

■ International Symposium

Women in the Balkans / Southeastern Europe

Organization: Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft)
Munich, 3-4 November 2014

Report by Gabriella Schubert / Johanna Deimel / Petra Bläss-Rafajlovski

□ The symposium was held at the premises of the IBZ (Internationales Begegnungszentrum der Wissenschaft) in Munich where the invited scientists, NGO activists and politicians from Southeastern Europe (SEE) and Germany exchanged views on: I. Parenthood, economy, social welfare; II. Work-life balance, migration; III. Sexism, violence, human trafficking, and IV. Activities for reconciliation, political participation and representation, lobbying and regional cooperation. The conference team was comprised of Petra Bläss-Rafajlovski (former Vice-President of the German Bundestag; member of the Board of the Southeast Europe Association), of Johanna Deimel (Deputy Director of the Southeast Europe Association), and of the *spiritus rector* of the event, Gabriella Schubert (university professor for Slavic and Southeast European Studies and member of the Board of the Southeast Europe Association).

In her **introduction**, *Gabriella Schubert*, Berlin, provided an overview on the complex situation of women and gender relations in Southeastern Europe. At the beginning, she explained what it means to be a women in Southeast Europe where patriarchal values have traditionally been a dominant factor of social organization and interaction and where patriarchy has not been eradicated neither in communist nor in post-communist times. After a brief insight into *pre-modern* masculinity and femininity concepts and rules defining the cohabitation in the Balkans extended families, she spoke about the apparent change which occurred during the *socialist period*. Schubert referred to the fact that while women and men were formally equal and women received access to education and to employment they could not advance further than midlevel positions. The opposition between public and private life, a grown difference between urban and rural women and women's double burden were also mentioned. During the civil wars in former Yugoslavia women were victims as well as peace activists with a consequent pacifism.

In her critical assessment Schubert considered *women in the post socialist society* as the main losers of transition. The fundamental changes after the system change and the collapsed economies have not only implicated disorders in political and social status, but also a backlash in terms of return to patriarchal values as well as traditional gender relations and hierarchies. A perception of gender roles following traditional patterns and a concept of femininity reducing women to their bodies, open sexism in media, the so called "sex industry" and "women markets" as well as the ban of abortion, increased domestic violence and trafficking in women have been combined with neoliberal values, right ideology, neo-patriarchy and the ruling concept of masculinity. Feminization of poverty, low incomes and unemployment very often force women to decide between career and family. Special problems of women belonging to ethnic minorities need special focus. On the other hand, women have also taken their chance to create their own businesses, not to forget female subcultures. Women's participation in decision-making, especially in political parties, and their representation in the public scenery is an important indicator for the degree of their emancipation. Women's fights for the implementation of women's rights in NGOs were highlighted.

In her **key note** on "**Women's Rights in the Balkans: Achievements, Challenges, Perspectives**" *Marije Cornelissen*, former MEP and Rapporteur on women's rights in Balkan accession countries at the European Parliament, Amsterdam, referred to the report on "Women's Rights in the Balkans" which was debated in March 2013 and finally adopted by the European Parliament in May 2013. The report, which has been met with a lot of criticism by the respective countries, was based on interviews with 50 organizations and explicitly addresses issues of concern in specific areas by also offering concrete recommendations to the respective countries – as for instance concerning the property law in Albania, the protection of maternity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the implementation of legislation and the election law in Croatia, support to victims of violence in Kosovo, the fragmented implementation of action plans in Montenegro and the cooperation with civil society in Serbia. Concentrating mainly on women in the labor market, in the social system and on violence against women, the report provides a powerful tool; an update of the report is currently under preparation.

