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MECHANISMS OF INTEGRATION OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY INTO SCIENCE POLICY IN SERBIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The paper explores gender mainstreaming in science policy in Serbia, in the context of EU accession, through hard and soft instruments (laws and strategies) and funding programs. The first part of the paper analyzes the integration of gender equality policies into the science and research sector in the EU, which has intensified in recent decades. In the current EU funding program, the promotion of gender equality goes beyond research action. New institutional mechanisms are introduced (gender equality plans) and the gender dimension is included in evaluation criteria for research grants (content regulation). In the second part, we explore how gender equality policies are incorporated into the science policy in Serbia. It is argued that gender equality mechanisms in the scientific sector are based on incoherent regulation. The EU mechanisms are introduced selectively, focusing on indirect policies (science popularization) and formal measures of gender equality, whereas other mechanisms (content regulation) are introduced inconsistently.

Key words: Gender equality. – Science and research policy. – Serbia. – European Union. – EU accession.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender *and* science and gender *in* science are not new research topics in Serbia. Over the past thirty years, there is an established tradition of sociological research on gender in science and the social status of women scientists (Blagojević 1992a; 1992b; Milić 1992; Pudar, Rácz 2018; Delibašić, Pudar Draško, Fiket 2018; Ćeriman, Fiket, Rácz 2018; Ignjatović 2006; Ignjatović, Buturović 2022). However, the relationship between *gender equality policies* and *science policies* has become relevant in political terms after the process of EU accession was initiated in Serbia. This process has become the strategic orientation of Serbia, leading to top-down reforms. The EU promotes gender equality in all segments of society, including science and research. The gender dimension and the scientific field are closely related, especially in recent decades. The number of research studies on gender has increased by 35% over the past twenty years (Čičkarić 2019, 94). Hence, the question of integrating science and gender policies is relevant for Serbia, including both the positive and the negative consequences of this process.¹

In this paper we explore how gender equality policies are incorporated into science policies in Serbia within the EU accession process. The focus is on the specific features of public policy and the social context in Serbia, and their influence on the implementation of gender and science policies. We explore the links between the social context and the science sector. Also, it should be noted that the science sector (research institutes) and university sector (higher education) in Serbia are both involved in science and research, yet separated and subject to different regulations. This paper does not explore higher education, although universities are involved in scientific and research activities and belong to the science sector. Higher education curriculum is also beyond the scope of this paper.²

We compare science policy and gender equality policy in Serbia and the EU focusing on how they are intertwined and complement each other. We examine in more detail the main instruments for promoting gender equality in science policy in Serbia, and their expected effects on scientific research

¹ Science policy refers to regulations in the sector of science and research, including organization, financing, and management, and scientific activities at the micro-level of institutions and actors. Science is now commonly connected to innovation (R&I), but here we are focusing on the scientific field, especially the programs for basic research which prioritize generating knowledge as a role of science.

² Gender aspects of higher education curriculum are explored in Serbian higher education institutions, for example, the Faculty of Law (see Vujadinović, Petrušić 2017).

and the status of men and women scientists. The consideration of the substantial and long-term implications of all relations between these two policy domains is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus is on formal mechanisms and public policy measures for gender equality and science policy in the EU and Serbia. We look at the transformation of regulations in both domains (the scientific sector and gender equality) during Serbia's EU accession process, and the mechanisms of direct or indirect incorporation of gender equality in science (through direct research funding and other related activities). It should be noted that Serbia's accession process has been stalled for the past decade, leading to a significant gap between substantial and formal reforms in many domains. This means either only formal reforms, or reversible or worsened conditions in other domains. A recent example is the temporary suspension of the Law on Gender Equality (adopted in 2021) by the Constitutional Court (Ustavni sud Republike Srbije 2024). This is an example of disharmonious development, which prevents the implementation of gender equality in all social domains.

