

RESEARCH

REPORTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

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DREAMERS, REBELS, DIPLOMATS. SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE. TWO GENERATIONS OF FEMALE ACTIVISTS



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To address complex questions on the role of women in democratic civic societies of East-Central European countries, and with the aim to foster dialogue between activists in the region, the Institute of Public Affairs and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's regional programme "Gender Equality in East-Central Europe" organised a two-day event in October 2014 under the title "Dreamers, Rebels, Diplomats. Social activism in East-Central Europe. Two generations of female activists". The event took place in Warsaw, and consisted of two parts: an international public conference and a closed workshop for activists. In this paper, the main outcomes of both conference and workshop will be presented. The discussions concerned women's social activism, political involvement both after 1989 and today, as well as strategies on giving women a more audible voice when speaking about many different issues related to their activism. A short introduction to the situation of the third sector and a brief analysis of the contemporary debate on women's engagement in the democratic opposition movement of the 1980s will be presented in the forthcoming pages of this paper, followed by a report about the conference and workshop.

Activists attending the event comprised of women from seven countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia. Not only did they represent two generations – 1989 and 2014 – but they also represented an array of different forms of activism, from trade union activism, student activism, urban movements, parliamentary politics, social work, and activism connected to women's homelessness, to preventing violence against women, art, and academic gender studies. The aim of the event was to provide a rare opportunity for intergenerational dialogue, as debates on the results of democratic transitions and current challenges of democratic civil movements in the East-Central European post-socialist countries rarely include perspectives of different generations.

The main topic of the event was an in-depth debate about women's social activism in the Baltic and Visegrad countries in 1989 and 2014. By drawing attention to the achievements of female activists from the anti-communist opposition, we wanted to restore the memory of women's participation in that unique social movement and the process of building new democracy. It is not only important for the reasons of historical fairness, but also gives young female leaders at the beginning of the 21st century great female role models to follow in their public activities. While the first part of the conference focused on the role of women in democratic opposition movements and democratic transitions, the second panel revolved around women's activism today and the question of what challenges and opportunities they are now facing in the current political reality. During the workshop the following day, female activists from the 1980s and female representatives of contemporary

social movements discussed best strategies of women's activists, taking into account different fields of action and the specific character of different types of activism.

The new social and economic order after 1989, the emergence of women's rights movements in the region, and recent backlashes against gender equality, LGBT communities, and minorities linking the countries of the ECE region, enabled the participating activists to find each other's experiences relevant and participate in inspiring debates on social activism strategies in their countries.

The lack of women in parliaments in the region after 1989

The erasure of women's involvement and leadership in democratic opposition movements of the 1980s, which took place right after the political breakthrough and the beginning of new, democratic governments in the 1990s, was widely described in "(No) women in politics. Is a common strategy for East-Central Europe possible?"¹ The discovery of this erased history, and the need for it to be discovered, sparked a crucial debate and the beginning of a new women's movement in Poland, the Women's Congress. It also turned out to be a common experience for countries of the region with a similar historical background. People interested in women's participation in public life in ECE seem to try to find the answer to a question that has been bothering them for some time: What happened to the female figures fighting for freedom and independence in the 1970s and 1980s? How come the process of restoring democracy turned out to deprive women from their actual participation in democratic institutions?

Just after 1989, the representation of women in individual parliaments fluctuated around 10%. Unfortunately, looking at a table comparing the situation of women in parliaments at that time and 25 years after transition, we might be disappointed with the lack of progress towards women's advancement in national politics – see Table 1. "Share of women in the Lower House of national parliaments in ECE countries after the first democratic elections held in 1989/90/91 and in 2014". The only countries that reached the 20% threshold are Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Representation of Czech,² Estonian, and Slovak women in politics is below 20%, while Hungary lags behind other ECE countries in this respect with only 10% of women among parliamentarians.

1 M. Druciarek, A. Niżyńska, (No)women in politics. Is a common strategy for East-Central Europe possible?, Institute of Public Affairs, 2014.

