

MILIEU H2020 Project ‘Women, Disability and Inclusion’: Introducing the Project

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Abstract: The paper introduces the MILIEU H2020 Project ‘Women, disability and inclusion – scientific excellence in Bulgaria’ – a Coordination and Support Action (CSA) project funded under the Horizon 2020 Programme, ‘Spreading excellence and widening participation – Twinning’ Call. The project aims to unlock, foster and sustain high-quality research at the intersection of studies on women, disability and inclusion by promoting collaboration, networking and an intensive exchange of research between partners. As a project to widen participation, MILIEU is specifically focused on driving excellence and enhancing the research-related fundraising and management competencies of the scholars and staff of the coordinating partner from the target country – in this case, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The paper introduces MILIEU’s goals, methods and expected impact and presents the principal tasks and activities in implementing a project related to fostering research in the areas of women, disabilities and inclusion. It also describes the risks and challenges faced by MILIEU and the consortium and how they were overcome and turned into success stories.

Keywords: H2020, MILIEU, women, disability, inclusion

1. Introduction

The MILIEU H2020 Project ‘Women, Disability and Inclusion – Scientific Excellence in Bulgaria’ addresses a specific need of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IPS-BAS) through obtaining, for the first time within an EU-funded programme, support to promote research on women, disability and inclusion by fostering the cooperation of IPS and BAS with two international leading research institutions – Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain (UCM) and Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy (UNIGE).

The MILIEU project started on 1 January 2021, is a three-year CSA, funded under the Horizon 2020 Call ‘Spreading excellence and widening participation – Twinning’. As a CSA aimed at widening participation, MILIEU fosters networking, coordination and raising awareness to promote competence-building, scientific excellence and the introduction of new lines of research. Moreover, this specific call allows MILIEU to undertake R&I activities not usually included in CSA projects.

2. Background

In Bulgaria, the poorest country in the EU, to be a woman with a disability is, almost inevitably, to face overwhelming disadvantage. As observed in the intersectionality literature (e.g. [Romero, 2018](#); [Hvenegård Lassen and Staunæs, 2020](#); [Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013](#)), this amounts to much more than double discrimination.

According to different data sets, between 7% and 16% of the Bulgarian population experience some degree of disability or long-standing limitation to their usual activities due to health problems (e.g. [National Statistical Institute, 2011](#); [Eurostat, 2020](#)). Gender disaggregated data show that, in 2019, 18.2% of women in Bulgaria reported some level of restriction compared to 13.9% of men ([Eurostat, 2020](#)). In 2021, 223,867 women were eligible to receive a disability pension compared to 192,374 men ([National Social Security Institute, 2021](#)). Even considering the difference in the proportion of women compared to men, which according to data from the recent 2021 census is 52% to 48% ([National Statistical Institute, 2021](#)), the ratio of those receiving a disability pension is still higher for women – 7.6% of women compared to 6.1% of men. Despite this significant discrepancy, there is a distinct lack of social policy initiatives or research and innovation projects focused on women with disabilities. In recent decades in Europe, and particularly Bulgaria, much progress has been made on issues experienced by women with disabilities; however, in Bulgaria, disability remains mainly hidden, denied, misrepresented or misevaluated ([Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2017](#)), and social policies aimed explicitly at women with disabilities are almost non-existent. In Bulgaria, people with disabilities are still generally treated

as ‘non-abled’. They are seen merely as recipients of social assistance (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2017) by the state and public bodies, despite the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted by the UN in 2006, signed by Bulgaria in 2007 and ratified in 2012) and the recent adoption of the Law for People with Disabilities (2018). Moreover, despite adopting the Law on Equality between women and men (2016), intended to establish the principle of equality as a coordinated state policy, a few mechanisms and measures for its implementation at different levels have been enacted; as a result, little has changed in practice. Furthermore, despite progress across Europe towards gender mainstreaming, a gender-oriented approach is almost impossible in Bulgaria, where disability studies are currently not pursued from a gendered perspective, and gender and disability studies are scarce. Therefore, other than basic statistics, data on disability-related to gender has been lacking in Bulgaria (CERMI European Conference, 2007). Women are often not considered separately, even in professional and specialised investigations on inclusion or disability.

