

With a Whimper, Not a Bang: The Increasing Acceptance of Feminism in Central Europe

By
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A lot has happened since the many texts appeared in the 1990s, which discussed why no women's movement had emerged in Central Europe (i.e. Stetson & Mazur 1995, Funk & Mueller 1993, Renne 1997, Rueschemeyer, 1995) or "why is there no feminism after communism" (Goldfarb 1997). Despite the anti-feminist legacy from the communist era, time does not stand still. Feminism is becoming more and more acceptable in the Central European discourse, but scholars have basically missed this change because it has come gradually, more with a whimper than with a bang. This article proceeds by first showing that the climate indeed is changing in the Czech and Slovak Republics as well as Poland. Then it gives reasons why this is so.

Increase in Acceptance of Feminism

Feminism in the Czech Republic

During the first post-communist years, feminism appeared to be particularly weak in the Czech Republic. In 1995, the Gender Studies Center in Prague published a book (*Altos and Sopranos*) that listed 30 women's organizations. None at the time openly had the goal of promoting gender equality and changing traditional gender roles, although two of the groups come at least close. The leader of *ProFem* criticized the "reigning patriarchy" and *New Humanity (Nová humanita)* criticized "relationships of dominance and subordination." *ProFem*, however, had a base of three members, while *New Humanity* had four members and about 500 activists in 1995. Many of the groups did not even deal with specific women's issues and instead concentrated on general issues, such as preventing crime or opposing nuclear power, while others dealt with self-help issues, such as spreading information on AIDs (Saxonberg 2001b).

While none of the Czech women's organizations openly supported gender equality, several stated openly say that they were *not* feminist. For example, Hana Entlerová, who was leader of the Leftist Women's Club, claimed that the main issues concerning men and women have

nothing in common with feminism, because full self-realization is the right of men and women equally. At the same time, I am for every woman having complete freedom in deciding whether to do to work or to stay home, whether or not to have children, etc. (Gender Studies Center, 1995:66-7).

Meanwhile the then leader of the Association of Social Democratic Women argued that women have "different roles to play in society" than men (*Občasník růže*, 1997).

By 2008, the number of women's organizations had grown to at least 49 that I could find on the internet. Of these organizations, 6 showed some support for feminism

(6%) and 18 showed support for gender equality (37%). Even if these two groups still comprised a minority, they nonetheless comprised a rather large minority of 43%, compared to zero such organizations 13 years earlier.

Also in comparing the way the mass media treated the theme of feminism, in the 1990s Czech women could only make semi-feminist statements with the qualifier, “I am not a feminist, but...” while 10 years later they could already say “I am a feminist, but not a radical feminist.” Although the need to qualify oneself still exists, a shift still has taken place, in which feminism is no longer automatically associated with radical male-haters as long as one makes the qualification that one really does not belong to this “radical” group. Just to give some examples, in 1998 the most popular daily newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes* used the term feminism 7 times and none of them were positive. In one movie review, the author criticize an Oscar-winning Dutch film for displaying a “chauvinistic feminism,” because the women are presented in a positive tone as being strong, wise and self-confident, while the men are mean, selfish, nerds (Janovský 1999). In a review of a book by a Chinese-American author, the Czech reviewer notes that the author belongs to the feminist genre, but it is better not to use this term for “non-enlightened” Czechs, who associate feminism with “with harassment and cutting the patriarchal appendix or ‘chauvinistic’ penis off.” In this extreme case, though, it is clear that the reviewer is being ironic, because he is rather positive toward the book and distances himself from “typical” Czechs by writing that “non-enlightened” Czechs perceive feminism in this light. This shows an awareness that feminism is basically accepted in much of the Western world and that only unknowledgeable people associate feminism with violent male-hatred (Matoušek 1998). The one time a journalist asked a Czech woman about feminism, she replied that she does not really know what the term means and that she grow up under conditions in which is seemed “natural” that the male has the last word (Verecký 1998).