2 However, it is worth-noting that in 2010 the number of female representatives among all members of the Lower House of Czech Parliament reached 22% and in the next elections we could observe a decrease of 3 percentage points.

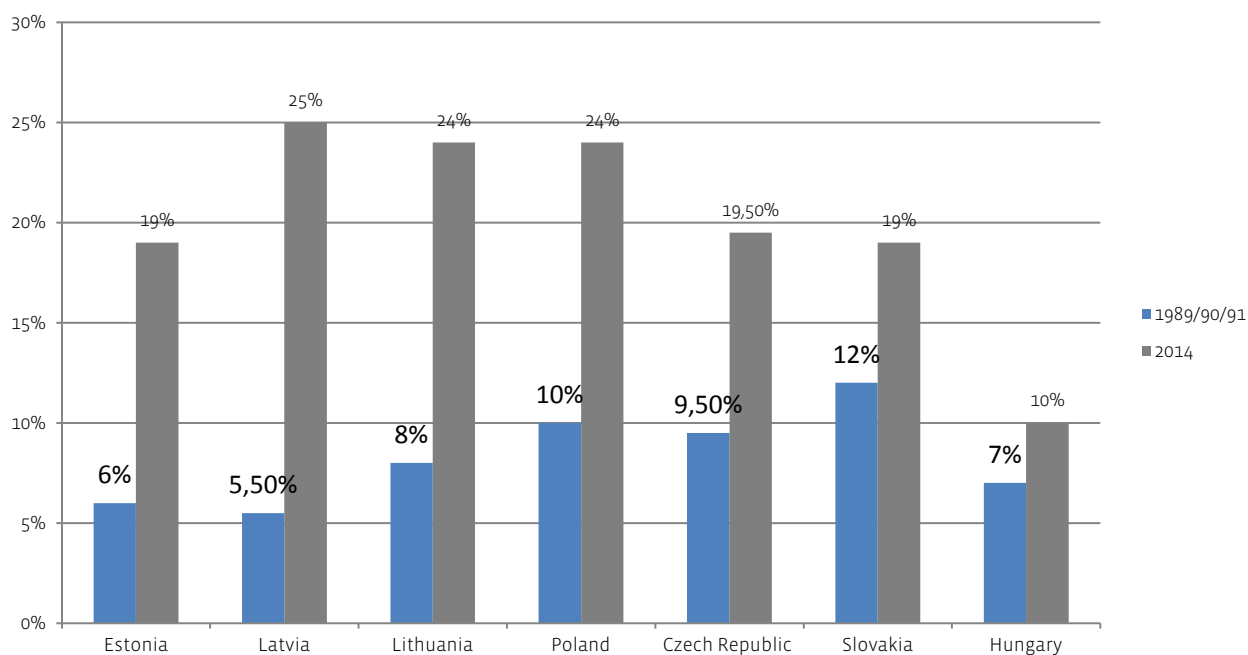


Table 1: Share of women in the Lower House of national parliaments in ECE countries after the first democratic elections held in 1989/90/91 and in 2014. Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, November 2014.

The fact that in the first elections in which citizens were able to choose their representatives in a fully free and independent way, women were practically eliminated from political life shows that their position in ECE countries in the period immediately following transformation was very weak.

In our paper “(No)women in politics. Is a common strategy for East-Central Europe possible?” we examined the barriers and problems that women are still facing in their political careers 25 years after the first democratic elections more in-depth.

“The fact that political life in the form of party democracy was only then being formed, did not have any clear rules, and was based mainly on personal links, did not favour women in the development of their parliamentary careers. Therefore, women politicians did not have particularly good chances for promotion in their political parties and the decision to enter the realm of politics was not often taken by women.”³ The lack of women’s representation was perpetuated by a vicious circle: women did not have sufficient female role models inside political parties, which could indirectly transfer to their underrepresentation on electoral lists, in turn resulting in the lack of women in parliament. Thus, no new women could become powerful role models for new women in politics. This is a mechanism called the “old-boy network” and has worked very well for male politicians for a long time. The limited number of female politicians hinders the aspirations of young women to become one of them, because the political world seems to be reserved only for men.⁴

³ M. Druciarek, A. Niżyńska, (No)women in politics. Is a common strategy for East-Central Europe possible?, Institute of Public Affairs, 2014.