Cornelissen emphasized that EU accession and subsequently the necessary adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire* have a huge impact on women's rights because almost all negotiation chapters also entail gender related aspects. Thus, the EU accession process offers important instruments to improve gender equality in particular regarding legislation. Cornelissen further underlined that it is of specific importance to lobby for an open and transparent EU accession process. The EU negotiation process in Island was mentioned as a positive example where civil society organizations (CSO) have been included and where everything was effected in a transparent and public manner. Quite the opposite was the case in Croatia where civil society was involved at the very last stage of negotiations only. The speaker further drew the attention to the impact of the global economic crisis for women. She made references to the 2015 EU Semester for economic governance and to the indicators of the EU 2020 Strategy and their focus on economic and social issues as well as on employment and education. To her mind economics and national budgets are always gender policy related. The SEE Semester on governance thus needs to be properly discussed in the parliaments as well as in the public, Cornelissen stated. Since all EU member states have committed to the EU 2020 Strategy, the speaker finally referred to the EU Commission's Annual Growth Survey, the National Reform Program and the Country Specific Recommendations as important tools and instruments to push gender policy forward.

During the **discussions** it was criticized that the South Eastern Europe 2020 Strategy not only lacks gender related indicators. Furthermore, the Strategy also regards women mainly as a social problem and not as an important economic factor and potential. Therefore the Regional Cooperation Council needs to be pushed to address gender issues along with the social perspective in general more properly. A further significant problem mentioned in the discussion was the lack of data and indicators; and what is more, the data available are often distorting reality. Special problems relate to business registration, informal and subsistence economy and to the fact that statistics released by tax offices and ministries are mostly not involved in the so-called gender machinery. Thus, it was recommended that a gender sensitive data basis needs to be set up. Recently, the UN Regional Conference on Gender Statistics on 23 October 2014 in Tirana has introduced a plan for a joint regional publication of gender statistics. The discussion of the first Munich conference day ended with the positive note that women's civil society organizations are gaining more and more influence. Reference was made to the initiative of the European Women's Lobby for an Anti-Poverty-Network. Finally it was underlined that mutual partnership relations between government and civil society are very beneficial for any country and of utmost importance.

Panel I: Parenthood, Economy and Social Welfare

Inputs by

- Mary Ann Rukavina Cipetić, Director of TF-Initiative for Sustainable Growth, Zagreb;
- Vera Gudac-Dodić, Senior Research Associate, at the Institute for Recent History of Serbia, Belgrade;
- Krassimira Daskalova, Professor of Modern European Cultural History, Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, University St. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia.

The Gender Task Force (GTF) – initiated by women and established in 1999 within the framework of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe – has, according to *Mary Ann Rukavina Cipetić*, at first concentrated on the political representation of women. It was argued that this has not led to a real transformation in gender equality, yet. Since 2010 the GTF's emphasis has lain on women entrepreneurship and on the economic empowerment of women in general. The GTF intends to establish a policy dialogue on women's entrepreneurship between businesswomen, civil society and policy makers. It was stated that female unemployment is high across the region and that the economic crisis has forced women to work, however mostly in informal economic sectors. While in Croatia and in Turkey the first businesswomen's clusters exist, female entrepreneurship is quite a new phenomenon in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro and thus still needs to be established and consolidated there.

It is good news that in the meantime more countries of the region are currently preparing or implementing a strategic approach towards women entrepreneurship. Obviously, there is a political will, and financial assistances are available. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development EBRD promotes services focusing on female entrepreneurship and special programs on Women in Business have been set up in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The use of EBRD regional programs and new credit lines was strongly recommended. Albania, Serbia and Montenegro were mentioned as examples where Action Plans with special sections on women entrepreneurship are in preparation. The huge potential of women in business and economy must no longer be neglected. Especially given the fact that "women are well educated, that they have different approaches in doing business and are less corrupted than men, female entrepreneurship offers a long-term and broader added value to the societies", Cipetić underlined.