2. THE MECHANISMS FOR INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY POLICY INTO SCIENCE POLICY IN THE EU

Gender equality policy and science policy in the EU are implemented through different public policy measures. Similar methods are implemented in gender equality, science, higher education, and health (Ahrens 2019, 7). Since the 1980s, these domains have been regulated through "soft" public policy instruments, instead of "hard" legislative forms and directives. These policy programs include strategies, action plans, timeframes, and funding for their implementation, but also mechanisms for evaluation and monitoring (Ahrens 2019, 7). This approach was used for harmonizing complicated positions and reducing structural differences between member states (Ahrens 2019). They are implemented through soft *Acquis*: recommendations, conclusions, etc. (Višekruna 2022, 254). Of course, hard policy instruments were also used in gender equality policies. The six directives addressing gender equality, primarily in labour and social rights, are relevant for the scientific domain, for example, gender equality in the workplace, maternity leave or parental leave (European Commission 2020, 8). Science remains under the authority of national regulations for identity-related, and other reasons (Višekruna 2022, 256). The way to overcome these differences at the national level was to strengthen the supra-national EU administrative level, which acquired a dominant position and capacities to allocate

funds and even to impose harmonization of the national systems through administrative measures at the EU level, which is particularly important for the countries in the accession process.

The principles of gender equality are mostly introduced through strategies that address all domains through a dual public policy paradigm: gender mainstreaming and specific measures for women. The *gender mainstreaming* approach aims to introduce changes in the “gender contract” in all social areas, including family, work, and politics (Booth, Bennett 2002; Ignjatović, Bošković 2013). Gender mainstreaming is supposed to introduce gender equality in all domains of social life (Čičkarić 2015, 495). The second approach, gender as a *cross-cutting* dimension in terms of intersectionality, combines other dimensions of discrimination and social identities with gender identity (ethnicity, disability, sexual identity, etc.) This approach has been implemented in the scientific domain over the past twenty years. It has been addressed in the latest strategy through intersectionality and other relevant dimensions of discrimination (European Commission 2000; 2006; 2010a; 2020). Both principles have been used in the mechanisms for integrating gender equality into the science sector.

2.1. The sector strategies for science and gender equality

The Lisbon Strategy is a meta-strategy that defined the guidelines for science after 2000, specifically through the Council of the European Union’s Resolution of 15 June 2000 establishing the European Research Area (ERA). It emphasizes the “knowledge triangle” of research, innovation and education, with the goal to contribute to the Lisbon Agenda (Council of the European Union 2008).³ The ERA process introduced a radical change in funding

³ Meta-strategic frameworks, which set the guidelines for the social and economic development of the European Union for certain time periods, have had a significant direct impact on both gender equality policy and science policy, but they have also indirectly influenced both areas.

Science policy in the EU is guided by the Lisbon Agenda (2000–2010). The Lisbon Agenda determined the strategic development goals of the EU, including those related to science. It has three main goals related to science: sustainable growth, social cohesion, and “to become the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world” by introducing “a new paradigm based on knowledge” (Dion 2005). This orientation of the Lisbon Process was implemented through science funding programs, emphasizing innovation, competitiveness, technology and the IT sector. The core ideas from the Lisbon Agenda are relevant today, especially focusing on innovation and the social role of science. After the Lisbon Agenda, the Europe 2020 strategic document was adopted, covering the 2010–2020

science through *framework programmes*, in order to boost competitiveness, innovation, and practical approaches to social issues (European Parliament, 2017). The EU administrative level of funding science and research was reinforced, emphasizing the harmonization of national systems (Višekruna 2022, 258). The integration of gender equality into science policies was initiated within this framework, focusing on further articulation and convergence of gender equality principles and science policies.

In the next section, we analyze the transformation of goals and instruments for implementation of gender equality in the scientific sector after 2000. In the 2001–2005 strategy (adopted in 2000), science and gender equality are linked through the goal of changing gender roles and stereotypes in science (European Commission 2000). Specific mechanisms were introduced in the 2006–2010 period: gender parity in the management of public scientific institutions, and a mechanism to encourage the participation of women in sectors where women are the minority, such as ICT and technology (European Commission 2006). The third mechanism focused on family-work balance.⁴

period (European Commission 2010b). It was developed following the 2008 global economic crisis. Europe 2020 focuses more on “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, but it builds on the strategic goals from the previous strategy – applied science that addresses practical issues. Among the five strategic goals, science and research policy was elaborated in Innovative Europe, which emphasized more investment in R&D (the target was 3% of GDP) by combining basic and applied science, but also private and public sectors.