⁴ Research “Women on the electoral lists” carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs in 2011, 2012, and 2014, which included several dozen interviews conducted with female candidates at the local, national, and European

Of course many other structural and institutional obstacles hindered women's political participation, but the vicious circle of the lack of female role models is an important factor worth mentioning.

The political milieu was not very supportive of women's participation on the political scene; hence some of them were more willing to engage in non-governmental activities, as well as local and civic initiatives. "Activism in social movements, especially in the case of a long-silenced and diverse group such as women, can offer an escape from the shortcomings of traditional forms of politics (such as parties and governments) and possibly remedy democratic deficits on both the global and domestic levels,"⁵ argues Katalin Fábián. Of course, some publicly active women before 1989 decided to enter politics and were successful. For example, Ludwika Wujec was for a long period of time devoted to restoring local governance in Poland and raising standards of democratic procedures. It was only few years ago that she started to be active within the Women's Congress.

On the other hand, many women who were active in the democratic opposition at that time have pursued their further activist careers within the framework of the women's movement. Jiřina Šiklová, one of the signatories of Charter 77⁶ in Czechoslovakia, created in 1991 the Prague Gender Studies Centre – the first feminist organisation in the Czech Republic, which is still active today. Women's involvement in the third sector after 1989 was significant in all ECE countries, and female activists took an active part in creating new kinds of institutions as an important part of the democratic structure. For NGOs, however, civic society would not become an active part in creating a new social system. A number of very important social issues such as unemployment and poverty became clearly visible, and the authorities often had problems keeping up with addressing them. At the same time, urgent social needs were sacrificed for the sake of building a free market economy. NGOs filled that gap and provided services that before 1989 were guaranteed by the state.

Civil Society in East-Central Europe

"The role of the NGO sector in the process of democratization is associated with building civic society where civil society organizations have to perform

level.

5 K. Fábián, *Open Societies? Connections between Women's Activism, Globalization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, *The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations* Volume 9, Number 6, 2010.

6 An informal civic initiative in communist Czechoslovakia from 1976 to 1992, named after the document Charter 77 from January 1977. Charter 77 criticised the government for failing to implement the human rights provisions of a number of documents it had signed.

important social, political, and community functions. In contrast to the socialist political system where the state was the sole provider of social welfare services and the Communist Party the only institution dictating the political agenda, in a functioning democracy, NGOs have to enhance political participation and help the political elite in defining a rational public agenda,”⁷ states Atanas Gotchev, in his analysis of the development of the third sector in post-communist countries. The third sector, which evolved after 1989 in the ECE region, was something completely new, just like the free market economy. Moreover, it became the sphere of social life and the labour market, and contrary to politics, it was highly dominated by women.⁸

A good tool to assess the stage of evolvement of the non-governmental sector, as well as allowing comparisons between countries, is the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia,⁹ which has been used by USAID since 1997 and currently covers 60 countries in different regions around the world. The Index measures the sustainability of each country’s CSO sector based on CSOSI’s seven dimensions: legal environment, organisational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, infrastructure, and public image. According to the ranking of 2013, “the Baltic and Visegrad countries continue to boast the highest overall levels of CSO sustainability in Europe and Eurasia.”¹⁰ The highest sustainability levels were reached by the third sectors in Estonia and Poland, while Hungary remains the only country among the Baltic states and Visegrad group that still needs to create better conditions for the sustainability of NGOs. In comparison to previous editions of the Index, only Slovakia and Hungary noted deterioration of their overall result, while In Latvia, CSOs made progress in five out of seven dimensions of sustainability – legal environment, financial viability, advocacy, infrastructure, and public image.

