**How women of the Balkans succeeded to raise their presence in the parliaments from an average of less than 7% in 1999, to an average of today of 26%?**

When after 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, former socialist countries became transition countries, progressive approach to gender equality was booming everywhere else before the 4th UN conference on Women, but in the transition countries, it was pushed aside. It was considered to be either already completely solved in socialist period (by newly formed liberal and social-democratic parties) or solved in a wrong way and should be replaced by the conservative concepts of women in the society (by more conservative, nationalistic and religious parties, which everywhere after the first free elections were entrusted by the voters the position of the governing parties).

The changes in the economy (privatisation), in social policy (austerity and targeting replacing universal social rights) and in the political systems (many parties, close to zero women in party leadership of all parties), very quickly showed that all that has been achieved by women’s movements and communist feminists after the two World Wars, might very quickly be lost, especially as women's presence in the parliaments after the first free elections, dropped from nearly 20% in socialist times to less than 15%  and in more politically divided countries like in the SEE, below 5% (Albania, Croatia, Serbia, BiH, Montenegro, Macedonia, Romania).

**WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTS IN SOME COUNTRIES OF THE CEE/SEE REGION**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **COUNTRY** | **W.**  **RIGHT TO VOTE** | **BEST %**  **OF**  **W.**  **IN PARL. BEFORE TRANSITION** | **% of W. MPS**  **ELECT.**  **1990/1** | **% of W. MPS**  **ELECT. 2009** | **% of W.MPS**  **ELEC. 2013** | **% of W.MPS**  **ELECT. 2017** | **% of W.MPS**  **EECT.2018** |
| **Albania** | **1920** | **1974-33,2 %** | **3,6%** | **6.4** | **17.9** | **27.90** | **27.9** |
| **Bulgaria** | **1944** | **1981-21,8%** | **12,9%** | **10.8** | **24.6** | **23.6** | **23.8** |
| **Hungary** | **1919** | **1980-30,1%** | **7,3%** | **8.3** | **8.8** | **10.1** | **12.6** |
| **Romania** | **1946** | **1985-34,4%** | **3,6%** | **11.4** | **13.3** | **20.7** | **20.7** |
| **Slovenia** | **1945** | **1982-26%** | **13,3%** | **7.8** | **32.2** | **36.4** | **24.4** |
| **Croatia** | **1945** | **1982-17%** | **4.5%** | **7.8** | **23.3** | **18.5** | **18.5** |
| **B&H** | **1945** | **1982-23%** | **2,9%** | **26.0** | **21.4** | **21.4** | **21.4** |
| **Serbia** | **1945** | **1986-17%** | **3,6%** | **5.5** | **33.2** | **34.4** | **34.4** |
| **Montenegro** | **1945** | **1986-17%** | **4,0%** | **11.1** | **17.3** | **23.5** | **23.5** |
| **Macedonia** | **1945** | **1986 -17%** | **3.3%** | **32.5** | **34.1** | **37.6** | **38.3** |

**Sources:**

**IPU, Geneva, Milka Puzigaća, Women in FRY, March 2002, CEE Network data base; IPU 2011, 2013, Dec 2017, Dec. 2018**

The Party of European Socialists in the EU  understood, that there is a need to help their potential sister parties to build a proper social democratic ideological and organisational profile and this is why they organised, in 1993, a support organisation, called European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity (<https://www.europeanforum.net/>)