By the year 2007 the number of articles in *Mladá fronta Dnes* using the term feminism had increased from 7 to 19 as the tone of these articles changed. Now it had become OK to call oneself a feminist as long as one qualified it, by adding that one was not a “radical” feminist. One columnist writes an article entitled “Why not be a radical (feminist)” and begins by stating, “I never was a staunch feminist, agitating against everyone... I always understood it in a moderate sense... I never was radical” (Komorádová 2007). In another article, the journalist writes: “The call for firm quotas on the number of politicians in the Czech Republic is not the folklore of radical feminists, who want to find an easier path to power” (Škrabal 2007). Then the author goes on to add that the radical feminists can manage without quotas and quotas represent a normal rather than radical demand. One article even used the term “radical” and “feminist” in a positive sense: the civic organization *Žába na prameni* received a prize for their support of gender equality and they introduced a t-shirt with the slogan “Feminism is the radical opinion that women are people” (hav 2007).

Even though one might expect the atmosphere in Catholic Poland to be more anti-feminist than in the secular Czech Republic, some women's organizations in Poland were calling themselves feminist already in the early 1990s (Jalusic and Antic 2001). For example, one NGO called itself the Polish Feminist Association (see Centrum promocji kobiet 1995: 20 and Walczewska 1999: 175). In fact this association formed already in 1980 (Fuszara 1997: 134). In the first years after the fall of communism, feminist theorists in Poland were even using phrases such as "emancipation," which were still taboo in the Czech discourse (see, for example, Walczewska 1999). One of the Polish journals dealing with gender issues (*Pełnym głosem*) openly advertises itself as being "feminist" already in the 1990s (Saxonberg 2000a). The Polish discourse was helped by the fact that the cultural and intellectual climate was much more open than in Czechoslovakia, so already in the 1980s feminist scholars were able to write about gender issues, although they were not allowed to openly propagate for feminist ideals. Thus, a tradition of doing research on gender issues already began to emerge before the one-party state collapsed. Another reason why the Polish women's movement was stronger and more radical than the Czech one was because of pure necessity. The Church's anti-abortion drive pushed Polish women's organizations to mobilize the populace around the issue of protecting women's right to choose (Fábián 2009: 86, Havelková 1996). Consequently, the Polish women's movement has succeeded in mobilizing its population more than in most transitional societies.

Today the percentage of women's organizations in Poland that consider themselves to be feminist is also much higher than in the Czech Republic. I could find 133 women's organizations listed on the internet. Of these 50 (or 38%) consider themselves to be feminist, while an additional 44 at least support the notion of gender equality even if they do not openly consider themselves to be feminist, making 94 (71%)¹ the total number who at least support gender equality.

As in the Czech Republic, both the number of articles mentioning feminism has increased, while attitudes of the journals seem more accepting of feminism. Just as women's organizations were more openly feminist in the 1990s, however, so were the newspapers less critical of feminism than in the Czech Republic, which is not the same as being openly pro-feminist. The most influential daily newspaper in Poland, *Gazeta Wyborcza* had four articles that mentioned feminism in 1996. Two displayed negative views, while two displayed positive views. For example, an article about a meeting of the Polish female writer's meeting cites the poet Urszula Koziol as stating that "Feminism is ridiculous, especially in the Polish context, and I come from a family with relations based on partnership" (Lubina-Cipińska 1996). The article ended with a very condescending tone against women by claiming:

With a typically female obstinacy, and jealousy they talked behind the back of Wisława Szymborska – this years' Nobel Price Winner in literature. As we can see gossiping is a standard of every women's meeting.

¹ I am including one group that does not use the term "gender equality" but does use the term "gender mainstreaming," which implies support for gender equality. Otherwise there is no point in mainstreaming gender.

Another article cites the meeting of the Association of Women in Dąbrowa Górnicza: “But we have to do everything so that we don’t get separated from the men, like the feminists want,” thus implying that the goal of feminists is for women to live completely separated from men (Jaworska 1996).

On the other hand, another article cites a professor who reflects, “life is oppressive in general. But women face even more oppression. And the feminist point of view is to make people conscious of this” (Ewa 1996). In addition, the literary historian and television personality, Kazimiera Szczuka, states that she is interested in feminism:

For previous generations that was unacceptable. Not only wouldn’t the authorities tolerate it. Feminism was something out of place also in the eyes of the Polish intellectuals, the intelligentsia, because in a totalitarian state it seemed like a substitute topic. That’s why the feminist turning point in Polish humanism is happening right now.