NGOs in ECE suffer mostly from the lack of funding and limited voluntarily activity of ECE societies. Most of the NGOs hire staff and the professionalisation of the sector is continuing rapidly. The lack of funding brings frustration and lack of perspectives to NGO workers, who often provide services that require specialist expertise and psychological preparations, such as social services for vulnerable groups and profound public policy analysis.¹¹

7 A. Gotchev, “NGOs and Promotion of Democracy and Civil Society in East Central Europe”, Sofia, 1998. <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/96-98/gotchev.pdf> [access: 14 November 2014]

8 Seventy per cent of all employees working in NGOs in Poland (excluding sport organisations) are women. [Data: Klon/Jawor 2012]

9 The Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) <http://www.usaid.gov/europe-urasia-civil-society> [access: 14 November 2014] The assessment is carried out by national experts. CSOSI’s local implementation partners in each country lead the process of organising and convening a diverse and representative panel of CSO experts. Country panels discuss the seven dimensions for the year being assessed, and reach consensus on the scores corresponding to each dimension.

10 2013 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. 17th Edition – June 2014. United States Agency for International Development, Bureau for Europe and Eurasia, Office of Democracy, Governance and Social Transition. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/E%26E%202013%20CSOSI%20Final%2010-29-14.pdf> [access: 14 November 2014]

11 2013 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. 17th Edition – June 2014. United States Agency for International Development, Bureau for Europe and Eurasia, Office of Democracy, Governance and Social Transition.

Development of the CSO sector in the ECE region can be analysed in terms of two important moments – the creation of the sector in 1989 and accession to the European Union in 2004, which opened windows of new possibilities for funding NGOs in new member states. This trend was visible in all Visegrad countries and Baltic states. However, the sudden increase of European funding did not solve all the problems related to the financial capacity of ECE NGOs. According to the 2013 CSO Index, they are still struggling to diversify their resources.

Moreover, this particular problem has also been diagnosed in sectoral analysis concerning only women's organisations. According to very interesting research on women's movements in post-soviet countries carried out by Natasha Bingham,¹² feminist NGOs in the region are limited due to the lack of resources and lack of interest in their actions not only among public officials, but also society in general. As one of the Estonian respondents of the research states: "There are few (active) women's organizations in our country and they have converged into some bigger cities, many districts are not covered. It seems that 'the voice' of women's organizations is not loud enough to influence the authorities in order to improve women's situation and effectively draw attention to gender-based violence."¹³ A louder voice could catch the public's attention, although it is very hard to beat the competition over financial resources with other NGOs. There is a limited pool of money in the non-governmental sector, while the number of initiatives is growing and many important social problems, not only gender inequality, are addressed by them. Very often other social issues are considered more urgent. It is therefore hard to beat the competition with other NGOs acting in the interest of other groups and trying to solve different social problems.

An inspiring statement was highlighted in the same research: "Women in the former Soviet republics were involved in independence movements only to find themselves excluded from state institutions. NGOs provided Eastern European women greater access to the political arena after democratic transition."¹⁴ This is why 25 years after the democratic revolutions, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Institute of Public Affairs decided to gather women from different backgrounds and generations, both democratic oppositionists from the 1980s and those who started their civic activity after 1989, to talk about women's activism today.¹⁵

As participants of the conference also highlighted, academia played an important part in supporting progressive movements in ECE countries just after 1989. Marija Aušrine Pavilionien , a panellist at the conference

<http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/E%26E%202013%20CSOSI%20Final%2010-29-14.pdf> [access: 14 November 2014]

12 N. Bingham, *Gendering Civil Society: Women's Organizations in Former Soviet Republics*: <http://wpsa.research.pdx.edu/meet/2012/bingham.pdf> [access: 21 November 2014]

13 Ibidem.

14 Ibidem.

15 The list of participants of the conference and workshop can be found at the end of this paper.

put it this way: “In Lithuania, this theoretical basis was very important in fighting traditionalistic tendencies of various social groups at the beginning of rebuilding democracy. We had a very active feminist movement thanks to university academics. For example, already in 1991 we had recreated University Women’s Association. Something that distinguished Lithuania from other post-Soviet countries is the unity of female academics, NGOs, and women in politics. This unity made Lithuania a very progressive country at the beginning of the transition period.” This very interesting point about the cooperation of academia, the third sector, and politicians brings us to the question: What does this cooperation look like right now? What is the current condition of civil society?