Gender equality is “a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights” (European Commission 2020, 1). It is defined in the principles of social cohesion in the Lisbon Agenda. A later critical revision of the strategy, promoted *gender mainstreaming* as a method for introducing gender equality into public policy, but it also recognized multiple discrimination (European Parliament 2009). In Europe 2020, gender equality is addressed similarly as in the Lisbon Strategy (European Commission 2010b). In European Pillar of Social Rights, gender equality is one of the 20 principles that were supported by all EU institutions (European Parliament 2017). This document is more balanced than the Lisbon agenda because it emphasizes the social dimension as a core value of the EU, in contrast to the more market-oriented Lisbon process.

⁴ There are many initiatives addressing gender equality in science. For example, The Helsinki Group on Women and Science was established in 1999, aiming to promote equal participation of women in science (European Commission 2010a). ENWISE initiative focused on postsocialist countries during their accession to the EU (European Commission 2003). There are many relevant projects financed within EU framework programmes focusing on the status of researchers, and women scientists in particular (Bozzon, Murgia, Poggio 2019). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) was established in 2010 for monitoring gender equality at the EU level, including official statistics and research (European Union n.d.).

The 2020–2025 Strategy introduced more developed measures for promoting women's participation in ICT, natural and technical sciences (European Commission 2020). This strategy introduced new mechanisms also. One mechanism is the Gender Equality Plan (GEP), a mandatory institutional gender equality plan for institutions applying for scientific framework programmes (Horizon Europe). Moreover, Horizon Europe addresses some current social issues, such as gender aspects of artificial intelligence (European Commission 2020). All these instruments have been integrated into scientific programs.

This process of gender equality integration into science was further articulated through the Ljubljana Process, which defined all the above instruments: institutional measures (mandatory GEP), content regulation in research and methodology, but also monitoring and evaluation of the results achieved in the priorities and goals (Council of the European Union 2021). These mechanisms have three goals: gender equality in research careers, decision making (management), and finally, scientific content (Council of the European Union 2021). The 2022–2024 ERA Plan relied on the Ljubljana Declaration, addressing gender equality as one of the priorities in science reforms (European Commission 2021). This document suggested introducing GEP as a mandatory requirement for research organizations in the application process (European Commission 2021). Since 2022, the GEP has been a mandatory evaluation criterion for applicants, leading to a full integration of gender equality in the funding of scientific projects.

2.2. Gender equality policy in EU framework programmes for science funding

Integrating gender equality into science policy was implemented through the above instruments and mechanisms within framework programmes (FPs) based on seven-year cycles of funding science and research at the EU level. The framework model was introduced in the 1980s as a strategic instrument for coherent implementation of research programs (European Parliament 2017). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in detail the history of convergence between gender equality policy and science policy through the FP mechanism. We focus on the recent process of integration and the current science funding program in the EU.

Unlike framework programmes where policy of gender equality is aimed at equal participation of women scientists in all scientific fields and overcoming difficulties related to career breaks due to family burden (see Avramov 2015), in the more recent programs, the gender dimension gained more articulated

public policy forms. In Horizon 2020 (2013–2020), the gender dimension was introduced in the rules for calls for proposals, based on the dominant gender mainstreaming paradigm. In addition to the gender balanced composition of applicant teams, gender was introduced in research content and methodology, as an evaluation criterion for some calls, for example, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) (European Commission 2017).

The current funding cycle, Horizon Europe (2021–2027), introduced additional changes in all key segments of science (European Commission 2022b; 2022c). First, gender equality goals are *more comprehensive* for applicants; for example, they include prevention of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in scientific and higher education institutions. Some aspects are defined as standards that should be met in the preliminary stage of the application process through internal procedures. Second, there are *new mechanisms* for gender equality that are mandatory (GEP). Scientific institutions are obliged to adopt gender equality plans. These preconditions are mandatory for applicants, and it is not possible to submit a proposal without satisfying these criteria. Third, gender equality policy is explicitly defined as a topic of *horizontal funding programs* within Horizon Europe. These are programs for strengthening the soft infrastructure of scientific institutions (for example, gender budgeting as an institutional mechanism in academic institutions). Gender is recognized as the key dimension of soft infrastructure.⁵

The mechanism of content regulation was implemented in the current model as a legacy of the previous Horizon 2020. It has probably the most far-reaching effect on science because it is implemented through the evaluation mechanism. Gender aspects are not only included in research based on the researcher's judgment and scientific relevance, but they become a mandatory part of all projects. Actually, it is not formally mandatory to address gender dimension, but it should be justified why the applicant does not consider it to be relevant for the given research project. Key components of the project (research problem, scientific methodology) must address the gender dimension. For example, the programs for individual mobility, such as the MSCA, introduced content regulation both in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe.