By 2007, the atmosphere had clearly improved. Not only had *Gazeta Wyborcza* increased the number of articles dealing with feminism from 4 to 6, none of them were particularly negative toward feminism and most were sympathetic. In addition, while all of the articles on feminism in 1996 were in the regional supplements, in 2007 most were either in the main newspaper or in the opinions section. The articles also tended to be less stereotypical. In one article, a doctoral student in theology discusses feminist theology as a positive alternative to the more “ambiguous” term feminism, “which is usually associated with radical, anticlerical, loud masculine-looking women” (Gomora 2007). Even if this article actually does repeat typical anti-feminist stereotypes that exist in Central Europe concerning mainstream feminism, at least it makes the term more nuanced by supporting another type of feminism, which “could empower women in danger of domestic violence, being deprived of their dignity.”

A much more positive article toward “mainstream” feminism interviews organizers of the annual women’s day celebration, known as “Manifa” (Zawadzka 2007). All of the participants interviewed consider themselves to be feminists, including one man, Krzysztof Labadz, chair of the trade union at the Budryk coal mine. He says, “years of work showed me that media create false images. If they make a bad impression of feminists, it means that feminists are not bad at all.” Another article discusses a festival organized by a quarterly that openly calls itself feminist: “Zadra” (splinter). Their vernissage included humorous drawings and a discussion on the sense of humor of Polish feminism. One of the organizers explains that they rely on humor “because times are really bad for women now, when they want to restrict our rights drastically. The festival should be a kind of relief, an opportunity to debate and relax” (Musiał 2007). These examples show that the newspaper began to show a more favorable and nuanced view of feminism. These organizations and organizers now dare to call themselves openly feminist without fear of being ridiculed, even if they are still keenly aware of the negative stereotypes against feminism in society and they are also aware that the political climate is not necessarily supportive of their agenda.

The Slovak women's movement faced some similar problems as in the Czech Republic, such as the dominance of a post-communist women's organization (the Slovak Union of Women) and the perceived need to focus on social and charity activities, rather than mobilizing people around political issues or lobbying politicians for legislative change. Still some changes have emerged. First, in contrast to the Czech Republic, some organizations considered themselves to be feminist from the beginning (Bútorová 2009: 572). Thus, similar to Poland, but in contrast to the Czech Republic and Hungary, a feminist journal appeared shortly after the collapse of communism. As Bútorová (2009: 572) remarks,

A pioneering role in this was played by the *Aspekt* Women's Association, established in 1993 by Jana Juráňová and Jana Cviková. Since then, they have been publishing books as well as the feminist cultural review, *Aspekt*, organizing educational events, and running a feminist library. Before long, several more feminist organizations were founded.

Thus, it has been common and easy for researchers in Slovakia to talk about some of the women's organizations as "feminist" as if it something perfectly natural, which does not require any qualifying explanation.² Since so much has been written about the tension between Western feminists and Central European women's organizations, it is noteworthy that "*Aspekt* was put together by a group consisting of both Slovak and Czech women who cooperated with several feminists from abroad" (Farkasova & Szapuova 1997: 64). So even if some tensions might have existed, Central European feminists felt they needed to cooperate with Western feminists as they had little knowledge of feminist texts and little experience in organizing around women's issues. A second difference in Slovakia compared to the Czech Republic is that the post-communist women's organization never dominated as much in Slovakia as in the Czech Republic, because "During the first half of the 1990s, the Slovak Union of Women was transformed into many local associations, most of them in the countryside" (Bútorová 2009: 572).

As in the neighboring countries, an increasing number and percentage of women's organizations either now consider themselves to be feminist or at least openly support the idea of gender equality. In Slovakia in 2008, I could find on the internet 5 groups that openly considered themselves to be feminist and 13 more that support gender equality, making it a total of 18 groups that at least support gender equality out of 38 which I could find on the internet. Thus, 47% at least support gender equality and 13% consider themselves to be feminist. Bútorová (2009: 570) writes that in the second decade since the fall of communism, "women and men in Slovakia have grown slightly more positive or at least neutral about feminism. Yet a majority of them have retained their negative and ignorant views"

The term "feminism" appears much less often in Slovak newspapers than in Czech. For example, in the year 2001 (the earliest year one could seek articles via the internet site) the business newspaper *Hospodářské noviny* only had one article on feminism. It is an interview with an actress-producer Deana Jakubisková-Horváthová, who criticizes feminists for maintaining that "fairytales with a prince deform women's consciousness," and adds that her "feminism" is that she believes that women *allow* men

² For example, interview with Jarmila Filadelfiová, researcher at the Institute of Public Affairs, interviewed in Bratislava on February 28, 2007.