Though women are better social-networkers this has not been implemented into business so far. Women still have to cope with the lack of social infrastructure and are confronted with inter-generational gaps regarding women's roles in family and economy. Public discourse on the situation of women is missing generally. Additionally, legislation and gender machinery are still not in place adequately. It is also challenging that women are mostly seen as victims rather than as positive actors in the business environment. However, women are not only a target group, but also a resource of economic development. Finally, a new framework for the gender perspective is required. Steps in that direction were positively mentioned with the Cetinje Parliamentary Forum on Women in Business in June 2014, organized by the Montenegrin Parliament, and with the regional Ministerial Conference on women's entrepreneurship in South Eastern Europe forthcoming in 2015.

The panel further discussed the situation of women in state socialism and referred to empowerment as well as to disempowerment of women in this period. *Vera Gudac-Dodić* explained that in Serbia, for instance, increased mass education and employment of women, based among others on the principle of equality was promoted from the early days of the socialist state. Women gained a number of rights on a formal and legal basis, including the right to schooling and education under equal conditions, the right to work and equal pay for the same work, active and passive suffrage, paid maternity leave, social insurance, the right to divorce, abortion and others. Socialist society adopted a raft of legal and normative acts guaranteeing gender equality. Modernizing processes that took place in Serbia in the post World War II period had an impact on the family, the position of women and their life in it. Full legal equality between men and women, extended schooling and increased economic independence, based on the fact that the number of women in work is much higher than before, had major ramifications for their status. The process of family nuclearization, liberalization of divorce and the possibility of birth control were all key determinants of the position of women in socialism. None of this was enough, though, to entirely overcome traditional mindsets in terms of the essence of women's social functions, to rely upon deep-rooted values, or to change the traditional roles of men and women within the family.

It is however necessary to carefully observe the theoretical problems, *Krassimira Daskalova* argued. Women and feminist discourses need a precise indication on the exact period in socialist time. The Balkan countries lived under different regimes, which also require specific distinctions of timeframes and countries in the analysis. Further on, a more comparative approach between and within the countries is required. While most Balkan countries were peasant states before, changes followed between the years 1945-1989. In the post socialist past the SEE countries also differed between the Eastern Bloc and Greece and Turkey with subsequently varying gender contracts in the respective countries. Daskalova reminded that women have not been victims only during communism and socialism. Yet, regarding gender equality, much progress was both ambiguous and contradictory in socialist time, i.e. the de jure and de facto situation were not the same. Given the fact that maternity protection was provided in Bulgaria for 460 days and thus provided for the longest period in socialist countries, one may ask whether that was really to the benefit of women.

In the **discussion** it was agreed that the post-socialist transition offered both possibilities and risks to women, however, in this respect a more comprehensive analysis and comparative research is required. It is of particular interest to look at the developments which are characterized by very dynamic societies and simultaneously by contradictory trends and fragmentations of populations. In Albania for example it would be interesting to explore how far rural women who migrated into the cities are really urbanized. A feminist perspective in

dealing with statistical data, analytic discourse and oral history is needed. Additionally, the differences concerning women belonging to ethnic minorities have to be taken into account. As indicators of re-traditionalization of the societies, the backlash in women's and social rights, the feminization of social activities, unequal payment and lower salaries, especially in "grey economy", were mentioned. It was also advocated that family planning is a women's choice and has to be treated as a human rights issue.

Big cities provide better job opportunities for women. In particular, business at micro level and in rural areas needs great creativity but is offering working possibilities for women as well. Thus, one can talk of a new kind of creative entrepreneurship by women. For example young educated women are mainly working in IT innovation, the energy sector and new medicine technology. As examples for new forms of women's networking the Network of Rural Women in Vojvodina and the self-organization of single mothers in Novi Belgrade were mentioned. One severe problem, however, is still the lack of women's ownership of land. Moreover the gap between gender equality strategies, legislation and their implementation persists and has to be closed. Again the impact of laws on the grounds of reality was qualified as very low. Here especially the parliaments and civil society have a crucial role in monitoring their implementation and application in practice.