Motivated by the specific needs of Bulgaria, MILIEU is also driven by the more substantial attention paid to women, disability and inclusion in scientific domains within the EU. After the introduction of the CRPD in the EU in 2010, ratified in Bulgaria in 2012, and thanks to the earlier affirmation of the Disability Rights and Feminist Rights movements, it is now clear that a cultural divide still exists in the academic environment, where specific social and scientific fields remain completely unexplored. This void lies at the core of MILIEU, which answers a concrete need to implement a project tackling such issues, introduce new research paths linked to women, disability and inclusion, and enhance research excellence and the scientific environment both for the target partner and the two collaborating partners in the project consortium.

3. MILIEU’s goal, objectives and expected impacts

In response to the objectives and specifics of the EU call, MILIEU aims to initiate a resolution to the problems described above.

The overall goal of MILIEU is to create a networking collaboration between the IPS-BAS and two highly renowned universities – UNIGE and UCM, with the final aim of increasing the capacity of IPS-BAS and BAS for scientific excellence, visibility and research innovation to enable ground-breaking research at the intersection of studies on women, disability and inclusion. This result will ensure the opening of new avenues for research, driving excellence and introducing concrete actions to welcome European Research Area (ERA) priorities in Bulgaria and its surrounding academic environment. As these research topics are almost completely unaddressed in Bulgaria, MILIEU will bring significant research and societal impacts in the long term, introducing a new line of research-related to disability studies, feminist disability studies, and gender and women’s studies at IPS-BAS and in Bulgaria.

Specific objectives

The multifaceted overall goal will bring positive change to IPS-BAS, the whole BAS Academy and the advanced project partners – UCM and UNIGE. To fulfil its goal, MILIEU has devised a set of interlinked specific objectives that together form the project implementation.

The first specific objective is to enhance the scientific and technological capacity of the consortium and, in particular, of IPS-BAS and BAS. This objective outlines the scientific strategy for introducing, stimulating and increasing excellence and innovation capacity, and an action plan designed to generate impacts for IPS-BAS, UCM and UNIGE in the research fields related to women, disability and inclusion. This objective also includes a portfolio of actions to be implemented at IPS and BAS to align it with ERA priorities and improve research and scientific activities. The almost complete absence of research projects in the domain in which MILIEU is interested testifies to the need to address these knowledge gaps, to introduce new research lines and research proposals, and to promote international scientific activity to address the knowledge gaps and the needs outlined in MILIEU.

The second specific objective of MILIEU is to raise the research profile of IPS-BAS and BAS, and increase their international networking activities and attractiveness within Bulgaria and the EU. This objective aims to guarantee IPS a leading position in the region in the research domains fostered by MILIEU and to ensure high visibility at the EU level. As a twinning action, MILIEU offers IPS and its scholars the best opportunities to open

up to the EU thanks to interactions with the project partners and the enlarged international networking and knowledge exchange fostered by the project.

It is worth mentioning that, although targeted primarily at IPS and BAS, this objective is also relevant to wider academic circles and Bulgarian society as a whole. As Bulgarian scholars cannot fully break away from their heritage of past isolation, their participation in EU-funded projects remains low. According to Bulgaria's Horizon 2020 national profile, the international visibility of Bulgarian scholars remains well below average – 3.6% of top-cited publications compared to an EU average of 11.1% (EC, 2021). Within its second objective, MILIEU lays the foundation for more positive scientific activity at IPS and BAS, with the potential to extend the results to the whole country with specific and durable actions. Thanks to this project, Bulgaria – until now marginal – will be relaunched in the active and receptive international scientific arena. In addition, the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) focus, now fundamental to European research strategies, is firmly embedded in the project's implementation philosophy and contributes to IPS' leading position in applying sustainable and responsible R&I in Bulgaria.

