Open Societies? Connections between Women’s Activism, Globalization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract: After the cloud of the Cold War lifted, a meaningful exchange of information about the political and social conditions in Eastern Europe emerged with new-found hope. Twenty years after the regime transformation, the dust may have settled enough after the dramatic change of guards in the postcommunist region to produce an account of how well democratization and diversity have fared, especially with gender perspective in mind. Women’s issues in the postcommunist transitions became one of the most challenging issues in this exchange, in terms of both the practice and theory of democracy and diversity. The focus on women provides a much-needed dialogue across the historically entrenched lines of separation between East and West and communist times and contemporary democratization. The lessons emerging from women’s activism in Central and Eastern Europe can provide a bridge between Western and Third World feminist analyses. Women’s groups increasingly enter into contact with various international organizations in their efforts to pressure governments and change popular perceptions of women’s status.

Keywords: Women’s Activism, Democracy, Central and Eastern Europe, Globalization, Transnational Social Movements

Introduction

After the cloud of the Cold War lifted, a meaningful exchange of information about the political and social conditions in Central and Eastern Europe emerged with new-found hope. Twenty years after the regime transformation, the dust may have settled enough in the postcommunist region to allow us to see how well democratization and diversity have fared, especially with a gender perspective in mind. Although elected governments have replaced the communist party dictatorships early in the 1990s, functioning democracies have emerged in only a handful of the twenty-seven post-communist European and Eurasian countries (Berg-Schlosser 2007; Rose et al. 1998). With globalization increasingly affecting the whole world (Giddens 2000), the internal changes became deeply interwoven with events and fluctuations of global markets, politics, and culture. Both these domestic changes and the increasing international connections have thoroughly influenced Central and Eastern European gender relations.

Central and Eastern Europe in this context refers to Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia. This group joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, along with the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. However, these three Baltic postcommunist countries differ from the Central and Eastern European region that the former were annexed by the Soviet Union whereas the latter retained official independence as satellites. It is important to emphasize that the interaction between the various actors is diverse and
dynamic both in its process and outcome. The changing international (political and economic) environment maintains, and occasionally continues to enhance, the regional differentiations between the vast territories that we now call Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia, and Central Asia. At the same time, old and new tensions also abound. Power differentials between what we used to call “East” (communist) and “West” (capitalist/democratic) continue to create new tensions around what the term “domestic violence” means, and how to help its victims and punish the perpetrators. There are also new, often surprising developments, such as the United Nations’ (UN) and the European Union’s (EU) unexpectedly strong effects on introducing laws against domestic violence in the postcommunist countries.

Globalization has hastened the (re)emergence of hundreds of women’s groups in Central and Eastern Europe (Lukić et al. 2006; True 2003). Although women’s groups existed in various forms and represented a variety of ideologies until the beginning of the communist takeovers in 1948, their numbers and activities were curtailed and one central organization took over their jobs until the late 1980s. With the advent of democratization, the new and newly re-established women’s groups in the region have effectively reacted to the dramatically changing political, economic, and cultural environments in their home environments and in this process, they frequently apply foreign models and references. Through their actions, these women’s groups are publicly expressing their interpretation of democracy, diversity, and the desirable gender roles in the region. The emergence and the resulting activities of women’s groups in Central and Eastern Europe inform us about the changing gender roles in the postcommunist context.

This essay aims to reveal some of the important connections between globalization and democratization with a special focus on women and their activism in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe. The first segment addresses the gendered aspects of democracy and democratization. This part discusses why gender and especially gender-related violence routinely fall outside the purview of measures assessing the extent and quality of democracy. The second part focuses on postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe. The postcommunist context links the global waves of democracy and the increasingly interconnected nature of social movements, in particular, the explicitly transnational women’s movements. In addition to fruitful cooperation, the increased personal and material interactions also brought more conflict in the already historically complicated relationships between postcommunist Europe and global actors. In the third segment, activism to criminalize domestic violence provides an illustrative example of the complicated and controversial relationship between global forces and postcommunist political actors. The last part highlights the many faces of globalization and democratization through the case of women’s NGOs in public life in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe.