Panel II: Work-Life Balance, Migration

Inputs by

- Marijana Dinek, Executive Director, Bosnia and Herzegovina Women's Initiative Foundation, Sarajevo;
- Marina Hughson, Senior Researcher/Scientific Counselor, Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade;
- Enkeleda Suti, Programme Assistant, UN Women Country Office in Albania, Tirana.

Marijana Dinek elucidated the situation of female migrants, refugees, internally displaced and asylum seekers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She reminded that women are under international protection in SEE. Up to now there has been a lack of research on the effects of migration in transition countries. Bosnia, for example, has to cope with female migrants from Africa, Syria and Iraq today. Generally there is no gender sensitivity in dealing with migrants as well as an ignorance regarding their real needs. People in Bosnia don't know anything about the specific cultural traditions of female migrants from Africa. These migrant women live in Bosnia without any documents, there are no programs for their employment and they are generally victimized, which is a huge problem. There are also highly qualified women among them. Some of them are victims of trafficking. Programs for economic empowerment of migrants are urgently needed. A positive example is a catering service established in Sarajevo for women from Syria, Iraq and African countries. Dinek pointed out that migrant women have especially to be empowered to create their own life, to fight for their rights and to use their resources. Specific political decisions concerning infrastructure, transport, social care and schools have to be made as well. She further stated that public perception of refugees and the role of media should be carefully taken into account.

Marina Hughson reminded that she has been an advocate of the visibility and of empowerment of women for a long time. Already in 1994 she organized the first post-communist conference in Belgrade entitled "What can we do for ourselves", followed by the Women's Balkan Conference in 2003 on "Women – agents of change". The question is, "how to make what we want to make", Hughson stressed. Upon request of the EU Commission she elaborated a study on "Gender Country Profile for Bosnia and Herzegovina", published in June 2014 and available on

the internet. One of the conclusions of the report was, that despite the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has successfully set up a legislative and policy framework for gender equality, stronger efforts are needed to achieve real equality on the ground. As a sociologist her approach substantiates the social change perspective regarding gender issues, Hughson explained. Regarding migration she pointed to the fact that there is rural-urban migration as well as return migration. Often due to huge poverty in the cities not only those of rural origin (re)migrate to the country side. Gender inequalities should be treated and approached within a complex web of social inequalities and impoverishment. Hughson also took a look at masculinity. Men, too, are victims in rural areas: high level of alcoholism among young men; women cannot stand the patriarch hierarchy, etc. In the 1980s new colleges have been set up in the country, which many women attended. The education policy had an impact on female family strategies. Usually three generations of women have been deployed before and female employment was understood as normal and not questioned at all.

Enkeleda Suti, born in 1984 in Tirana, complained that her generation lacks both, experience and correct and objective information especially regarding communist time in Albania. The UN Women Country Office is currently conducting four core programs: 1) leadership, political participation, CSO measuring; 2) women's economic empowerment; 3) violence against women; 4) national planning and budgeting on a gender perspective. Because of the global economic crisis Albania now is confronted with an increased return of Albanians (more men than women were working abroad) especially from Greece and Italy. Thus, the remittances have decreased, which has not only a severe impact on the GDP but on family incomes, too. In addition, the returnees face problems in finding jobs, in housing, schools for kids and in social services.

The **debate** on the panel concentrated on migration. It was mentioned that in Montenegro there are villages where all women have left and only men live. As a consequence, there is the critical phenomenon that men from Northern Montenegro marry women from Albania, who often know neither the language nor the groom before and are forced into the marriage. Attention was drawn to Bosnian refugees again, who return into their homeland and try to start their own enterprise but get disappointed and often leave the country again. Especially young people seek their opportunities abroad. This brain drain and the reduction of birth rates will have a great impact on the overall development of the country in the future.

Panel III: Sexism, Violence, Human Trafficking

Inputs by:

- Sanja Sarnavka, President of B.a.B.e. – Be active, Be emancipated, and Human Rights House, Zagreb;
- Ana Luleva, Professor, Director of the Ethnographic Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia;
- Maja Raičević, Executive Director, Women's Rights Center, Podgorica.