The third specific objective of MILIEU is to train early-stage researchers (ESR) at IPS and BAS by involving them in research activities at the international level in the fields fostered by the project. This will enable them to progress towards internationalisation while enhancing their career development and their independent thinking in the international arena. The main targets of this objective are ESR at IPS and BAS (in 2018, BAS had a total of 438 PhD students and 297 young scholars); however, the activities developed within SO3 are also open to ESRs from other institutions to maximise the project impact. This objective will also impact broader academic circles and society as a whole, as MILIEU strives to create a fertile and creative scientific environment to help prevent brain drain. Moreover, the activities envisaged by the project will reinforce the career development and independent thinking of ESRs, thus contributing to enhancing the research potential of IPS and Bulgaria. Such increased networking will produce a long-lasting multiplier effect, driving the growth of new generations of promising, internationalised researchers, open to the world.

The fourth specific objective pursues the attainment of high-level management and administration skills within IPS and BAS, especially as related to the improvement of capabilities in research management, with a focus on project design and management activities, to increase the likelihood of gaining funding for international research and innovation projects, and to exchange views and experience at international level. According to Bulgaria's Horizon 2020 national profile, only 0.03% of the principal investigators in Horizon 2020 European Research Council (ERC) grants and 0.5% of the participants in Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA) are Bulgarian (EC, 2021). Although IPS scores are above the national average, the numbers and statistics related to the institute's performance within the framework of Horizon 2020 show the need to strengthen the research management and administration skills of its scholars. For research institutions in general and, in particular, for those located in Eastern Europe, the ability to secure external funding and manage it efficiently is crucial. According to a Euraxess report on mobility patterns and the career paths of researchers (IDEA Consult, 2013), network and financial effects (i.e. the ability to obtain national and international research funding) are closely linked to the likelihood of success within a given research environment.

To successfully attain this specific objective, the cooperation of senior management at IPS is crucial, and this has been ensured before the project's start. Moreover, MILIEU is opening all opportunities in this specific objective to BAS and wider academic circles to guarantee the broadest possible results.

Approaches, methods and activities

To achieve its objectives, MILIEU relies on a range of approaches and methods, including interdisciplinarity and knowledge sharing, capacity building, a participatory approach, inclusivity, sustainability and far-reaching methods for communication and engagement.

The sharing, transfer and exchange of knowledge are essential for the project and run through all its work packages, activities and tasks. Learning-by-doing, dialogue and training attitudes are the preferred implementation methods of MILIEU and form the project's basic approach. Direct and open participation by the entire IPS staff in the activities, and opening access to interested scholars and staff from other institutes and academic institutions, is vital in creating a more significant impact.

Capacity building and shared learning are the primary approaches of three of the project's work packages, focused on spreading excellence. Training sessions targeted at the researchers, ESRs and administrative staff of IPS and other departments at BAS are the primary means of boosting capability to secure research funding, project drafts, networking and internationalisation. Other activities include cooperation in project drafting (national, EU and international) for research funding, event organisation and networking activities at each partner's premises.

The participatory approach is another key asset of the project, ensured via training sessions and exchanges between researchers within the consortium. Training sessions especially tailored for the ESRs include engagement in studies on disability, inclusion and gender research and introduce these young scholars to different environments, research methods and ways of working, fundamental for training and re-training researchers. Seminars, workshops, short-term placements and visits, summer schools and conferences are all channels to implement the participatory approach fostered by the project. Qualitative sessions with open debates, brainstorming, focus groups and storytelling sessions will lead research innovation processes and guarantee co-constructed and sustainable results.

Other key approaches of MILIEU are inclusiveness and sustainability, ensured by qualitative research using contacts with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), focus groups and narrative interviews that help reach a deep understanding of the advantages linked to enhancing the research in MILIEU's academic field. The quantitative analysis of data linked to women, disability and inclusion in different domains, including – but not restricted to – education, participation and law, facilitates the planning of project activities and the monitoring of the project's success.

The far-reaching engagement of MILIEU, yet another leading approach, is ensured by implementing means of communication and dissemination, such as social and traditional media, films, exhibitions, open participation, public engagement, all in durable and replicable perspectives.