Dreamers, Rebels, or Diplomats?

The debates held during and around the “Dreamers, Rebels, Diplomats” conference had two recurring themes: reflection on the history of women’s activism in the democratic oppositions before 1989, and a discussion of the ways of advancing women’s rights in the new democracies, namely the relationships between informal women’s rights movements, NGOs, and women politicians or women in decision-making positions. Theory and practice were linked and influenced each other in these debates, as some of the participants were female social activists, acquainted with feminist theory and used this to reflect on their experiences and practices.

1. The first panel, “Road to Democracy, the role of female activists during democratic transition”, gathered women who were active during the democratic opposition and further pursued their career in, respectively, free Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland as either local councillors or MPs. The panel was moderated by Agnieszka Graff, a Polish feminist and professor at Warsaw University. First, panellists had a chance to reflect on their personal reasons and motivations to be active in public life. Some of them pursued a career in academia, as it was a way to discover gender issues through establishing contacts with Western gender studies programmes. Others said it was a natural way for them to fight for women’s rights, as their family models supported strong and active women. Interestingly, one of the panellists, Ludwika Wujec from Poland, admitted that at the time of transformation, she was not active in a women’s movement. She even explained to her Western colleagues, when they asked about feminist actions in Poland: “There is nothing like that [women’s movement]. First, we need to build democracy and then we will fight for women’s rights.” However, she admitted that this attitude (“first democracy, then women’s rights”) was a mistake, as gender equality is an integral part of democracy and that in the last few years she

started to be active within the Women's Congress and committed herself to the promotion of women in politics.

Agnieszka Graff introduced the voice of the middle generation, as she called herself – not democratic oppositionists anymore, yet older than the current social activists – and reminded participants of the debate that took place in Poland in the mid-1990s, when younger women wanted to celebrate great female leaders of opposition as heroes, and the latter did not want to participate in that feast. Graff said she felt disappointed at that time, but it also raised the question of whether the road to democracy in ECE countries was also a path to re-traditionalisation? “Was comeback to normality also a comeback to patriarchy?” asked Agnieszka Graff.

Aušma Cimdina from Latvia agreed that the process of re-traditionalisation could have been observed in her country, yet she opposed a notion that “democracy was disproportionately harder for women. I think it was hard for both sexes, but these difficulties are specific, they are not gender neutral.” Her thesis was backed up by the Polish panellist, who agreed that transformation was a difficult experience for both men and women. “Employment security was lost by both men and women,” said Wujec. And the fact that women experienced it harder, was due to the fact that before transition, their situation was also worse than that of men.

Marija Pavilionienė's reflection on the involvement of academia in the fight against the conservative movement at that time has already been mentioned. She highlighted the accession to EU as a turning point on Lithuania's road to gender equality. After entering the European community, no one was afraid any longer about the reaction of the West towards any anti-progressive actions. These groups that supported accession despite a quite traditional approach to social issues, revealed their real attitude towards such concepts as gender equality, migration, and LGBT rights. “When we entered the EU, the masks fell down, nationalisms, traditionalisms, conservatism and all other -isms came out,” summed up the expert, currently an MP in Lithuania.

This trend of evolution of many “-isms” was also noted by Zsuzsanna Szelényi, a Hungarian MP. “The change from communism to democracy brought up many ideologies – nationalism, traditionalism. This all came up very openly in all ECE countries in a very natural way and it might have influenced societies in thinking very differently about gender roles.” She reminded participants that for many women, gender equality was imposed by communist ideology and was never really internalised by many Hungarians. Many women exercised their freedom after 1989 by staying at home and not having to work anymore. Zsuzsanna Szelényi also highlighted the important role of academia nowadays: “Thanks to gender studies, a new generation has started to focus on women's issues in a more natural and clear way, not an ideological way. I think this gave a fresh start.”