to choose for them, which “is the correct” way to live (Gregor 2001). The following year an author in the same newspaper laments that while feminism originally had acceptable goals, such as equal political rights, the newer feminism demands “emancipation and unisex.” This newer movement has become destructive and leads to such problems as female gangs and the rejection or postponement of motherhood (Zubo 2002). In that same year, a film critique criticizes a film for having “matriarchal motives that in some passages of the film can end by developing into open feminism” (Rehák 2002). The author goes on to complain that the film portrays men stereotypically (as if films never portray women stereotypically!). Both articles from this year portray feminism as being something unnatural and anti-male.

Already one year later, the tone starts to change, however. For example, one article gives a rather neutral description of the history of the feminist movement and differentiates between different types of feminisms (radical, liberal, social). Thus, this article goes against the previous stereotypes of feminism being a coherent movement of women, who hate men (*Hospodářské noviny* 2003). Two other articles that year mention feminism in a rather positive context of Erica Jong (one is an interview with her and one an article about her).

The fact that this newspaper began to show more positive accounts of feminism did not stop it from also publishing rather bizarre critiques of feminism. Thus, in 2004 one author claims that radical Islam will gain control over the EU because Islamic societies have the “Darwanistic advantage” of having higher fertility rates, since “they have not been touched by feminism” (Kohout 2004). Yet, the following month, one journalist laments over the fact that Slovakia does not have any functioning institutions that promote gender equality and notes positively that feminists show that biological differences do not need to lead to separate gender roles (Kadlecová 2004). These examples show that the climate was starting to open up, even if strange attacks against feminism still continued. It should also be noted that some people make strong differences between gender equality and feminism. Thus, a member of the European Parliament for the populist HZDS argues, “Gender equality is not feminism but an expression of dignity. Female sectors – education and health – are the worst paid” (*Hospodářské noviny* 2006). In other words, while support for gender equality is OK and expresses dignity, feminism somehow does not.

Institutional Openings

Why has feminism begun to become more acceptable? The most influential view of the rise of feminism probably comes from Inglehart’s (1997) modernization theory. He expanded upon it in a co-authored book with Norris (2003), in which they argue that economic developments make it easier for feminist values to emerge. In their view, the first step comes from industrialization, which brings women into the labor market. Then educational opportunities rise for women and they begin to participate in government. The postindustrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women rise in management and gain political influence. These developments bring about a transition from survival to self-expression values.

Their explanation is only partially applicable to the post-communist countries. The Stalinist emphasis on heavy industry and neglect of the service sector did prevent the emergence of a post-industrial economy, which might have hampered the development of feminist aspirations. However, many of the points in Central Europe differ from their general, linear model. High female employment rates existed already under communist rule and women also had rather equal access to education. Furthermore, even if the communist-ruled countries only found themselves under the industrial stage of development, their socioeconomic policies guaranteed everyone economic security, although at a level that was rather low by West European standards.

Given these limitations of the modernization model, institutionalism gives a good starting point for understanding the slow shifting in attitudes toward feminism. As the recent literature on “discursive institutionalism” shows, institutions also interact with the public discourse. Discursive institutionalists often place greater emphasis on ideas than on institutions (i.e. Schmidt 2010). They note, for example that ideational processes shape the manner in which policy makers perceive the world (Béland 2009: 564); consequently, one cannot simply read off the material interests of actors, because the discourse influences the manner in which actors perceive their interests (Kulawik 2009; Schmidt 2002, 2010). While this is true, such an approach emphasizes the existence of ideas which actors have and then how they use their ideas to change institutions.

My approach comes closer to Naumann (2005), who uses terms coming from the social movement literature on neo-institutionalism. Just as social movement theorists have discussed how NGOs utilize “political openings” when the “political opportunity structure,”³ changes, the Central European women’s movements provide good examples of how openings can also make it possible for a counter discourse to emerge and gain respectability. This is not to deny Schmidt’s emphasis on ideas: after all, these openings would not make the emergence of a feminist discourse possible if there were not already internationally well-established ideas about feminism and gender equality. However, I want to account for the *changing* of ideas. In the Central European case, both NGOs, the mass media and the general public only knew of “feminism” in a very simplistic, artificial manner (basically as an ideology that allows women to hate men); so their ideas only changed once institutional openings emerged that brought Central Europeans into greater contact with “feminist” ideas.