⁵ For example, *Budget-It* project addresses gender budgeting in academic institutions (and local municipalities) through research and intervention activities (Budget-It 2023).

We looked at the MSCA grants for early career men and women researchers.⁶ Gender aspects are included in *excellence*, as the main criterion for project evaluation. This criterion assesses the substantial scientific value of the project: identifying a research gap, state-of-the-art, relevance and novelty of methodology, and expected insights that should contribute to the body of knowledge. A specific sub-criterion of excellence focuses on the methodology, where *gender and diversity aspects* are included as relevant (mandatory to address) dimensions. It is clear that addressing gender does include formal criteria, such as the gender balance of the team. The core methodology is assessed through this subcriterion, so it is necessary to provide an explanation why gender and diversity aspects are not addressed in the proposal (Radiance 2025). Applicants are encouraged to address gender and intersectionality in the other two project evaluation criteria (*impact and implementation*) (MSCA-NET 2021). Proposals usually address the gender dimension by default, through far-fetched claims without proper theoretical and methodological justification. It is implicitly desirable to address gender, so it is rarely the case that applicants disregard this dimension as “not relevant” (even though the rules allow such an approach). There are unintended consequences of content regulation – gender is addressed as a generic, formal, and nonsubstantially relevant dimension of the proposal.

Today, the principles of gender equality are integrated into science policy in the EU through the instruments that shape scientific activities through internal regulations and content regulation (research and methodology). It is beyond this paper to address the long-term effects of these measures. Also, the question arises how this model is transferred to the national science funding programs of EU member states, considering that one of the goals is harmonization of the national frameworks for science funding (European Parliament 2017). The same question arises for EU candidate countries, including Serbia. We explore how the process of harmonization and translation of the EU model has been implemented from above in the science sector.

⁶ The ‘early career researcher’ status is based on the PhD date. Applicants are eligible for MSCA postdoctoral fellowships if up to eight years have passed since they earned their PhD degree. Career breaks are also calculated as additional years due to maternity leave, or career path change. The early career stage is not based on a researcher’s age because it would be age-based discrimination.

3. TOP-DOWN GENDER MAINSTREAMING OF SCIENCE POLICY IN SERBIA

Science and research are not the key or critical sectors in the process of Serbia's harmonization with the EU. One reason for this is that science and research are still predominantly regulated at the national level in the EU, in spite of the abovementioned strengthening of the EU administrative level of science funding. The second reason is that researchers from Serbia already participate in the ERA to some extent. Paradoxically, although it is not required to harmonize it with the EU policy, it is precisely science policy in Serbia that has been fundamentally harmonized with the EU. A final evaluation of the chapter addressing science and research in the EU accession process will be performed after the more complicated areas have been successfully transformed through the harmonization process.

A formal inclusion of Serbia in the ERA started when Serbia became the candidate country for EU membership, but collaborative activities were initiated before the official status was granted, in the fields of agriculture, IT, and energy (Potočnik 2009). Following Serbia being officially granted candidate country status in 2012, the process of harmonization with the EU standards has been monitored as part of Chapter 25 (Science and Research). After screening, this chapter was opened and temporarily closed in 2016. The plan was to close this chapter after all the other chapters had been closed, following the progress through reporting (Višekruna 2022, 264). Systemic changes in the science sector are mostly introduced top-down and driven by the incentive for harmonization with the EU. In one of the previous progress reports, innovation and commercialization were given the most attention, in line with the Lisbon Agenda (European Commission 2022a). The report acknowledged that Serbia has participated in seven-year framework programmes for science funding (currently Horizon Europe for 2021–2027), and further investment in science and innovation was encouraged. The 2025 progress report found no progress during the previous reporting period (Evropska komisija 2025).

