

Reflections on Female-led Social Change in Post-Socialist States

Walking through the streets of Belgrade on our first night in Serbia, something struck me as *deja vu* - I felt like I had been here before. Overpowering skyscrapers, monumental sculptures jutting up towards the sky in monotonal greys were losing their veneer as graffiti covered most of where the arm could reach. A miasma of past grandeur loomed over the city as we walked through. I was shocked from my dream, though, when we entered the old city, calling back a different memory, that of a nation struggling to reclaim a lost past. But, in the end, the city held something unique in its grasp; a connection to the past that differed greatly than what I had seen before.

As someone who specializes in Central Asia, the opportunity to visit the Balkans was very special. First, it provided an opportunity to relate the experiences that I had already seen to a new region, which is commonly lumped in with Eurasian countries as part of 'Eastern Europe'. However, it was all the more interesting given that, while there were semblances of similarities between the Balkan countries and Central Asia, and even more similarities between them and those states now existing after the fall of the Soviet Union; the Balkans countries have something completely unique to themselves.

First, this eery *deja vu* that I mention comes from the similarities in architecture that I saw coming from the era of socialism. There were obvious connections between the architecture ideologies of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, as I immediately felt a feeling of 'return' walking amongst the concrete behemoths.

Differing from this, though, was the attempt that Belgrade, among many other Balkan cities, exhibited: an attempt to construct a past that had been lost because of this era. For example, places like Belgrade, Dubrovnik and Mostar were trying to return to this era of medievalism by remodelling the relics and recalling the symbols of that era. This shift towards the past is exactly what I had seen in the Eastern European states, like Poland and the Czech Republic, who were trying to relive a life without the scourge of the Soviet Union, which is reflected in their politics as well. In the Balkans, this same sensation arose in me as we walked the castles and cobbled streets.

However, something completely unique to the region arose as well, seemingly formulated from the shared history of conflict that arose in the region during the '90s and early 2000s. Rubble lined the streets of almost every place we visited, as the wound of the past still seemed to fester both physically and mentally. This wound could still be felt in the people that we met. This history was not something far in the past, like states out of the Soviet Union would like to portray, but rather something that was still fresh, and could possibly return again.

Other than this, though, there were quite a few similarities that I found between the former socialist unions, especially in regards to the formations of civil society after their respective

collapses. What I would like to address here is the similarity of female participation and leadership in civil society in the states of both the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia.

Although it may have never been achieved, gender equality was a central tenet of socialism, as the project would never be completed without the abolishment of all hierarchy in society. This led to prominent female leaders in both societies, like Valentina Tereshkova of the USSR and Milka Planinc of Yugoslavia. Because of the centrality of this tenet, many women were brought out of the home and into the public sphere, and the influence of that ideology was prominent in the experience that we had in Yugoslavia.

During our travels, we were able to meet with many women who are working on conflict resolution in the Balkans. From Eli Krasniqi, professor of Feminist Studies at the University of Prishtina, to Emina Bosnjak, head of Sarajevo Open Centre for the local LGBTQ community; women are taking charge within the NGO field, and will seemingly continue to do so, moving forward.

This trend is similar to what I have experienced in the former Soviet Union, as women have been welcomed into the public spotlight for almost one hundred years now. This has led to higher rates of participation by women in representative bodies, and quite a few women taking high positions of power. An example of this is Roza Otunbayeva, former revolution leader in the 2010 revolution and subsequent president of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Comparing this to the United States, we see a huge difference. While women were invited to participate in the public sphere beginning with the right to vote in 1920, active promotion of equality between the sexes was never fully supported. This can be seen in the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to pass in 1982. While it can be said that we were offered a narrow view of political life in the Balkans (and definitely conceding that the patriarchy is still alive and well in the region), it should be noted that most professionals in the field of conflict resolution from the United States and Western Europe are often men. This contrasts quite starkly from the professionals we met with in the Balkans.

Therefore, I would argue that an active promotion of gender equality, began under the socialist era, has led to a higher number of female leaders in the field of social change. For the promotion of civil and human rights for peripheral gender and sexuality groups, this bodes well for further work in the Balkans. Utilization of this past ideology could be used to the advantage of international NGOs, while taking into account the nation-state building currently trying to distance itself from the memory of Yugoslavia.

In the end, while the 'glass ceiling' still affects many in the United States, an exception may exist in the Balkans, and the inspiring work of women in the region is truly helping us all move forward.