A great socialist woman activist from Vojvodina (Serbia), a wife of the last representative of socialist Yugoslavia in the UN, Daša Šilović, who was then with her husband, a foe of Miloševič, exiled and stayed to live in New Your, advocated and succeeded that this Forum formed an informal **Women's Working Group**with the task to take stock of the status of women in the future PES sister parties and in their societies. The group was co-ordinated by an energetic young Swedish SD feminist, Lena Ag. In the nineties of the former century there were very few gender-sensitive women in party leadership of the social democratic, socialist and labour parties in the CEE and SEE regions but the Women’s Working Group was formed of 7 prominent SD women activists, coming from Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia. In four years this group organised several regional thematic conferences and got strong evidence of the degradation of crucial women human rights in all former socialist countries. This women's working group declared the need to engender SD parties from within and transform all newly formed social democratic parties into the flagships of gender equality in their societies. This is why in 1997 at the big international conference in Prague, it was proposed, to establish a more formal CEE Network for Gender Issues. Olof Palme Centre took over the core funding, while other SD foundations (FES, Labour Party Westminster Foundation, Karl Renner, Jean Jaures...) helped in the implementation of the project by project-based activities of the Network.  It got first based in Hungary, Budapest in January 1998. The Network started to connect prominent women from all SD parties in former socialist countries and many progressive women NGOs, women leaders from the TU, gender experts from academia and journalists, close to the left. Immediately the Network translated and adjusted Women Can Do It Norwegian Labour Women manual in all the languages of the CEE and SEE region and started to organise regional TOT seminars and then party by party seminars to get women activists from all social democratic parties on the same page with regard the issue on how to deal with gender equality issues in their parties and in parliamentary democracy. This effort gave great results as by 2000 nearly all these parties have formed their party women organisations, included first gender equality statements in their programmes and introduced voluntary party quotas in their statutes. At the same time these women's party organisations started to cooperate with progressive NGOs by defending the right on freedom of choice (abortion) and combating violence against women. In many cases, other parties followed suit.

Very early CEE Network for Gender Issues understood that in the transition countries, all the efforts to seriously deal with gender equality issues would be in vain if the CEE Network does not create nationwide crosscutting women issue coalitions.

The window of opportunity for the wars' ridden SEE region opened with the establishment of the Stability Pact for South East Europe in 1999 and for the CEE region with the process of enlargement of the EU which accepted 8 CEE countries in 2004, 2 from the SEE in 2007 and Croatia in 2013.

The CEE Network became one of the initiators, political advocate and organiser of the regional SEE initiative of women activists and even some male party leaders, from different political parties and NGOs, from some governmental bodies for gender equality and from the parliaments, to get a formal seat for gender issues within the Stability Pact for South East Europe - so-called Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF). Established in November of 1999 in Sarajevo. Regional cooperation of women in the SEE region, that SP GTF organised across all ethnic, religious, political, position-opposition, government- non government divisions, helped women all over the SEE:

* to establish their national gender equality mechanisms,
* to enact their first equal opportunity acts,
* to enact strong quota regulations and raise the presence of the  women in the parliaments from an average of less than 7% in 1999  to more than 26% today. (Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Northern Macedonia are now all over 30%, Slovenia had 36%, but recently, in 2018,  was pushed down to 24%).

CEE Network also played a crucial role in encouraging the governments of the SEE countries, every time when these governments were including SD parties, to accept national action plans for the implementation of the UN SC Resolution 1325 and to sign and ratify Istanbul convention. At the same time, CEE Network for Gender Issues did its very best to use women forums of SD sister parties in  11  future EU member states, former socialist countries, to advocate,  in the national processes of the EU enlargement,  for the inclusion of the best possible EU standards for gender equality in their legislative  harmonisation process. Due to the work of the CEE Network, newcomers to the EU in their first elections for the European Parliament brought more women MEPS in the EU parliament than many old EU member states with the long democratic tradition. Zita Gurmai, one of the members of the Women's Working Group from 1994, and the member of the Board of the CEE Network for Gender Issues from 1998 till today, was in 2004 elected MEP. She became a worldwide visible feminist leader of the PES Women.

**In the whole period after Beijing conference till 2016, regional and broader cooperation of women leaders and activists across normal divisions in democratic and post-conflict societies was the mightiest tool for the effective promotion of women human rights and gender equality under crucial conditionality:**

* **This cooperation needed a strong focus on a small number of well-selected priorities (issue coalitions)**
* **The strategy for change had to be owned by all the women who were implementing the strategy**
* **There could be no women's leadership if there were no strong bottom-up nationwide women 's movements**
* **Long term, stable international support and solidarity were the musts, but they could never replace feminist action on the ground (so-called sandwich strategy).[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**New global mainstream political framework after 2013**

After the decline of the Arab spring in 2013 (Military coup in Egypt, US Military Intervention in Syria, Russian military intervention in Ukraine, massive migrations – Balkan route, Trump elected in the USA, Brexit in the UK, illiberal democracies in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Italy…), the world is living in a different political frame. The frame of revived and revamped cold war.

How they got us here and what are the consequences for the equality between men and women?