Although Serbia's EU accession progress has been stalled for years, science policy has radically changed the scientific sector in Serbia. A new systemic legal framework was introduced and fundamentally changed the science and research sector (Zakon o nauci i istraživanjima 2019; Zakon o Fondu za nauku 2018). The Innovation Fund and the Science Fund have become key institutions for project-based funding of scientific research, which fundamentally changed the functioning of science and the status of researchers. Along with this new systemic change, the 2015 amendments to the Law on Science and Research increased the power of the state in scientific

institutes by changing the composition of governing boards of research institutes, introducing a majority of government representatives and a minority of representatives of researchers (Zakon o naučnoistraživačkoj delatnosti 2005).

Some issues have been identified in the most recent progress report. The report demands that Serbia guarantee the autonomy for research institutes and universities, and respect academic freedom and freedom of scientific research, in line with the ERA principles (Evropska komisija 2025, 16). We will not go into detail here on the backsliding of Serbia's accession progress. We will focus on the key changes in science and gender equality and demonstrate how some EU principles and standards have been introduced selectively. For example, content regulation is not as significant in Serbia's calls for scientific projects, although this was introduced in the set of evaluation criteria, without modifications for small scientific systems with many specific needs. Also, some mechanisms of gender equality in science cannot be implemented because they are not supported by the basic regulations necessary for their implementation (for example, the suspension of the Law on Gender Equality).

The reforms of the scientific sector are supported by IPA funds and World Bank loans. One example is the Serbia Accelerating Innovation and Growth Entrepreneurship Project (SAIGE), which was a framework for the transformation of scientific institutes (Republic of Serbia 2019). This project reflects the Lisbon process, imposing a new model of science funding and management. According to this paradigm, science is inseparable from the economy and its "commercial" dimension. The Innovation Fund has a role, along with the Science Fund, to promote entrepreneurship and innovation. Even the calls for basic research projects by the Science Fund impose the post-Lisbon conception of science. This orientation of Serbia's science policy is a sign of the lack of awareness of the specific needs of Serbia's small science and research sector. The direct copy-paste of mechanisms may result in unintended consequences. Gender equality policy was integrated into science policy in this process. For example, the Science Fund opened calls that promote the participation of women and women's entrepreneurship (Republic of Serbia 2019).

In Serbia's accession process, gender equality is addressed in the chapters addressing fundamental rights, whereas the chapter related to science does not address gender equality as a value that must be incorporated in the system through harmonization. However, a large part of gender equality policy was guided by the EU accession process. The policies were transformed into "state feminism" which set strategic priorities, but also encountered certain problems in the implementation (Ignjatović,

Bošković 2017; Antonijević 2016). Currently, there are several modalities of connecting gender equality and science policy in Serbia. The first is *direct participation* of Serbian researchers in EU science funding programs. The rules and conditions apply to participants from Serbia, which means that certain instruments for gender equality must be introduced to ensure eligibility.⁷ The second modality is the promotion of gender equality policy in science through *reform programs* funded by the EU. These programs target science, gender equality, and the intersecting areas. After 2000, the topic of gender equality in science was supported in different ways. For example, the program for research and innovation targets the *widening countries* with weak track records of success in EU science funding programs (Serbia is one of them) in order to promote their participation in the ERA. Along with the harmonization of national science system with that of the EU, this program has different instruments for systemically addressing gender equality in scientific projects, for example, by providing support for developing *gender equality plans* (European Commission 2022b).

3.1. Diverging paths of soft and hard instruments for gender equality and science policy

Another two methods of integrating gender equality policy and science policy in Serbia show the level of integration of gender equality policy into science policy at the national level. First, there are soft and hard instruments of national public policy, legislation and strategic documents in science and related areas (education, technological innovation) and in the area of gender equality (similar as in the EU, as mentioned above). There are also programs for funding scientific research which show how plans and regulation frameworks are implemented in the system for the allocation of financial resources in the science sector.

Gender equality policy and science are linked by the following legislation: the 2009 and 2021 laws on gender equality, and the 2005, 2010, 2018 and 2019 laws regulating the science sector.⁸ The 2005 Law

⁷ For example, the Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in research institutions (LeTSGEPs) project, implemented by the Mathematical Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, deals with introducing GEPs.