Democracy and the Inclusion of Women

In the past decades, democracy and democratization have emerged as two of the most pertinent and popular themes in the social sciences, political science in particular. The increasing number of case studies and conceptualizations produced not only various competing definitions of what constitutes democracy and what can be called a consolidated democracy (Diamond 1999; Linz and Stephan 1996). Following the path of contemporary political philosophy on democracy and case studies on democratization, scholars developed many different ways of measuring the quality of democracy (Berg-Schlosser 2004; Munck and
These measures of democracy range from popular ratings of "political rights" and "civil liberties" by Freedom House (1978-) to the complex World Bank indices on the "rule of law" (Kaufman et al. 2008).

Among the shortcomings of these numerous and increasingly complex measures is their heavy institutional focus, for example, on political parties and elections. The institutional focus frequently limits the inclusion of political and civil rights beyond their immediate application regarding elections. However, measuring the quality of democracy need to extend beyond the ballot, including diversity.

While diversity became one of the core foundations of modern liberal democracy, its definition has remained contentious. In addition to the more established measures of diversity, such as proportions of democratic inclusion in governments, legislatures, and the judicial branch, the decision-making structure of a group engaged in public affairs and its relations to and financial dependence on other groups also form part of assessing democratic participation. Ranging from more mainstream practices of ethnic inclusion to the unquestioning postmodern embrace of all kinds of differences there are also more contextually demanding approaches that carefully scrutinize difference to satisfy "securing the survival and health of our liberal civic order (Macedo 2000: 151).

However, it is crucial to avoid naïve or superficial interpretations of diversity. Inclusion of diverse voices in the political process does not imply that all voices need to be integrated without regard to the aims that the activists call for. For example, when neo-Nazi parties promote an agenda intended to exclude ethnic, racial, or religious minorities and legal immigrants from local and national decision-making, they work against the very meaning of democracy. These considerations are important because Central and Eastern European countries struggle to deal with the recent emergence of increasingly popular ultra-right, most often xenophobic and racist political movements. In contrast to the right-wing nationalist movements and their exclusivist message, when activists argue for the integration of women’s voices, their claims harmonize with democratic inclusion.

The democratic deficit of national and regional politics was especially clearly brought home in the aftermath of the June 2009 European Parliamentary (EP) election. In the Czech Republic, the advertisement of Narodni strana (National Party) on public television referred to the “final solution” and addressed the Roma as “parasites” during the preparations for the European Parliamentary elections (Conroy 2009). The Slovak and Hungarian governments used different measures to contain their respective extreme nationalist movements, both without much success (168 óra 2009; Palata 2009). With record-low voter turnout for the EP elections, right-wing nationalist parties took a surprisingly large portion of the vote in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom (BBC 2009).

Partially because diversity and other types of gauges measuring the quality of democracy are hard to assess unequivocally, only gross human rights violations, such as genocide or mass political terror, are included in even the most recent measures of democracy. It is important to note that while new indices such as the UNDP’s GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) and the Gender Gap Index (GGI), compiled by the World Economic Forum (Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi 2007), have begun to focus on how women fare politically and economically worldwide, violence against women and terror in the family (i.e., domestic violence) have been entirely excluded from the formal measures of democratization. It should also be noted that due to the nature of domestic violence, much empirical data that would
normally be used to measure effects of human rights violations are unavailable on a reliable and country-by-country bases. With estimates of women suffering from domestic violence ranging from 20 percent to 50 percent (Khan 2000: 1), assessing the successes and shortcomings of efforts to assist victims of domestic violence is in need of global attention and funding. Domestic violence exacts a very high price not only from its individual victims in the form of high health costs, high mortality, and low quality of life, but it levies a huge and often entirely hidden cost on the whole society because of the decreased economic productivity and the severely diminished quality of participation in public affairs (Walby 2004).