In the nineties of the former century, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we lived in a short period of hope that the humanity is heading towards the global civilisation of peace and indivisible human rights. In this context, at the 4th UN World Conference on Women in 1995, a global governmental and civil society progressive consensus was formed that women rights are human rights and vice versa. But this consensus has never been underpinned by a new global social contract and already in 2000, Beijing Platform for Action has been squeezed in much more partial and modest Millennium Development goals and coupled by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. In the developed world the energy of the feminisms concentrated on strengthening of the state gender equality mechanisms and improvement of the legal frameworks for gender equality mostly in the fields of personal rights on free choice regarding sexuality rights and access to reproductive health, freedom and non-discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation, prevention of multiple discrimination of minority women, combating violence against women and strives for equal representation of women in decision making, first in legislative, than in executive and lately also in economic power. There is no doubt that after Beijing, regardless of all odds, there has been considerable progress in gender equality achieved in several important fields: diminishing of illiteracy and progress in education, reproductive health, in direst poverty eradication, bigger inclusion of women in paid labour, transformation of violence against women from a private into an important political issue, in the rights of minority women groups such as LGBT and Roma, in the presence and much less in power of women in decision making bodies.

The second big blow to the progressive Beijing global consensus on gender equality came immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11 in 2001 in New York. Practically from day to night the global political mood changed from hope to fear, a war against terror replaced the dream about the global civilisation of indivisible human rights. The taxpayers money of more and more nations, instead of being used for the new global social contract and the saving of the ecologic challenges of the planet, started to flow into “security” - military interventions and a new global race in the armament, production of fake news and fake problems, destroying Palestine, destabilising Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, called in life violent radical extremists, terrorists, and Islamic state. Millions of refugees from the war zones started to add to millions of those who were already migrating due to the droughts, floods, famine, dire poverty, massive unemployment, lack of democracy and any tangible future in their home countries.

The third, decisive blow came everywhere (with the exemption of the USA under Obama), in the form of austerity frenzy after the outbreak of the global financial and economic crises in 2007/8 when it became very obvious that globalised financial capital is capable to survive and even flourish with the public money, squeezed out of the working classes – their wages, their pensions, their social transfers, their housing, child care, education, elderly care, quality of life. The richest became fewer and richer, the poor became poorer, precarious and much more numerous. The youth and the women, socially weaker, being always more economically dependent on the welfare state, are suffering even more than the rest of the population.

This is how the stage was so set for the today’s raise of the right extremisms, patriarchal, radical religious leaders’ supported nationalisms, for the ever faster growing degradation and rejection of the multilateral, internationally binding regulations of security, production, trade, ecological and communication standards and human rights.

Backlash against Beijing global consensus on indivisible women human rights has always been around, but now it is entering through the main entrance of the mainstream politics of some crucial global nations. What in 1995 was a small number of UN member states which had some reservations to the Beijing documents, became now the official rejection of the very concept of gender equality agreed in Beijing. The concept of gender equality is rejected from the rostrums of the parliaments and from the cabinet ministers. Yesterday women rights’ advocates were verbally aggressed by more or less influential right wing individuals, harassed and intimidated by anonymous foes in social media, today they might be killed by them, like Jo Cox in UK, or even much worse, jailed like Pussy Riot in Russia or accused for simple civic dissent as members of terrorist organisations like in Turkey, by the authoritarian regimes or even killed by the police, like young SD feminist, Shaimaa[[2]](#endnote-2) in Egypt. The last alarming proof of the backlash becoming the mainstream is how the USA administration vetoed, and Russian and China’s abstained while voting on the wording insuring health care services for the survivors of rape in armed conflicts in the last UN SC Resolution 2476 on **Sexual** Violence in Conflict.

Today, global progressive feminist movement is at the historical test. It has to rethink not its values, concepts and its goals, but its strategies and tactics. Its ability to raise massive bottom up women’s support to solve the crucial global challenges – stop militarisation, diminish unbearable inequality, erase remaining discrimination, violence, and growing exclusion, establish participatory parity democracy, enable socially just transition to the 4th technological revolution, effectively respond to challenges of climate change and pollution, forming issue coalitions at all levels, connecting and co-operating with all other progressive bottom up social and political movements, making savvy use of the small progress of women in the decision making bodies, might well decide not only the fate of the women, but the fate of the humankind.

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   **Sonja Lokar: WOMEN’S ROLE IN TRANSITION - STABILITY PACT GENDER TASK FORCE - LESSONS LEARNT** [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://news.vice.com/.../anatomy-of-a-killing-how-shaimaa-al-sabbag. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)