⁸ The Budget Law is an important hard instrument because it allocates public funds for strategic goals, including science and gender equality. Also, regulations for preventing discrimination are important. Here, we are primarily interested in the convergences of the basic legislative frameworks for science and gender equality.

on Science and Research does not address gender perspective, whereas the amendments to the law (2015) introduced gender equality principles: balanced participation of men and women in science governing bodies, national commissions for scientific fields and scientific journals (Zakon o naučnoistraživačkoj delatnosti 2005). The 2009 Law on Gender Equality mostly regulated discrimination in the science and research sector (Article 30, Zakon o ravnopravnosti polova 2009). We argue that gender equality is addressed more specifically in the legislative framework for science than in the general legislation on gender equality.

This relation between gender and science regulations deteriorated further. In the current regulatory framework, there are fewer measures and instruments for gender equality than in the basic law on gender equality. The law stipulates that science and research are based on the principles of “gender equality in science and research, as well as in governing bodies in science” (Article 4, Zakon o nauci i istraživanjima 2019). The law introduced a note about using the grammatical male gender for women, disregarding gender sensitive language for science promotion grades. Maintaining the researchers’ registry by gender is presented as a gender equality mechanism, rather than just an administrative measure (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021b). The previously mentioned parity in the representation of both genders in governing bodies was not included in this law. According to the Law on the Science Fund, gender equality must be ensured in the Science Council, as the governing body of the Science Fund (Zakon o Fondu za nauku 2018).

Unlike in the case of these modest measures, the current Law on Gender Equality (2021) contains evidence that the ongoing process of integrating gender equality into science in the EU has effected the new regulations. There are measures for “equal opportunities for women and men” in different areas of society, including science and technological development (Article 1, translated by author). Furthermore, goals and instruments are elaborated in the sections of education, science, and technological development, stating that resources should be provided for gender equality promotion (Article 37): “introducing and implementing measures in the area of science and research, financed by public funds, for the purpose of including the gender perspective in all stages of the creation, evaluation, selection, implementation and assessment of scientific projects results, as well as equal participation of women and men in research teams and governing bodies responsible for the creation, evaluation, selection, and implementation of scientific research projects” (Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti 2021, translated by author). This strategic goal was aligned with the Ljubljana process, but the legislation for the science sector did not follow these changes, despite both laws being adopted during the same time period (Table 1).

Now we take a look at the strategic documents to examine whether gender equality is more integrated into science policy through soft instruments, like in the EU. Our focus is on the period starting with the temporary closure of Chapter 25: Science and Research (2016) until the present. The strategic documents for the gender equality and science domains were adopted following the same dynamics (2016 and 2021). The Strategy for Science and Technological Development (2016–2020) addressed gender equality through the economy, with no specific links to the science area. The gender dimension is included in the strategic goal addressing human resources and minorities. Gender budgeting is planned at all levels of governance, and measured through quantitative indicators of participation of women in decision making and some research areas (Vlada Republike Srbije 2016b, 15–16). The 2016–2020 Strategy for Gender Equality reinforced the participation of women in certain scientific fields, the promotion of women's achievements in science, fighting discrimination, and ensuring the promotion of women (Vlada Republike Srbije 2016a). In this segment, these two strategies converge to a large extent.

Another segment of the strategy related to science apparently goes a step beyond the science strategy. It includes changing gender patterns and promoting gender equality culture in higher education and gender studies, implying a narrow scientific approach to gender (Vlada Republike Srbije 2016a). Marijana Pajvančić noted another goal that is not specific to science: introducing gender perspective into all strategic documents (Pajvančić 2020). However, there are no guidelines for science, nor are the effects of the earlier model examined, when science was addressed together with education, technological development, and economic empowerment, thus completely disregarding the specific features of science.

Did something change in Serbia after the Ljubljana process? The 2021–2025 Strategy for Science and Research draws on the ERA principles, among others: “Gender equality in leadership positions, developing gender equality policies in research organizations” (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021b). It is stated that the goal of the previous strategy (enhancement of gender equality and minority equality in science and innovation) has been partially achieved, but the revision of goals and new measures for gender equality were not addressed. The Strategy is “gender blind”, just like the current legislation in the science and research sector (2019) lacking even the basic gender sensitive language (for academic ranks in the science sector).