The twinning exercise promoted by MILIEU builds on an appropriate set of key actions, with a strong focus on ESR engagement – from joint training and research paths to bilateral meetings, from short visits to dedicated conferences and summer schools – leading to new research opportunities and joint research projects in the field. The organisation of networking and outreach activities, conferences and dissemination events, and liaison activities with similar projects contribute to the visibility of IPS-BAS and the two partners – UCM and UNIGE – in the field. Finally, to ensure the transferability and uptake of results and the sustainability of MILIEU after the project end date, the partners will produce final recommendations and guidelines for policymakers and other institutions in target countries.

Expected impact

The expected impacts of MILIEU are related to promoting a solid and innovative research culture with the final goal of increasing the excellence, reputation and attractiveness of the consortium – and, most of all, IPS-BAS and BAS – in international networking and cooperation. The successful implementation of the project, thanks to the cross-fertilisation activities fostered, will generate substantial impacts, all contributing to enhancing the excellence and research performance of IPS and BAS. Further, MILIEU will create the conditions to allow IPS to become a leading research institution in Bulgaria, thanks to the enhanced research culture (including ESRs as protagonists) and the institutional changes generated. This impact will attract Bulgarian and European students and help, with its associated effects, to improve the general economic situation in Bulgaria as a result of increased participation in scientific activity and improved business contacts inside and outside Bulgaria.

Considering the above, MILIEU contributes to eliminating the existing gap between EU countries and enhancing the Bulgarian academic sector by:

- enhancing the national research framework for the studies of women, disability and inclusion, within which research is still significantly underperforming, as explained above;
- creating further funding opportunities, by promoting and increasing project design activities and specific fundraising training to obtain external funding for research and innovation activities. This effort is combined with tailored management improvement to be achieved through learning-by-doing activities, specific

training and generating a snowball effect beneficial to the researchers and administrative staff of IPS and BAS and, more widely, to Bulgarian academia;

- introducing active international and national networking;
- substantially enhancing international cooperation and competition;
- creating the conditions for improving the capacity to attract internationally leading researchers;
- creating a concrete transfer of knowledge among IPS, UCM and UNIGE and other actors;
- opening up new and unexplored research lines by developing a pool of expertise in the research domains at the core of MILIEU, creating the conditions for inclusion and equality in the academic environment and selected subjects;
- adopting RRI principles and a participatory methodology towards research, which should involve society, government and industry with academia;
- devising and implementing a dedicated action plan to ensure the project activities' sustainability after each end date.



Figure 1: Project impact and long-term contribution

4. Risks, challenges and success stories in the first year of the project

Identifying and mitigating the various risks and challenges stemming from the internal characteristics of the project and consortium and the external characteristics of society and the specific project field are fundamental

to the successful implementation of any project. This is especially true for CSA widening participation projects such as MILIEU, targeted at overcoming challenges through their goal and expected impact. For MILIEU, the consortium identified several critical risks in the project preparation phase, including hostility to gender equality, low ESR interest, loss of critical competencies or key persons, poor dissemination and communication return, failure to produce a delivery in time. All these risks are monitored, and the impact of project activities is periodically evaluated.

MILIEU faced several challenges within the first year of the project and even before its start.

The very existence of a project targeted at the core topics of MILIEU is a success, given current developments and mobilisations in the public discourse in Bulgaria in recent years over the term gender. Although not the case among SSH scholars and scientists at IPS-BAS, a persistent misunderstanding of the term is supported by its improper and derogatory use (Darakchi, 2019), extending even to a delegitimisation of the field and studies on gender. In order to avoid this turmoil and the risk of being suspended at the institutional or national level, MILIEU has been written using terms that do not form part of the anti-gender mobilisation discourse and is currently taking steps to create a scientific debate that would help resolve the issue.