Croatia is to *Sanja Sarnavka's* opinion challenged by the incapacity of the society and the government (including political parties) to organize the state in a structured way. The economic situation is "horrible" and the GDP decline in the last six years has been alarming. According to her, 60,000 children to the age of six years live below poverty lines. One can also talk about an overall presence of machismo in Croatia. Both, the severe economic situation and the conservative position of the Catholic Church are contributing to a "re-patriarchalisation", i.e. reinforcement of the patriarchal order and promoting patriarchal values. To her mind the Croatian society of today is utterly divided along ideological lines. On the one side, for instance,

not only the Catholic Church but also women were part of a strong movement to promote patriarchal values, as it was the case with the referendum on same-sex marriage in 2013 only. On the other side, and Sarnavka called it "schizophrenic", same-sex life partnerships have been acknowledged in Croatia. Concerning human trafficking, she underlined Croatia is more a transit country than a contributor. Women are politically engaged in promoting an effective implementation of the so called Nordic model to prevent trafficking and exploitation. Over the past ten years, 300 women in Croatia have been killed by their husbands, partners, sons or other family members although the trend is falling. In October 2014 an international conference was held in Zagreb on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Sarnavka informed. Still, victims of violence have only limited access to help services. Finally, she referred to the civil society watchdog coalition Platform 112 which aims at contributing to organize the state towards more democracy and out of the economic crisis. Improving civic education is one of the core demands of the platform, not only with the intention to advance civic competences but also to support emancipation and to establish gender equality. To overcome stereotypes about sexes and to foster gender equality it is necessary to deepen the understanding on gender equality in schools and civic education programs and to change the media discourse on women in Croatia.

Ana Luleva at first turned the attention on women and informality, especially in the tourist sector. The inclusion in informal economic activities is part of the system and of family survival strategies, she explained. Gender stereotypes are persisting in Bulgaria. She underlined that she prefers to use the term *gender* instead of *women*, because men are also suppressed by the patriarchal order. In Bulgaria one can generally observe a tendency back to motherhood and family which is in a clear contradiction to the socialist gender contract. This new neo-patriarchal discourse is worrying and women so far did not protest against the respective media discourse. Bulgarian women are only active in the spheres of childcare and motherhood. Due to the lack of political will for gender equality legislation, to the lack of women's organizations and to the generally neoconservative public media discourse women are regarded as objects. Luleva finally observed a masculinization of the Bulgarian language which leads to a total disappearance of female terms and job titles, especially for professions in higher positions.

Montenegro was presented by *Maja Raičević* as one of the most traditional patriarchal countries. Women are responsible for the success of the entire family life. The number of divorces is increasing, and divorced women thereafter have a different and much lower social status than men. The list of negative trends Raičević presented included: discrimination of divorced women; widespread domestic violence; cases of selective abortion; different appreciation of the birth of a girl and a boy as well as a low economic empowerment of women. She also reported about media campaigns against strong women; they are targeted by smear campaigns, sexism, intimidation and open attacks. Active women also face threats from family members, relatives and men, often linked to traditional views on the women's role in society. In the media, active women are frequently demonized and their work is discredited.

Media freedom in Montenegro is declining. This makes it even more important to strengthen solidarity among women in case of harassment. Good news is that discussions are going on about the role of women in the electoral system and that women are fighting for human rights and against corruption. On the issue of trafficking of women Raičević added that it is a cross-border phenomenon and must also be challenged and addressed within an international and regional context. While Montenegro has signed the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, no regular institutions and

structures have emerged so far. Besides the implementation of the Convention, public awareness is needed on the issue of violence against women, according to Raičević. It was stated that a big gap exists between institutions and women NGOs and that women in high positions often forget their gender approach, not to forget that there is a tradition of stigmatizing feminists.