Effective representation is crucial for the survival of the new postcommunist democracies. Although effectiveness can also be measured in many ways, diversity of representation among the leaders of public life can signal intent to comply with the basic and most compelling calls of democracy. Democratization takes place at several different levels of society: from the highest decision-making authorities to the local and informal levels of associations. Although individuals may not be active participants at all times because of personal choices and constraints, even their intermittent participation establishes a basis of participatory democracy. 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. Although historical and cultural precedents constrain the development of mass movements based on women’s interests, a global groundswell of democratization, working hand-in-hand with internationally interconnected social movements promoting human rights, produced an increasingly prominent and diverse transnational women’s movement (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Globalization, Democratization and Gender in Central and Eastern Europe

Through the many channels of globalization, local, national and international events are becoming increasingly intertwined. Due to its many and multifaceted effects, globalization is surely one of the most contentious political battlegrounds of our age (cf. el-Ojeili and Hayden 2006; Held and McGrew 2007). The advocates of globalization say it is an engine for universal prosperity (Norberg 2003), while its critics see it as a race to the bottom for the poor or the middle class (Rudra 2008).

The political and economic changes that followed the fall of communism introduced global flows and exchanges to the region with breathtaking speed (Åslund 2007). A notable current of contemporary work on Central and Eastern Europe points out superficial democratization, economic polarization, and cultural homogenization as the main effects of integration into the European and global political, economic, and cultural frameworks (Böröcz and Kovács 2001; Galasinska et al. 2009).

This essay debates the nearly exclusively pessimistic arguments. I contend that both gains and losses occur in the interaction of the most specific, local issues, such as women’s activism against domestic violence, with the broadest and most diffuse global forces, such as economic, legal, and institutional influences. In the past twenty years, as the near-monopoly of the communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe has given way to a more democratic political environment, gender roles in the postcommunist region have also dramatically transformed, thoroughly affecting gender equality and consequently, women’s organizing.
The pressure of international exposure has strongly contributed to two apparently divergent effects on gender relations that this region is still sorting through. The newly revitalized capitalist economy maintained and in many cases added to traditional gender segregation and made it more difficult for women to find and keep full-time jobs, especially during their reproductive years (Bukodi 2005; Frey 1999; Lyon 2007; Nagy 2001). Women became increasingly defined in terms of their roles as mothers and as sexual symbols. However, international norms, including democratization, human rights, and various global social movements, such as environmentalism, anarchism, and especially feminism, contributed to at least a superficial relaxing of the traditional social barriers between the sexes. Following mostly Western European and North American patterns, postcommunist gender studies also began to flourish at this time (Kamp 2009; Pető 2006; Zimmermann 2007).

In terms of both the practice and theory of democracy and diversity, women’s issues in the postcommunist transitions became one of the most challenging topics in the globalization process of the Central and East European region. Despite the differences in their transition toward capitalism and democracy in the region, one of the common features was the elimination of the Marxist-inspired and state-sponsored, albeit mostly rhetorical, support for equality of the sexes (Watson 1993).

At least three main approaches to assessing the newly dominant Western European and North American influences developed among gender scholars. The three approaches reflect both the increasing global integration and the parallel process of separation/differentiation (Fodor and Varsa 2009). The first, although least frequently expressed but nonetheless popular approach is to counter the hegemony of Western (academic) thought and emphasize the unique experience of the postcommunist region. Here, the alienation generated by the position of petitioner tends to render explanations of East Europeanness and its gender relations as profoundly different and unintelligible when seen through a “Western” lens (Tóth 1993). According to the second main trend, gender researchers tended to emphasize the need for a “constant interchange between East and West” (Pető and Szapor 2007) and the need for “redistributive politics” to alleviate inequalities between center (i.e., the West) and periphery, i.e., the postcommunist world in this context (Timár 2007). The third approach, represented by Cerwonka, a US gender scholar residing in Hungary, questions whether the concept of “hegemony” is even a useful concept to describe the relationship between Western feminist theory and postcommunist gender research (2008). Cerwonka claims theories are “transculturated,” that is, adapted, modified, and rethought for each specific context, and when Western feminist theories travel to Eastern Europe, they too change and become more sophisticated and refined.

