

Women in Political Power in East and Central Europe

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East and Central European countries provoked interest and hope among Western feminists between 1945 and the 1960s for many reasons. In concrete terms, these countries were credited with four qualities: they guaranteed women's professional and educational advancement; they developed social policy which freed women from childcare, setting up collective childcare facilities; they introduced liberal, egalitarian legislation on women's rights, concerned as much with private life (contraception, abortion, divorce, women's rights within marriage) as with public life; they favour large-scale female participation in the different structures of political life.

If the policies concerning women in postwar communist regimes, and the consequences of these policies are examined objectively, two appreciatively different periods can be distinguished.

The first (1945 until 1960-65) is the period during which the socialist myth of women's liberation was constructed: it was one of the priority tasks which would contribute to the construction of a new society. The status of women had to be changed through legislation first of all, but also through a series of measures called socialist education, which was profoundly to transform traditional attitudes.

The theme of women's liberation in socialist society was linked to the essence of Marxist ideology concerning revolutionary change and aiming to abolish all forms of slavery and domination. The emergence of the 'woman question' in propaganda solved in the short term the problem of the shortage of unqualified labour in the first stages of the construction of communism. It was precisely this period which incited Western feminists to praise the achievements of women in the East.

The setting up of an educational and re-educational system together with the massive entry of women into the economy on the one hand and the relentless pace of industrialisation linked to massive population migrations to large and medium sized towns on the other, changed, in the short term, a good many patriarchal attitudes which had dominated in many of the East European countries before the arrival of communism. These changes were even more obvious in less industrialised countries in which the social relations of rural life were the norm (Bulgaria, Romania, USSR).

In the 1960s and 1970s, women in the East were already well integrated into the labour market and represented nearly half of the working population. However, and in spite of their equal educational attainments, women suffered from a clear wage differential and had only marginal access to managerial positions (Tryfan, 1990; Siemienska, 1990; Wolchik, 1979, 1981).

During this period, an increasing number of women were elected to parliaments. At the

end of the 1960s, the female presence in different parliaments varied from 13.5 percent in Poland to over 30 percent in East Germany and the Soviet Union.

The participation of women in political power during this phase of the construction of socialism took on a symbolic quality. In the late 1960s, women represented on average over 21 percent of the members of the East and Central European Communist parties and only 8 percent of their Central Committees. During the same period, the percentage of women members of the political bureaux of Communist parties never exceeded 5 percent.

Behind the socialist myth of women on the road to political equality with men, there is a more sombre reality. In the East as in the West, women bore the burden of the double division of power-vertical and horizontal between the sexes. They remained marginal, on the edge of political life, represented only at the bottom of the power hierarchy or in sectors considered to be unimportant, where real power was not at stake.

In the second period, changes in political life were less visible. As in the first period, there was a large and growing number of women representatives in the different parliaments. From 1970 to 1980, the number increased by more than 10 percent in Hungary, Romania, and Poland. Yet in real seats of power, at the top of the Communist party and in government, women remained in a tiny minority.



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The most recent elections in Central and Eastern Europe, following the fall of the Communist regimes reveal a spectacular loss of women representatives in the new parliaments. This drop is the most marked in Romania where the percentage has fallen from 34.4 percent in 1985 to 5.5 percent in 1990.

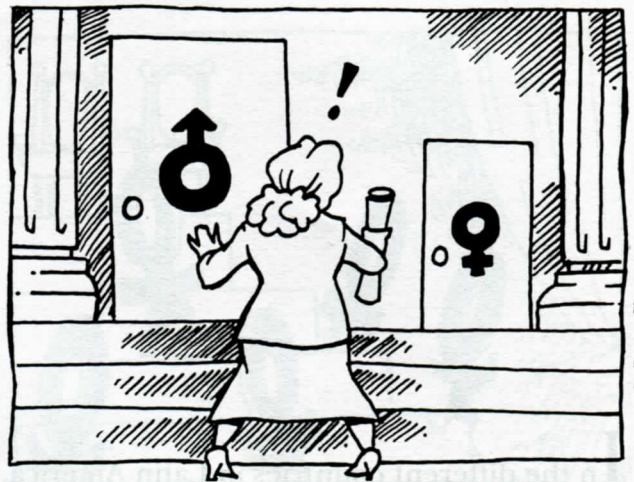
With this kind of regression, the Communist countries have lost their vanguard position in relation to Western Europe. How can this regression be explained? Is it a phenomenon that is affecting the whole of the political sphere? Why are women being eliminated from the world of politics? Are the revolutions which swept away the Communist regimes bringing in new models for women's social roles? By rejecting Communism and its different propaganda themes, are women in Eastern and Central Europe going to return to old pre-communist values, or are they going to seek references in the Western model, now that they know the true situation of women in the West?

While the situation of women in ex-communist countries today raises more questions than it gives answers, several comments may be made. First, the significant drop of the number of women representatives in the different newly elected assemblies seem to be a direct consequence of the political changes and of the new importance in elections.

For the first time in 45 years, elections are no longer a matter of masquerade and imitation, but represent a serious question of power; they consequently mean real competition between the candidates chosen by the different parties. Artificially raised under Communist regimes, the percentage of women representatives can seem, in fact, to be exceptionally low today.

However, the changes in the East do not mean that there is no hope for the growth of feminism in these countries. There may be fewer women in politics - a consequence of the electoral market - but women may have a greater influence. Indeed, the intellectuals who fought hardest for political change are

the very same ones who are most in favour of the rapid integration of women in politics. Furthermore, in creating opposition movements, intellectuals largely depended on the presence of well-known women leaders and activists (Siemienska, 1990). In Bulgaria, women intellectuals, writers, painters, economists, lawyers, appeared at the head of all the opposition movements and formed the hard core of the opposition's electoral campaign in 1990. The Socialist Party placed competent women in prominent positions to help boost party fortunes and give it a more positive image.



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Women may have lost numerical importance in parliament, but they have gained positions of power in government and elsewhere. In Bulgaria, Emilia Maslarova is in 1991 Minister of Labour and social affairs. In Poland, women hold two of the three vice-presidential posts of the Polish parliament. In Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel's government appointed three women to important posts in 1990; Olga Klimova as Ambassador to the United States, Dagmar Buresova as Minister of Justice for Czech regions, and Vera Caslavstra as advisor on social affairs. Finally, in the new united Germany, Chancellor Kohl's government of 20 ministers includes four women or 20 percent, a rate equivalent to that of the new Bundestag elected in December 1990 and a result which may at least partly be attributed to the fusion with the former GDR, which had always had a high number of women in its political elite.

At the present time, the new political parties emerging in the post-Communist era are concentrating on the problems of economic crisis and on the restoration of national sovereignty. Women's issues and sexual equality have hardly been at the centre of political preoccupations. However, recent events have meant that this kind of problem can no longer be considered minor. The questioning of abortion rights in Poland has shown that this issue is at the heart of violent ideological clashes, confirming the power of the Catholic Church.

Other issues (maternity rights, creches) have proved that they were merely the tip of a major political problem: the passage of a socialist economy - which functioned in a possibly haphazard way but which nonetheless gave certain social advantages to workers. Women in the East may well rediscover in 1991 that the personal is at the heart of the political.

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