The 2021–2030 Strategy for Gender Equality addresses this discrepancy between the previous strategies and laws on promoting gender equality in science (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021a). In this new stage, there is a divergence regarding the strategic direction for the development of gender

equality during the same period, in terms of the EU trends. The terminology of the Ljubljana process was introduced into Serbian regulations and the mandatory GEP is mentioned as a precondition for EU calls in science (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021a). The new strategy for science does not adequately address the issue of gender equality, although some positive solutions from the Law on Science and Research (2019) are mentioned. However, basically, these stipulations just partially contribute to the integrating of gender equality in the science sector. Some solutions are taken from previous practices, for example, maternity leave is deducted from the period for scientific promotion, as is the case with providing statistics by gender (registry).

On the other hand, the Strategy does not define specific measures for gender equality in leadership. Gender sensitive language is again addressed in a note about grammatical male gender as inclusive of both genders (Vlada Republike Srbije 2021a). Formal representation is emphasized, like gender parity in higher education in different research areas. However, the current strategy for gender equality does not provide specific solutions for local science in Serbia, with complicated status-related and organizational forms. Only universities are addressed in the strategy, whereas institutes are not recognized as scientific research organizations. This dualism in the science sector became even more evident when the ministries for education and science were separated in the government (Vlada Republike Srbije 2022).

Table 1. The level of harmonization of regulations for gender equality and science

Gender equality	Science	Level of harmonization
Law (2009): ban on discrimination in science	Law (2005): no specific measures for gender equality	Law on Gender Equality (2009) and Law on Science and Research (2005): low
	Law (2005/2015): Gender parity in governing bodies (national boards for scientific areas, other commissions)	Law on Gender Equality (2009), Law on Science and Research (2005/2015): high

Gender equality	Science	Level of harmonization
Law (2021): Representation, content regulation in science, gender dimension in project evaluation criteria	Law (2019): Representation of women in leadership, administrative measures (registry by gender) Law on the Science Fund (2018): gender equality in governing bodies (Science Council)	Law on Gender Equality (2021), Law on Science and Research (2019): low

Source: author.

3.2. Gender mainstreaming of science funding

We will look at the two examples to show the scope and limits of financial support for integrating gender equality policies into science policy in Serbia. First, we analyze the role of the Center for the Promotion of Science in the gender equality promotion activities. The Center performs auxiliary and secondary activities related to science. It is more related to education and media domains, than science. However, its role is recognized in the 2021–2025 Strategy for Science and Research. It is interesting to note that its role in promoting gender equality is not clearly emphasized in laws and strategies, but it is involved in promoting gender equality as “scientific activity”. In the Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2023, resources were allocated for “gender and science” through promotional activities of the Center, under the following program activity: “Providing support to the Center for the Promotion of Science” (Zakon o budžetu Republike Srbije za 2023. godinu, 2022, translated by author). The second goal is more specific: “Increase the amount of popular science content for young people, to support future generations of scientists and enhance gender equality in science and increase the interest of women in careers in science” (Zakon o budžetu Republike Srbije za 2023. godinu, 2022). One of the indicators for monitoring this activity is “the number of workshops addressing stereotypes [the word was misspelled in Serbian, note by the author] in science and the importance of women in science” (Zakon o budžetu Republike Srbije za 2023. godinu, 2022, translated by author). Leaving aside linguistically and fundamentally vague definitions, which may indicate the low quality of Center’s program activities, this approach to integrating gender equality into the science sector is based on indirect, secondary activities in science (popularization of science).

Another example is the Science Fund, which has an even bigger role in science funding, and consequently – gender mainstreaming. Since 2019, the Science Fund has the main role in allocation of public expenditure for scientific research in Serbia through different calls and programs. The Fund is modelled on the EU framework programmes and plays a key role in science funding because institutional funding does not cover research expenses. The Science Fund was established as one of the pillars of the 2016–2020 Strategy, which introduced a balance between institutional and project-based funding in science. Paradoxically, although the previous model was project-based science funding, it was much more flexible compared to the current mixed model. The Science Fund has the main role in funding science and in the past several years it has shaped scientific work more than any other institution before.

The question is: has the gender dimension been included in the science funding model, predominantly implemented by the Science Fund? The Fund has a key role in the allocation of public resources for scientific research through public calls. The legal framework for the Science Fund (2019) insufficiently addressed gender equality. We mentioned above that gender parity was mandatory for the governing bodies of the Science Fund (Scientific Council). However, unlike EU programs, the Fund's public calls and programs do not include all mechanisms for gender equality, for example, mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment, especially in universities and scientific institutes, although a great number of scientific institutions have developed these mechanisms in the past few years.