Actually, several types of openings took place. First, the mere fact that the one-party dictatorship fell made it possible for independent NGOs to emerge and argue for alternative realities. That by itself was not enough, though, for a change in the public discourse, as the above examples show the great problems that women’s organizations faced in the early 1990s, as the population and mass media was extremely negative toward feminism. Another important change comes from the opening up toward the world in general and Europe in particular. NGOs could now cooperate with international organizations and Western NGOs. Tensions might arise because the international organizations and Western organizations take on the role of money-givers, who can place demands on the Central European NGOs, which might go against the wishes of these NGOs. Yet, the mere fact that Central European organizations come into contact with international organizations and other national Western NGOs, exposes them to the

³ For a discussion of the literature on political opportunity structures, see Della Porta & Diani (2006), Kitschelt (1986), Saxonberg (2001a), Tarrow (1989, 1991, 1998, 2001).

international discourse. One more factor that is often neglected is the role that internationalization plays in the educational system. Central Europeans study at West European universities and work in the West, Western students study at Central European universities and work in Central Europe, and eventually now almost all the important large universities in Central Europe have established programs in gender studies. Finally, the EU accession talks gave support to women's NGOs, as Central European governments were forced to establish councils dealing with gender equality in order to meet EU demands for "gender mainstreaming." This in turn forced the mass media to discuss gender equality more often, which then gave greater legitimacy to women's organizations.

Since the first point about the introduction of democracy making it easier for NGOs to emerge is obvious, this section article will take up the other points.

International Contacts

Much has been written about the supposed "cooptation" of NGOs in post-communist countries, because of their reliance on support from international organizations. Although observers agree that foreign aid enabled new organizations to emerge, critics argue that foreign donors transformed post-communist civil society organizations into grant-seeking professional NGOs instead of the contentious collective actors, whom they had originally planned to support (McMahon 2001, Henderson, 2002, 2003, Narozhna 2004). The new professionalized organizations that emerged have allegedly become lame as they are forced to pursue the issues that the foreign donors support rather than developing a more radical agenda that could succeed in mobilizing domestic support (Hrycak 2002, Mendelson & Glenn 2002). According to this argument, the programs created dependency among these organizations, as they got caught in an endless vicious circle of writing grant applications, which left them little time for developing activities that could mobilize society.

Against this cooptation thesis, I support more Jenkins' channeling thesis. He argues that the goals of donors are complex, so it is wrong to see them only as tools of social control. Moreover, the "professionalization [induced by external support] has frequently created greater mobilization and social movement success" (Jenkins 1998: 212). As Petrova and Tarrow note in developing their notion of *transactional activism*, by not limiting political activism to its participatory dimension one can see a rich "picture of transactions consisting of coalition formation around single issues, network formation, and negotiation with elites on the part of civic groups in Central and Eastern Europe..." (Petrova & Tarrow 2007). Through these networks with international organizations, Central European NGOs come into greater contact with the international discourse, which also can expose them to more radical ideas.

Of course, this is not to deny that problems do arise from this reliance on international funding. For even if Central Europeans women's organizations have become more exposed to the international discourse and through this at times have become more "feminist" and more questioning of the dominating gender roles (Saxonberg 2001b, 2003), many international organizations also have a tendency to push certain issues that are less controversial than others. For example, some international organizations have pushed the issue of violence against women a lot, especially in

Hungary and Slovakia, while ignoring family policy issues to a large extent that would make it easier for women to balance work and family (such as increased access to daycare, encouraging fathers to share in the parental leaves, etc.). However, even in this case some caution is necessary. For although one could argue that that preventing violence against women still keeps patriarchal relationships in place more so than, for example, policies that enable women to work and induce men to share equally in the child-raising, it is also clear that battered women do not even enjoy the most fundamental basic rights. In addition, what can show male power over women more openly and directly than men who use violence to control a women's body? Consequently, even if support from international organizations might push women's organizations to pursue human rights issues that even conservatives and the Catholic Church often supports, it does not necessarily mean that this focus is "objectively" wrong.