These three main Central and Eastern European approaches highlight how central has been the effect of global interactions on the region. In particular, the impact of Western dominance in conceptualization and terminology has proved to be repeatedly influential on gender and interpretations of gender equality. Crucially, funding from Western organizations – in this case, related to gender, human rights, women’s rights, and domestic violence in particular – shaped the agenda of scholars and NGO activists alike.

Obvious tensions about what is gender equality and how to achieve it have arisen between Central and Eastern Europe and the multiple, often contradictory global forces that impact this region. These tensions serve as urgent calls for meaningful dialogue and opportunities to share the desire that “self-reflective East-West dialogue must continue if there is to be a constructive, just transnational women’s movement” (Funk 2007: 204). Indeed, the focus
Transnational Networks and Activism against Domestic Violence during the Postcommunist Period

Domestic violence is one of the most contested and suppressed topics in the contemporary postcommunist region. At the same time, activism related to the elimination of (or, at least the meaningful reduction of) domestic violence has been in many ways one of the most successful encounters between local activists and international organizations and movements. The regime transitions have opened up a space where gender analysis, social movement activism, and domestic and international economic and political changes clash.

The issue of violence relates directly to the wider and more complex issue of the nature of power. Since the 1989 postcommunist transitions, the nature of power has changed dramatically, albeit to various degrees, in the large and diverse territory of Central and Eastern Europe. The process of transformation enhanced the effect of global events and transnational political/economic actors on domestic forces in the region. Nearly every aspect of these societies has undergone some degree of transformation, with the role and methods of patriarchy being no exception. At this point in history we cannot fully assess how and if patriarchy has strengthened after the regime change, but its historical continuity has certainly not faltered and many political, economic, and cultural facets in the different postcommunist societies indicate a more self-assured male dominance, both symbolically and in practice. A rare countertrend to this is a slowly emerging postcommunist feminist movement and related movements against domestic violence.

Power structures within patriarchal societies normalize and legitimate male violence against women, and the discipline and appeal of violence as a means of claiming and defending privilege can be so great that women and children slip into complicity without realizing it. The women’s movement, acting from moral and political arguments such as fairness and equal rights, has, since its inception in the early nineteenth century, focused on various forms of discrimination against women. However, only relatively recently have activists turned their attention to domestic violence and managed to develop successful campaigns against the bodily harm and emotional abuse that women often suffer within intimate settings (Jefferson 2003; Renzetti et al. 2001). The definition, legal approaches, and especially the implementation are highly debated among the various and internationally connected actors. That is to say, domestic violence is not a simple issue (Thomas 2008).

To expose partner violence against women, activists most often formed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to more effectively engage with their own governments, other states’ embassies, local and international police and law professionals, a wide variety of international organizations, and fellow social movements. These long-term involvements produced various concrete legal changes and many less tangible changes in attitudes (Fábián forthcoming 2010).
Contemporary Women’s Groups in Central and Eastern Europe

The re-emergence of civic groups has been one of the most fundamental developments in post-communist societies in the past twenty years, and women’s organizing has been part of this force (Howard 2003). The collapse of the communist regimes revealed, and initially emphasized, the historical and cultural differences between women in Central and Eastern Europe and women in the West. A decade later, women’s organizations in the region started to connect and to co-operate more intensely both regionally and globally.

Women’s groups sprang up relatively quickly and intensely in Poland, where they developed as a reaction to the legislative intent to criminalize abortion, and also in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning 2005. The wave of abortion debates across the region gave impetus to increased women’s self-awareness and a realization of their civic vulnerability. In the former Yugoslavia, war atrocities and crimes against humanity – notably the rape camps used as a means of genocide – prompted consciousness-raising efforts, and the formation and strengthening of women’s support centers (Iveković and Mostov 2002). In Slovenia and Hungary, in contrast, the development of women’s groups was slower and less dramatic. For example in 1995, of the 30,000 Hungarian NGOs, approximately forty were explicitly women’s groups. Six years later, the number of NGOs had reached over 50,000 (Central Statistical Office 2002: 50). From nearly 100 women’s groups active in 2009, again approximately forty have stayed consistently active in women’s issues.