Agnieszka Graff also raised the issue of overrepresentation of women in the third sector and their underrepresentation in politics. Ludwika Wujec opposed the notion that NGOs are just “safe shelters” for those women who want to be publically active, yet they do not want pursue a political career. “It is a great place for civic engagement and women are very much active there,” said Wujec. Graff explained her supposition with the global trend of dreamers and rebels creating NGOs, while political players create political parties and business. Graff also reminded participants of the vivid debate in the Polish women’s movement and the dilemma of whether feminists should enter politics. The panellists all agreed that politics is a way to change reality, but they also gave some advice.

Marija Pavilionienė noted: “You can have great knowledge and expertise, but when you join the party, you lose your courage and you serve the party leaders. This is the main problem with entering politics. Women should first of all reinforce their personalities and individualities, plus have the courage to express their own views.” Zsuzsanna Szelényi raised another important issue of competitiveness in a political world. She warned that women who are elected due to a quota mechanism can forget that the political world is highly competitive and women need to fight as much as men do.

The panellists also talked about the most important issue, in their opinion, for their societies regarding women’s matters. Aušma Cimdina presented the problem of the image of women in the Latvian media and hyper-sexualisation of media messages. She also stressed the need for education from a very low age to mainstream gender equality attitudes in society. The necessity of equality education was one of the points raised by all four panellists during the debate. In Lithuania, a similar problem to Poland occurs, which is the influence of the Catholic Church on legislation, especially in the field of reproductive health and family models. Zsuzsanna Szelényi mentioned those problems that are currently being addressed in Hungary: gender-based violence and the low participation of women on the labour market.

Panellists from the first panel considered themselves mostly dreamers and rebels, not so much diplomats. However, the fact that they all have such complex and powerful life stories may bring us to the conclusion that they use all three strategies in the end, in order to pursue their goals as politicians, activists, and women responsible for public good and the condition of their societies.

2. In the second panel, “Possibilities of democracy – perspectives of contemporary female social activists”, young activists from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia gathered to speak about their role in social activism as women and whether they feel themselves to be the successors of the female democratic oppositionists from the 1980s. The panellists represented various social movements: members of trade unions,

urban activists, and the fight for the rights of homeless and economically disadvantaged people as well as LGBT minority. Agata Chełstowska from the Gender Equality Observatory at the Institute of Public Affairs was the moderator of the panel and firstly asked in what way feminism and women's rights activism are, if at all, present in such various fields of actions.

Mariann Dósa, a scholar from Hungary, gave an interesting remark on the gender lenses she constantly wears while working on very different social issues: "Even though I identify myself as a feminist, I also do not take feminism as one issue. I take gender as a pair of lenses that I always wear, when I work in different fields – in academia and activism work. For example, homeless women have different problems than men, I work for the NGO City for All dealing with issues of homeless citizens, and I created a special group for homeless women." Radka Sokolová, a trade unionist from the Czech Republic, supported this comment by showing how her trade union work affects female employees, although she mostly fights more for labour rights than for women's rights themselves. However, Agnieszka Ziółkowska from the Polish urban movement warned against declarative support for gender issues by male social leaders. "Being a female leader in social movements is as hard as it is in politics. And although male leaders declaratively support gender equality, they also use discriminatory practices within the movement."