Another challenge came from the somewhat related, although distinct, widespread perception that in Bulgaria and especially in science, equality between women and men was established many years ago. Merely looking at the statistical distribution and general data, this appears so; indeed, much has been achieved. However, this is rather the remnant of socialist declarative equality, which has little to do with women's autonomy and empowerment or the eradication of gender-based prejudice (e.g. Goldfarb, 1997; Kotzeva, 1999; Miroiu, 2007). This declarative equality has the effect of substantially amplifying the resistance to adopting genuine equality between women and men. As part of MILIEU, one of the authors and another colleague had the opportunity to participate in the commission entrusted with developing the first Gender Equality Plan (GEP) of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences aimed at boosting equality between women and men in the Academy. Although the adoption of the GEP itself should be credited not to MILIEU but to the European Commission – for making a GEP a prerequisite for Horizon funding – our participation in the project allowed us to observe first hand and, more importantly, to contribute to and steer institutional changes in the Academy towards measures that will foster genuine rather than declarative equality between women and men, overcoming unconscious gender-based bias.

Another challenge faced by MILIEU is the slow pace of changing understandings of and approaches to disability. Changing a culture is a challenging task, and a culture of exclusion needs still more time and competence to be transformed into one of inclusion. The actions planned at the institutional level primarily involve the partner institutions, particularly IPS and BAS. However, information about training activities was disseminated to all higher education institutions, NGOs and stakeholders working in areas connected to disability and gender in Bulgaria. Access to all training and mentoring events was provided for all interested parties. Thus, for example, the last training seminar event of MILIEU in December 2021 welcomed participants from the institutes of the Academy, several universities and NGO representatives, and was able to share best practice with a far wider audience.

Finally, we wish to focus on a challenge faced by all scientific activity in the last two years – the impossibility of organising face-to-face meetings and direct exchanges that were intended, in the project writing phase, to be the primary means for implementing MILIEU. Like all other projects, MILIEU had to adapt to the physical barriers brought by the pandemic and, in doing so, to make the schedule and activities more flexible via online meetings and hybrid sessions. Since online meetings reduce opportunities for personal interaction and sharing, the start of the project was rescheduled so that the key activities needing face-to-face interaction would fall in the summer months, and some activities – such as short-term visits – were postponed to the second and third year. Other activities – such as training sessions and the first co-hosted summer school – were implemented online or in a hybrid form which, in the case of MILIEU, paradoxically led to far higher inclusivity and impact, since a significant number of people had the opportunity to become involved in the absence of physical obstacles.

5. In conclusion: Future activities

In order to achieve its goal and objectives and enhance R&I in Bulgaria, with a focus on the study fields of women, disability and inclusion, MILIEU operates on different levels by:

- 1) implementing an excellent twinning exercise, capable of influencing, engaging and fertilising the surrounding environment;
- 2) intervening in institutional changes at IPS-BAS – with actions specifically tailored to strengthening its scientific and technological bases, in full compliance with ERA priorities;
- 3) developing and implementing a plan to increase research capacity, attractiveness, funding, competitiveness and excellence;
- 4) boosting ESRs' involvement in the international scientific arena.

After the first year of the project, and with the exploratory and planning tasks already complete, MILIEU is, in January 2022, well into its implantation phase, looking forward to some of the key events in the second and the third years of the project.

For 2022 and 2023, the partners envisage online and hybrid training events and seminars, exchange visits, meetings and workshops targeting the managerial staff of IPS and BAS, two international conferences and two summer schools for ESRs and research personnel.

The 2022 doctoral school is scheduled for the early summer in Madrid and will focus on 'Diversity and Inclusion in Responsible Research, Innovation and Communication'. It will gather at least 20 PhD students and ESRs from IPS and the other 41 research institutes at BAS, UNIGE and UCM for three days of intensive training and exchange with experienced scholars and high-level professionals. Its principal objective will be to teach ESRs how to plan and practically implement effective, responsible research and communication strategies to include at various levels the project's direct and indirect target groups, especially those less visible, including the general public.

The 2022 international conference of MILIEU is scheduled for the autumn and, it is hoped, will take place in person in Sofia. The conference will gather leading scholars and grass-root practitioners to explore and discuss key issues and problems related to women's studies, disability and inclusion.¹

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¹ A full list, descriptions and registration links for MILIEU's events are available at the project website at <https://milieu-h2020.eu>.

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