The exact numbers of active NGOs and women’s groups are uncertain and depend on how the data is collected. On the one hand, the actual number of all NGOs and women’s groups may be higher than the statistical data claims. Some of the registered NGOs are umbrella organizations, sheltering many other groups (e.g., the Association of Hungarian Women and many women’s party caucuses all claim to be such organizations). Conversely, when groups dissolve, they often take a long time to announce this fact to their respective national Central Statistical Office. Until there is a legal or tax incentive to make the accounting process of NGOs more accurate, only participant observation and cross-checking of activists’ accounts (through interviews) can provide a more accurate picture of the trends in the lifecycle of women’s groups.

Shifts in gender expectations and role performance echo the changing structure of power in Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, the new gender relations incorporated a response to the experience of communism that assumed a simultaneously de-or over-politicized (but still monopolized) attitude towards many issues, including gender (Gal and Kligman 2000a and 2000b). On the other hand, today’s changing Central and Eastern European gender relations reflect an increasing influence of globalization, with dominant capitalist, (neo)liberal, and Western-oriented characteristics (Johnson 2009; True 2003).

Quite a few female activists discovered the personal and funding potentials of establishing women-focused NGOs in the past twenty years of postcommunist and increasing global politics. These NGOs began offering various services, especially in the fields of welfare and education, to local governments and applied for funding to national and international organizations. Offering services through local or national governments makes Central and Eastern European NGOs particularly vulnerable to entering into an acutely dependent relationship. The women activists often perceive the need to be apolitical in their domestic environments so as to avoid the party-affiliation that may interfere with continuing their work. However,
in turning towards the international environment for support, a clear gender-specific, often feminist, stance is required (or at least helpful). Uneasy with this double-speak but driven to survive, quite a few women NGOs have adapted to these contradictory expectations by becoming professional agencies to provide welfare-related services, such as training, employment referral, and domestic abuse hotlines. The pragmatism of these new service-provider NGOs is both an opportunity and a liability, as they offer a resonant sounding board about the viability of an independent civil society in a democratizing region and inform about the increasing interchange between gender-specific domestic and international norms.

**Conclusion: The Intersections of Globalization, Democratization and Women’s Movements in Central and Eastern Europe**

This essay has described the emergence of women’s groups in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe as a response to globalization, democratization, and transnational social movements. Women’s organizing responded to both internal and international economic and political forces. While the heritage of the communist era continues to affect social movement activism and the perception of proper roles of the genders, global forces have injected new norms, such as democratization and new terms, such as domestic violence. The merging of the powerful, international, political, economic and cultural forces produced controversial and complex effects in the region.

On the one hand, Central and Eastern European societies have become much more open toward diversity, a move strengthened by more international exposure. In particular, women’s NGOs in the region have benefited from the increased global interactions and they adopted some of the most resonant items on the agenda of the international human rights and women’s movements, such as criminalizing domestic violence. On the other hand, the region has reacted to the powerful effects of globalization by producing a number of exclusivist and nationalist social movements. Twenty years after the communist-regime changes in Eastern and Central Europe, societies are more open, not only to various global forces but also to historically well-established, self-protective mechanisms that are exclusivist in nature. Incorporating the diverse women’s voices in local, national, and international decision-making may provide an antidote to calls of exclusion.

**References**


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A native of Hungary, Katalin Fábián (Ph.D., Political Science, Syracuse University) is Associate Professor of Government and Law at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania. She has published extensively on gender equality and women’s political activism in Central and Eastern Europe. She edited “Globalization: Perspectives From Central and Eastern Europe” published by Elsevier Press in 2007. She also served as the editor of a special issue of Canadian American Slavic Studies that focused on the changing international relations of Central and Eastern Europe. Her forthcoming book is “Contemporary Women’s Movements in Hungary: Globalization, Democracy, and Gender Equality” forthcoming in the fall of 2009 by the Johns Hopkins University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press. She is currently conducting research on how domestic violence legislation has changed in the postcommunist European Union accession countries. Her second edited volume, “The Politics of Domestic Violence in Postcommunist States: Local Activism, National Policies, and Global Forces” will be published in 2010 by Indiana University Press.