What was surprising to the conference participants was how unified the experience of the erasure of women's engagement in the fight for democracy was for the East-Central European bloc. All of the younger participants expressed their desire to know more about women activists who were active in the democratic oppositions of their countries during the 1980s, and the sense of void in the place of national histories of democratic oppositions. The differences between countries mainly lay in how much, if anything, was written about a country's female opposition activists of the 1980s. The Hungarian participants had the chance to exchange knowledge on Hungarian publications on the issue. Poland seemed to be a positive example, with a few books and a documentary film about women in the Solidarność movement being made. It is worth mentioning that a pioneering book describing the work and memories of Polish women activists of the time was written by an American researcher, Shana Penn.¹⁶

There was a common conviction that the current female activists should both "create bridges between our activism and their activism," as Agnieszka Ziółkowska mentioned, which might change the male dominated political scene, which has the same faces and hasn't changed during last 25 years. Mariann Dósa supported this active attitude and highlighted the responsibility of current feminist activists not to be forgotten: "We have to think what we need to make differently to be better heard. And it is not about blaming our predecessors, because it is not their individual fault, these

¹⁶ S. Penn, "Solidarity's secret", The University of Michigan Press, 2005.

are systemic patterns that lead to the erasure of female activity history from our public debate. We have a responsibility to change it and we should be more vocal and reach more people – men and women – in our societies and raise consciousness.”

Alena Krempaská, a human rights activist from Bratislava, reflected on the bridges between 1980s’ female oppositionists and contemporary women active in Slovak public life. She admitted she does not work with any of them so closely, but she said: “I feel that they have made huge steps in the process of mainstreaming gender equality, so I feel I owe them and this is how I have a connection with them.”

All panellists admitted that a backlash against progressive values could be observed in all countries. Although it has different backgrounds, it takes the same form. Sometimes it is panic against gender equality or LGBT rights reinforced by the Catholic Church (Poland, Slovakia); other times it is a fear against challenging traditional family roles and family models (Hungary). The biggest challenges for improving the situation of women were also identified. Radka Sokolová said that “Gender Pay Gap, work-life balance, and equal representation of men and women in decision making positions – these are the most important issues for women in the Czech Republic right now.” Alena Krempaská said that the most important issue for women in Slovakia is the lack of women’s issues in the public debate.

The last and most important question for the future of social activists in the respective countries that was raised during the panel concerned their thoughts on entering politics. It turned out that contemporary activists do not share the dilemma of their predecessors described by Agnieszka Graff in the previous panel discussion, namely hesitation over the involvement of feminists and other social activists in political parties. They all either believe they should enter politics and change the rules of the games from the inside to make the political world more transparent and based on merits, or they admit they cooperate with politicians in their advocacy activities.

The discussions commenced during the conference were brought to a closed workshop for the activists, which was held the next day at the Institute of Public Affairs.

The Workshop

The workshop was designed as a platform for the exchange of experiences and a space for regional and intergenerational dialogue on female activism as well as on successful and potential strategies. Participants were asked two main questions during the first part of the group work:

Why did they decide to become social activists?

Among many reasons for their activism, female participants specified the willingness to develop themselves and the satisfaction they get from their work. The possibility of meeting people who support their ideas and share their views of society development was also important factor for many of them. Of course, the change they want to make in the world was commonly stated as a reason for their activism, but also less serious and substantial causes were mentioned, such as simple fun in what they do, which they would not find in other kinds of work. Being active in different issues and for various causes, they justified interest in that particular field through their personal experiences and taking responsibility for others, especially the weakest groups.

What hinders their social activism?

The main constraints ECE female activists face in their work agree with the ones already mentioned in the previous parts of the paper and are, in general, convergent with the struggles faced by civil society in the region. The constraints include lack of funding, big competition among NGOs over limited resources, and the ignorance of the state regarding the social problems raised by activists. The egoism of citizens of ECE countries driven by the free market rules of individual profit is also a factor limiting the number of volunteers in the organisations. The burnout of NGO employees and independent activists caused by the above-mentioned constraints was also mentioned by participants as a big problem.

Especially hard for women activists are right-wing movements currently gaining power in many ECE countries and populism becoming a popular method of earning political supporters. Female participants expressed their need to achieve balance between the high standards of the work they do and the results they want to make. They also argued that an open discussion about failures and “bad practices” could be beneficial for their work, as they might learn not only from the best examples, but also from other organisations’/ movements’ mistakes. The ability to reach out for help and the admittance of the fact that not everything can be done at once would also be advantageous for female activists in some situations.