The requirements for basic research grants and programs in all scientific fields have diverged from the EU requirements. The first calls for proposals by the Science Fund in 2020 (the special COVID-19 and IDEAS programs), just like the 2022 program IDENTITIES, did not include gender studies as a scientific field in the application form. The question arises regarding how competent the selected project evaluators were if there was no clear indication of a scientific subfield.⁹ However, in the 2024 IDEAS Call, the gender dimension was introduced through content regulation in the excellence criterion, similar to Horizon Europe (Fond za nauku 2024). It is

⁹ The results of the previous Science Fund calls should be explored from a gender perspective, as well as the effects of the Science Fund funding model on the status of researchers employed in the science sector. We do not address these issues here, but we do focus on public policy and the formal framework for gender equality in science.

too early to estimate the effects of integrating gender equality into science policy, considering that the results of the call are still pending (a year and a half after the call closing date).

4. CONCLUSION

The process of integrating gender equality into science policy in Serbia was guided by the process of accession to the EU, in spite of stalled dynamics of harmonization with EU standards in other areas over the past years (Evropska komisija 2025; European Commission 2022a; Pejić Nikić 2026). Although gender equality policy has changed in the EU over past decades, the result of this development was the complete integration of gender equality in the science and research sector. The ERA plan for 2022–2024 showed a gap between EU level and national systems, therefore the process of harmonization was included in the science agenda. Also, science funding at the EU supra-national administrative level was strengthened and had a great influence on the science systems of the EU member states and candidate countries. Further development in Serbia will depend on the country's future strategic orientation, considering that its accession has for some time been more formal than substantial.

The process of Serbia's accession to the EU has influence on the integration of gender equality policy into science policy. First, some activities related to gender equality in science are mostly based on auxiliary, secondary activities which are not directly related to scientific research (Center for Science Promotion) but take the role of promoters of gender equality. The second dominant mechanism is formal representation in governing bodies; gender equality is less represented in content regulation and program-based funding of topics addressing the gender dimension.

The integration of gender equality into science policy in Serbia is achieved through *selective adoption* of EU models, including the strategic directions and their implementation through instruments and mechanisms. Some instruments are introduced indirectly through education and training projects in research organizations (for example, training on gender budgeting or GEP development), but their effects are not direct. The analysis of regulations in the science sector indicates that the legislative framework was developed with a *discrepancy* in the dynamics and types of measures. Due to the discrepancy, in some periods there was greater convergence between gender equality in basic legislation (the law on gender equality) and gender equality in legislation in science. The culmination of the discrepancy was the recent suspension of the Law on Gender Equality, which practically prevented the

coordination of measures in different areas, including in science. Finally, the mechanisms of gender equality in the science sector have been introduced *inconsistently* in practice. Even when some principles are introduced in gender equality policy based on the EU model, they are not implemented consistently. For example, the IDEAS Call (2024) introduced mechanisms for the gender dimension in projects, but the call has administrative and substantial problems, so the funding for projects has not yet been granted.

The adoption of the EU models of gender equality in the science and research sector in Serbia is shaped by global factors, which have radically changed the status of science in society, but also by the specific trajectory of gender equality policy in Serbia over the past thirty years (Ignjatović, Bošković 2017). Leaving aside Serbia's specific features in the area of gender equality and the stalled accession process, the global context is the same for Serbia and for the EU. Some policy instruments in the science sector in Serbia and the EU are created as an attempt to respond to the recent changes in the status of science as a profession, which has changed substantially in recent decades. Researchers are faced with challenges of precarious work, a reputational crisis in science, and restricted autonomy of scientific work (Ignjatović, Buturović 2022). As a reaction to these challenges, researchers have increased their interest in their own status, which has resulted in an increased number of research studies on the status of science in society (as we mentioned in the Introduction). One aspect of this auto-reflexivity is an increased interest in the intersection of the gender dimension with science policy and its effects on the functioning of science (Le Feuvre *et al.* 2019; Ignjatović, Buturović 2022). This context will shape the future direction of the integration of gender equality policy into science policy in Serbia.

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