventually comes before Parliament it is expected to face similar obstacles.

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<sup>6</sup> The draft amendment was scheduled for the agenda in Parliament several times and repeatedly postponed. In fact, existing Health Ministry guidelines already provided what was called for in the amendment, but the amendment was proposed as a safeguard in case the Constitutional Court ruled that the guidelines were in conflict with the constitution. However, in early September the decision on a ruling was postponed.

## 5. CURRENT STAGE IN THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF GENDER EQUALITY IN SLOVAKIA: SOME CRITICAL ISSUES, RISKS AND IMPLICATIONS

The work of the Matra Expert Group in shaping and reshaping a draft institutional and policy framework for promoting gender equality in Slovakia indicates the necessity for having relevant and mandated structures in *three* spheres. These are the spheres of Parliament, Government and Independent Bodies in civil society. How these structures interact between themselves, and how each is accessed by representatives from NGOs and activists in the women's movement, is of course a key issue for evolving democratic institutions and for ensuring further institutionalisation of gender equality goals in Slovakia. The types of forums for political participation, which can be encouraged and facilitated by these structures, where different voices find expression, provide a clear indicator as to the democratic process and the stability of democratic institutions. There are several critical questions concerning the need for transparency of information, and increasing knowledge and awareness on processes and procedures which builds the capacity of citizens, both women and men, to interact with democratic structures and shape policy outcomes.

### *Parliament: what exists and what is envisaged*

The composition of the Parliamentary Commission reflects political compromise, which is to be expected in an evolving democratic process. There are several political nominations, various NGOs and a smaller number of experts than originally envisaged among the 18 Commission members. One third of the members were nominated directly by the Matra Expert Group, others represent important constituencies such as *Forum 2000* or relevant bodies such as the Section for Human Rights and National Minorities in the Office of Government. The work of the Commission is being conducted in open public forum and thus provides the possibility for wider dissemination of ideas and positions. Representatives from the women's media are members, which in theory provides the potential for raising awareness on the gender equality agenda and critical issues such as anti-discrimination, which require informed public debate. A key question, however, concerns the profile of the Commission both in Parliament and among the broader public and the extent to which the work of the Commission is being reported on and disseminated.

The question of accountability of the Parliamentary Commission to members and the public is crucial at this early stage of institutionalisation and is particularly important given the extent of politicisation existing in Slovakian public life. There is a risk that the Commission can be used as a political instrument, and that the deep political party divisions will be reflected in action and positions taken within the Commission. Another important aspect concerns the fact that women do not necessarily share a common agenda. The members are not a homogeneous group, and political party agendas may well compete with the gender equality agenda.

### *Government: what exists and what is envisaged*

In Government, it is currently the Department of Equal Opportunities and Anti-Discrimination within MOLSAF, which provides the principal institutional site for all questions dealing with the promotion of gender equality in Slovakia. This location of responsibility within a sectoral ministry, although common in ministries of social affairs in many countries, has been 'assumed' *de facto* by MOLSAF. In reality, legal 'competency' for equal opportunities and

gender equality i.e. ultimate responsibility has not been allocated *de jure* to MOLSAF. The clearest mandate for gender equality in fact lies with the Office of Government. There are some influential opinions that overall policy coordination is better placed in the Office of Government where the Section on Human Rights and National Minorities, for example, has a similar co-ordination function.

The mandate and capacity of the Department of Equal Opportunities and Anti-Discrimination has been expanded through the recent restructuring in MOLSAF, and the CCWI secretariat (although its final status has yet to be decided) is also located within the department. DEOAD has developed a proposal for a type of 'pleni-potentiary' or similar structure, which would be located in the Office of Government and responsible for overall policy co-ordination on gender equality. The proposal has been endorsed by the Matra Expert Group and presented to the Parliamentary Commission. It is currently being discussed in principle and lobbied for both in the political arena and in Government. In the event of such a body being established in the Office of Government, DEOAD will then be able to focus its work on mainstreaming gender equality in the mandated policy areas of social affairs and employment. Given the enormous needs to integrate gender equality into all applications for structural funds and other resources from the EU, which may become available with accession, DEOAD has proposed the establishment of a technical Gender Expert Group, which will work closely with DEOAD in meeting these requests.

One critical issue concerns the fact that, until a structure is in place, which will also undertake all international reporting obligations as well as policy co-ordination, there is no national government body with a clear mandate for dealing with these issues. In this vacuum, there is clearly a risk that DEOAD will continue to be seen as the responsible national focal point, but without the required mandate or capacity. A related factor is that the opportunities for inter-ministerial contact and involvement, originally provided through CCWI, have ceased since the elections and an alternative structure for inter-ministerial contact has yet to be agreed. A key question will concern the form of relationships between these various structures in government and those existing and envisaged, in both the Parliamentary sphere and independent bodies in civil society. Roles and responsibilities will need to be clearly defined.

*Independent Bodies: what exists and what is envisaged*

The delays concerning the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation, and the lack of structures to oversee compliance and enforcement of such measures, have contributed to a real vacuum in this area. There is also uncertainty around the future of the Centre for Human Rights and a real concern in several quarters of Slovakian opinion that, if and when the anti-legislation is adopted, the question of enforcement and establishment of a centre for Equal Treatment and Anti-Discrimination will still remain problematic. In this institutional vacuum, a recent initiative to establish a foundation as an independent body promoting tolerance and combating discrimination provides some hope for moving the agenda forward even though there are constraints which continue to block progress at the political level. This initiative has already received some backing from the EU and has support to organise a launching conference in December 2003.

The potential role for such an independent Foundation is important in two scenarios. While

there remains no conclusive outcome in the anti-discrimination and its enforcement, there is a need to continue with the crucial task of creating public awareness and consciousness in Slovakian society. If and when legislation is adopted and some mechanisms for enforcement are established, there will continue to be a need for an independent body to function as a watchdog, ensuring coherence with EU Directives and holding government structures accountable to these and other international commitments such as CEDAW. To some extent, the Matra Expert Group has in fact played the role of an independent body as a group of experts dealing with gender equality issues during the past two years. There is the potential to transform this role and continue to support the ongoing process of institutionalisation of gender equality in a new form. Some form of collaboration with the proposed Foundation could possibly be envisaged, which would ensure that gender equality issues remain high on the agenda on entry to the EU in 2004.

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The overall political environment in the Slovak Republic continues to be extremely volatile. Earlier indications of crisis in the coalition have in fact deepened and the coalition is very fragile with no clear majority in Parliament. This fragility is reflected in the fact that many initiatives are being blocked and thus no significant progress can be made. This crisis situation is revealing the true extent of party political divisions which are constraining political action and conclusive policy outcomes. The current impasse concerning the anti-discrimination legislation is a clear example. The politicisation of the clause on sexual orientation, which is required in EU Directives (No.43 and 78), through consistent opposition from the Christian Democratic party has also complicated the adoption of other initiatives such as the Labour Code and the Social Insurance Act. The processes around the abortion law amendments and anti-discrimination legislation suggest that reaching compliance with EU Directives concerning gender issues and equality will continue to be extremely difficult in Slovakia. It is therefore important that groups and individuals promoting gender equality and working for the approval of anti-discrimination legislation and structures for enforcement in Slovakia are linked into and supported through international / European networks<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, contact will need to be strengthened in the future with the EU network of specialised bodies on anti-discrimination.