The second theme, present throughout the conference and workshop, was a debate on the different forms and strategies of activists of the women’s rights movement. The event also benefitted from the diversity of the invited guests’ occupations. The guests represented such varied fields as trade union activism, urban movements, parliamentary politics, social work, and activism connected to women’s homelessness, gender studies, art, and others. This diversity of experiences, combined with an intergenerational discussion,

provided a rare opportunity for strategising and formulating general conclusions on women's activism in the region.

There was a discussion on the different pros and cons of different forms of activism: from informal groups, through NGOs, to membership in political parties, and running for or holding public office.

Women politicians, some of them current and past members of parliaments, were asked about the limitations of association with a political party and the constraints of parliamentary mainstream politics, regarded as requiring much compromise. The guests discussed these limitations and hardships connected to being the first or only woman in a largely male-dominated high-power environment. At the same time, they expressed their conviction that gender equality in parliamentary politics, influencing legislation, and running for public office are necessary strategies for a movement that wants to influence change in any country.

Asked about their perspective on taking part in politics, younger activists also responded in a positive way: while stressing their criticism, they drew on the experience of being part of democratic civic societies and different social movements, and supported the conclusion that activists concerned with gender equality should join and influence politics. One of the participants, representing a Polish urban movement, described the effort to run for public offices (in local as well as parliamentary elections) as a matter of "taking responsibility for one's words" and having the courage not only to describe, but implement change.

The practice of NGOs and their activism was also discussed. The difficulties and disadvantages of NGO activism have already been described above, although the workshop and conference participants highlighted a lot of positive aspects of social activism. It was viewed as independent, true to the ideals of equality, crucial for awareness-raising in many fields of social life, flexible, and well suited for the needs of local communities. Informal groups had mainly structural concerns (depending on private donors, harder to sustain than in wealthier states), and on the other hand, they were described as possessing great flexibility, having the possibility for radical ideas and activism, having the ability to influence larger formal structures, and coordinating many different forms of action. On top of these debates, art and academia were perceived as necessary and inspiring, as they are able to provide reflection and new ideas for activism.

The overall conclusion seemed to be that all of the forms of the considered theory and practice of activism are needed and desirable, with all their respective opportunities and limitations. Of course, as all the women gathered during the workshop have strong personalities with even stronger convictions, they vividly discussed many aspects of female activism. The neoliberal paradigm was questioned, especially by the younger participants, although some women argued that the free market gives space

for the liberty and individuality that is needed in democracy. In the end, however, there wasn't a sense of conflict between the different levels of activism, rather reinforcement in the effort to advance equality and mutual reliance between different roads and strategies

Conclusions and reflections on gender equality in the region

The “Dreamers, Rebels, Diplomats” conference and workshop provided a much-needed opportunity for discussion and reflection on gender equality issues in a regional perspective. Women activists from the Visegrad and Baltic post-socialist countries, sharing a certain historical perspective, found it helpful and highly inspiring to talk about feminism, equality, theory, and practice on a regional platform. Participants stressed this as one of the main advantages of the event and expressed the relevance of annual regional meetings.

Populism, gender backlash, and the rise of nationalist movements turned out to be one of the main regional commonalities. However different in particular countries, the occurrence of gender backlash, affecting women's rights organisations as well as LGBT and minority communities, seemed to link the ECE countries. The activists' workshop provided an especially good opportunity for discussing the ways of dealing with the right-wing gender backlash. This in turn led to a debate on the causes of these political campaigns and the popularity of populist or nationalist groups.

It is important to stress that while addressing all the complex issues of regional activism, the disputants did not limit themselves to questions of representation and stereotypes, etc. Structural changes in the economies of ECE countries that followed the introduction of capitalist systems, and their gender-specific influence on societies, were a common point of reference for the debate. Gender budgeting, the issue of reproductive work, new forms of employment, social policies concerning parenthood, reproductive rights, and trade union activism were an important part of the discussions, marking an important role of economic factors in pursuing gender equality.