An example of the domestic violence issue comes from an activist from the Slovak Alliance of Women, who explains, why her organization decided to concentrate on violence against women (without any pressure from outside sources):

And actually, from this book [that we were writing about the situation of women in Slovakia] came the decision to really look at the situation of women in the whole spectrum; and we discovered those fields where their human rights were oppressed, are oppressed, are being oppressed, all the time; and these more obvious or visible fields were domestic violence of course then trafficking in women, then representation of women in decision-making positions in political life or economical life and such, reproductive rights and situation of women at labor market and so we thought ok let's start with domestic violence because you can't anyhow influence the situation of a group of people if they are beaten at the same time or raped or you know violated.⁴

In any case, whether one likes it or not, foreign funding has played a major role for the survival of a large portion of the Central European women's organizations. One survey of Czech women's organizations finds that of 13 groups founded before the accession to the EU process began in 1997, 6 of them give funding from foreign organizations as the reason why they started their organizations. By the mid 1990s, funding from US foundations declined and most of the organizations began to rely on EU funding. In their overview of the 33 women's organizations, which they studied in 2007 and 2008, 94% used direct EU funding sources or grants from Czech foundations (Císař & Vráblíková, forthcoming).

For the smaller organizations, external (mostly foreign) funding has become essential. For example, the German Green foundation *Frauen-Anstiftung* provided 100% of *ProFem's* financing during its first year, 1993 (*ProFem* 1995:16). By 1995, the German organization had increased its funding by nearly 420% and comprised 90% of *ProFem's* total funding. However, once this feminist green foundation joined together with the German Green Party's other foundation, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 1998:3) it became more difficult for women's groups to get funding.⁵ The EU became especially important for small groups, who received funding for their organizational development as well as for individual projects (Hašková, 2005: 1085).

⁴ Interview with Katja Farkasova, Slovak Alliance of Women (Aliancia žien) in Bratislava on February 28, 2007.

⁵ Interview with Saša Marie Lienau, head of ProFem in Prague on January 18, 1999.

As the Central European countries were entering negotiations for joining the EU, the European Women's Lobby became particularly important, as national women's organizations could use this Lobby to get the EU to pressure their own governments (Císař & Vráblíková, forthcoming, Saxonberg 2001b, 2003b). Hana Klimešová of the Movement for Women's Equal Rights, recalled that in the 1990s the Czech government normally tried to ignore the women's organizations and was only afraid of one thing: the EU. Without pressure from the EU, the government will not take steps to implement the European Union's policies on gender and human rights. Thus, her organization often turned to the European Women's Lobby to try to get the Czech government to change its policies.⁶ As Roth (2007: 461) notes,

Feminist mobilization around gender equality policy in the EU thus provides a good example of "boomerang patterns" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12) that can be employed when the channels between states and their domestic actors are blocked. In this situation, domestic NGOs can bypass the state and seek out international allies including NGOs in other countries, a supranational entity like the EU, as well as international organizations such as the UN. Using these international forums, transnational advocacy networks (TANs) comprising NGOs and experts can put pressure on the state when it violates or refuses to recognize rights, or to introduce new legislation.

In general, my interviews indicate that in all three countries relations are rather good between Central European women's groups and international organizations, although some cases of bad experiences have arisen (see Fábíán 2002: 274, repeated in 2009:118 for an interesting Hungarian example). However, the worst examples come from the early 1990s. Even if no relationships in life are ever problem-free, my interviews indicate that tensions between international (usually western) organizations and Central European ones are not all that high today. Since most of my interviews indicate this, I will only give a few examples. An activist from the Slovak Alliance of Women first surprised me by so openly using the term "feminist" as if it were normal (which it is in Sweden, but previously was not in Slovakia). When I asked her about tensions with Westerners, about so much was written in the 1990s, she replied:

Yes, but this was 15 years ago. There came a lot of women especially because this booklet which we wrote together with Zora [Bútorová—a researcher at the Institute of Public Affairs], we managed to find some money and translate it into English so we had even 2 issues were in English. I almost had the feeling that every scientist, feministic scientist who comes from the West had a list of places she wanted to visit and it was someone from the government, someone from the parliament, a Roma settlement and the Alliance of Women just because of this book. It became so popular. And so many times they really asked stupid questions but it's so long ago. The new generation nowadays thinks, really thinks differently. Maybe I sound too positive and too optimistic but I see when I speak with the young students they know so much about these issues.⁷

For the Polish case, a representative from the Coalition Karat admits that international grant givers have influence over NGOs because they are dependent on them for money, but adds that they are also often able to get funding for controversial issues, since if some sponsors turn them down, they can sometimes find others:

⁶ Interview with Hana Klimešová, from Movement for Women's Equal Rights in the Czech Republic and the Czech-German Forum of Women, in Prague on January 26, 1999

⁷ Interview with Katja Farkasova, Slovak Alliance of Women (Aliancia žien).

