

25 years of relentless feminist activism in former socialist countries of the SEE

I was not born as a feminist. I became an ardent one when the Berlin wall crashed down on women in the former socialist countries.

I am coming from the county now called Republic of Slovenia, a member of the EU from 2004, from the region degraded by the wars for the shaping of the new independent nation states steaming from the bloody dissolution of the former socialist Yugoslavia in the nineties and devastated by the neoliberal post war globalisation of this periphery of the EU after 2000. I participated at the Beijing conference in 1995 as an NGO member of the Slovenian governmental delegation, where I got engaged in the group of the progressive UN ECE region delegates, who tried, and did not succeed, to include the ban of discrimination based on sexual orientation in the Beijing documents.

In the last 25 years, women activists all over the globe, we were fighting within three different global contexts.

The first one was the context of hope for the global civilisation of democracy based on indivisible human rights (end of eighties till September 11. 2001). The peak of this period was Beijing conference in 1995, the greatest global political consensus on gender equality ever forged.

The second was the context of narrowing of the Beijing agenda to MDGs and their framing in the militaristic efforts of the »War against terror« (2001-2008).

The third is the context of austerity frenzy after the outbreak of the global financial crises, followed by the radical conservative backlash (2008 till yesterday).

Throughout of this long period, I have been and I still am a feminist ACTIVIST. I was asked to give you a short personal testimony, this is why I will speak mostly about the feminist strive in very specific environment of the post war of the Western Balkan region.

For former European socialist countries the first context was the period of a difficult transition. With the first free elections, women were pushed out of decision making, transitional austerity, deregulation of the labour market, massive unemployment, building of the new nation states, wars for Greater nations, ignited nationalisms, brought retarditionalisation, made women disappear first into individual strategies of survival, than, encouraged them into forming of the NGOs dealing with desperate and failed attempts to prevent armed conflicts and later on, using them for the support to the women, victims of wars. The main lessons learned from this period for the active women of the war thorn Balkan transition countries were two:

- the war cannot be prevented by the street protests of the pacifists, regardless of their number in street protests, as they are cooked in the cabinets of the executive political power, and
- we need to help in strengthening and then relay on globally agreed legal frameworks for gender equality, to develop women's international solidarity and to strive for our half of political power in all decision making bodies, but first and foremost in our national parliaments and governments.

Signature documents of the second global context are MDGs and the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, asking for the active inclusion of women in the processes of (re)building peace and security. For the feminism in the developed democratic Europe, this was the period of the losing of the impetus of the Beijing conference, of the narrowing of the complex gender equality agenda to the personal identity policies and issues connected with trafficking and other forms of violence against women. But for the feminists in the SEE European transition countries, European enlargement process opened the

window of opportunity to catch up with the European legally binding gender equality standards, while in the Balkan region, after the end of the Serbia – Kosovo war in June 1999, active women succeeded to establish the first formal regional initiative for gender equality within the international governmental plan for the reconciliation and normalisation of the post war Balkan region: Gender Task Force within the Stability Pact for the South Eastern Europe. Balkan feminists developed several innovations in their struggle for women human rights: regional cooperation, big nation-wide crosscutting issue coalitions, parallel women's electoral campaigns, and sandwich strategy, just to name the four most important ones. We harmonised to a serious extend our gender equality standards and legislation with the EU, we succeeded, by enacting legal quotas in all Balkan countries, we have risen our presence in the parliaments from an average of 7% in 2000 to an EU average of more than 30% today.

The main lesson we learned in this period is, that in the weak post war democracies, legal gender equality frameworks are easier to change than practice, and that much stronger presence of women in the parliaments does not automatically lead to the stronger representation and implementation of feminist priorities, especially not the costly ones, the ones connected to the labour related, economic and social rights of women.

The third global context, the period after the outbreak of the global financial crises and recession in 2008, which has hit the most semi periphery and periphery of the developed world, especially after gradual changes in the global geostrategic balance of power, destabilized all what has been achieved from 1999. Poisonous combination of austerity frenzy, EU enlargement fatigue and migration crises pushed the EU in serious political crises and moved European prospects of the post war Western Balkan region countries into undefined future. Unemployment, poverty, brain drain, ageing of the population, lack of rule of law, endemic violence against women, the disappointment of the people with the main progressive transition political parties, became a fertile ground for the revival of the nationalisms, politics of fear and its typical tendency to ask from the women to get back to their »natural roles“ of “queens of the homes and mothers of the nation«. After 2008 in the Western Balkans, Beijing consensus in the mainstream politics has mostly fallen apart. The very concept of equality and indivisible women human rights came under direct, open attacks of the far right parties and conservative streams in the catholic, orthodox churches, as well as in the mosques. Shrinking of women's economic and social rights got twinned with the rejection of so called gender ideology. This became the entry point for the attacks on the feminist activists and politicians, on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, on LGBT+ rights, on gender equality based education about renewal of gender roles and on gender equality based sexuality education in public schools. Standing for the protection of glorified national identity and traditional, religion based family values, promoting fake protection of women from the “abusive and uncivilised culture” of so called illegal immigrants, became the mighty tools for creating the support of different social groups of women voters to the parties which are, what a paradox, the biggest threat to the women's emancipation. What was in 1995, in Beijing, globally rejected and criticized minority, is more and more becoming the mainstream politics first in the Western Balkans, than in Russia, than in many member states of the EU and in the USA.

In my region, the lessons learnt by the feminists in this period are the same as everywhere else: do not get mad, get even! We, active women, do not have the luxury to give up. In Poland - Black movement, in the USA ME#TOO and feminist march to Washington, in Spain, Feminist strike to end violence against women in 2018, in Switzerland, Feminist strike in 2019 for equal rights of all women, for time to live, for sharing of the care work, for half of power, in the UK, just today - massive petition for buffer zones around maternity wards..

In Serbia women from all political streams and fields of political action, from all generations, in the worst of times, when the men in mainstream politics are unable even to talk to each other, forged Women's platform for the development in Serbia, in Northern Macedonia, women in the parliament united in the renewal of their legal rights to their bodies, to the free choice and raised their legal quotas to 40%, in my country, Slovenia, we have just started a crosscutting bottom up coalition for the first law on universal public services for long term care, the advocacy for criminalisation of rape, based on the concept of the lack of consent, we are fighting for legally binding parity not only on party candidates' lists but also for parity in the seats in the parliament....

For me it became clear what we need to do: Defend what has been achieved at all costs, start new initiatives to strengthen women's labour, economic, social and personal rights, which make sense for the majority of women, renew the energy of the feminist movement from the bottom up, first of all by including the energy, needs and priorities of the new generation of feminist fighters.

And then came Greta, framing for us a new global context of our fights for indivisible human rights, the context of urgent response to the climate crises.

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