Panel IV: Reconciliation, Participation, Representation, Lobbying and Regional Cooperation

Inputs by:

- Zorica Trifunović, Activist & Consultant at "Women in Black", Belgrade;
- Valentina Leskaj, MP, Head of the Albanian Delegation in PACE, Tirana;
- Lejla Turčilo, Professor, Vice-Dean, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo.

The "Women in Black" initiative in Belgrade was described by *Zorica Trifunović* as an example for women's capacity of networking. She reported about 16,000 street protests within the last 23 years despite verbal attacks against them as "bitches" and despite blame games. Sometimes the protests were even heavily guarded. "Only women have the capacity of networking across the region", she said. The contacts between women in the region have never been lost, not even during the Yugoslav wars. Since 2011 a regional initiative has been launched for a Women's Court – A Feminist Approach to Justice in the Former Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, which is supposed to focus on war crimes during and after the wars in the 1990s. So far there has been no official talk about it and the initiative is facing a lot of difficulties, Trifunović informed. Although due to the ongoing political Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue the situation in general has improved in the region, it is still a problem to organize a cross-regional meeting in Bosnia, because of the visa-requirements for Kosovo representatives. Trifunović strongly promoted the importance of regional meetings of women, especially from Kosovo and Serbia. As previous speakers, Trifunović as well observed a re-traditionalization of gender roles in the societies and in the media, an empowered nationalism in all former Yugoslav countries and severe militarization. Women offer opportunities for peace and reconciliation; their potential is not yet adequately used, she concluded.

Valentina Leskaj explained that she has been a CSO activist before and in 2002 she decided to enter into politics. She cited Hillary Clinton, at that time First Lady of the United States, who at the women's conference in Beijing 1995 stated "Women's rights are human rights". The issue of women's concerns belongs to the entire society and is also an indicator for the level of democracy. However, up to recently, Albania held one of the lowest rankings regarding female representations in elected positions at national level. Since the quota-system has been incorporated into the electoral code, more women have entered into politics and the number of female representatives in parliament has increased. Women entered into high-level decision making positions. In Albania today women's participation in parliament reaches 21 %, seven ministers are female and women hold a share of 47 % in high level positions in public institutions. These achievements need to be sustained and still a lot needs to be done. Recent years have seen a significant strengthening of the laws, and policies which promote gender equality, national strategies and laws are in place – but reality is less promising.

Lejla Turčilo drew the attention on women in Bosnia and Herzegovina again. She reported on how the women's movement started to form in Bosnia and Herzegovina and how women began to raise their voice against discrimination and unequal opportunities, at the same time fighting for a civil society. However it is very difficult to obtain reliable data, if any, in this respect, she said. The 2013 census has not been published yet. In any case it looks good on

paper when it comes to gender issues, but there is definitely an inequality when it comes to the access and/or positions in the market and/or political life.

In the **discussion** it was suggested to use the IPA funds (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) also for women's regional cooperation projects. The individual "Gender Country Profile" for EU accession countries is providing guidelines and offering recommendations for IPA-projects. Thus, EU accession and EU membership have a strong impact on gender issues concerning legislation, national strategies and commitments and should be used as significant tools. However, a monitoring of the implementation is crucial to prevent lip services and technical implementation without an adequate cultural implementation in the respective countries.

The importance of Women's Caucuses or Alliances in parliaments was underlined, too. In addition to the already existing ones in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, a cross-party Women's Caucus has been established in Serbia recently as well. Currently the Serbian Parliament has 84 women MPs, which is 33.6 % of the Assembly. Generally, more attention has to be paid to women's representation in local governments and municipalities. Finally, the major role of media was emphasized. It is important to empower women by giving them positive stimuli and by reporting on success stories. A bad example in this respect was the Bosnia and Herzegovina survey on media in the election campaign of 2014: Out of 8,000 articles there were only 200 about women.

But Women's empowerment is not only a matter of higher rates of female participation in political and economic decision making positions but also of higher standards of ethical behavior and of concerns regarding the common good. Women are less corrupt than men and have a high level of empathy and sensitivity.