Well, actually looking for money is very often connected with putting your activities into some kind of roles. I mean, it's very often like that but, well, there are sponsors who were willing to sponsor these activities which were found very controversial in Poland although there were also such sponsors who preferred not to do it, not to have bad relations with the government so you know it means that when government changed you couldn't receive money from UN agencies, for example, for some very controversial activities. But, yes, sponsors strongly influence the activities of the NGOs. It's like that.⁸

She adds that Western feminists today have a greater understanding of Polish conditions now than in the early 1990s:

... this is the result of the work of Karat and also the 24:25 coalition, which is the coalition of reproductive rights in our region; and it's also quite visible on the EU level. It's being coordinated by the Federation for Women Family Planning. And I would say that due to our work in those two coalitions, these two networks, yes, Western feminists who are active and are engaged in the activities for women's rights, yeah have a better understanding of our problems now than a few years ago and I think it's quite important in our work and theirs.

Similarly, another Polish feminist activist says she has not noticed the tensions between Western feminists and Central European activists that were discussed in the early 1990s:

No, well it's been 17 years. So I think that even those Western feminists maybe they just understood that there's something different in Central and Eastern Europe and that the social context is different.⁹

Her organization is not so dependent on foreign aid, but a representative from one of the best-known feminist organizations, OŚKA, claims that she has never experienced problems with international grant givers making demands on them to change their policies or concentrate on topics to which they did not want to give priority.¹⁰ Roth 2007: 467) backs up this claim and concludes after interviewing activists from women's NGOs in central Europe that "overall, accession did not produce dramatic changes in the issues pursued by women's organizations, but rather a continuation and deepening of those activities."

The EU Gives Legitimacy to Gender Issues in the Mass Media

Because of EU pressure for gender mainstreaming, all the Central European countries were forced to set up some kind of council for gender equality. In the Czech Republic, an independent Government Council for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women was established in 2001. The Council included representatives of the ministries and nongovernmental women's organizations, along with employers' delegations and the

⁸ Interview with Aleksandra Solik, from Coalition Karat (Koalicja Karat) and Federation for Women and Family Planning, in Warsaw, May 24, 2007.

⁹ Interview with Julia Kubisa, vice president of Fundacja MaMa and Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca, in Warsaw, May 24, 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with Marta Sokotowska, assistant at OŚKA a Polish women's organization, in Warsaw on May 24, 2007.

Czech Statistical Bureau (Linková 2003). This council only had minor influence on relatively minor reforms and basically has been only a consultive organ (Sedelmeier 2009: 9). For example, it proposed legislation,¹¹ that later became law, which enables both parents to share the 9 days of leave benefits for taking care of sick children (Saxonberg & Sirovátka 2007, Saxonberg & Szelewa 2007). Despite such small reforms, the council avoided discussions over such issues as the need for men to share in parental leave responsibilities, the need for greater access to childcare, etc. Parliament also created a Permanent Commission for Family and Equal Opportunity and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs also established the Department for Equal Opportunities. Again, none of these organizations seems to have had much influence on policy-making, although as will be discussed later, a special committee set-up in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs did have some minor influence on family policies.

In Poland, after negotiations began for accession to the EU and further pressure arose from the Beijing conference in 1995, the government created the *Forum* of cooperation between the Office of the Governmental Plenipotentiary for Family and Women's Affairs and women's NGOs. "The *Forum* created a platform through which women's NGOs had input into the reviews of proposed changes in the Labor Code, thereby having the opportunity to provide legal opinions during this process" (Regulska & Grabowska 2008: 142). Although it was founded under a social-democratic government, the government made it clear that it did not take gender issues seriously and only did the minimum required by the EU. The conservative government that came to power in 1997 was even more critical and changed the name of the Plenipotentiary for Family and Women's Affairs to the Plenipotentiary for Family Affairs. It also refused to create a Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men, which was the title that the EU preferred (Regulska & Grabowska 2008: 142-3).

As the negotiations for accession progressed, the EU placed greater pressure on the Polish government to define such terms as "sex discrimination," "indirect discrimination" and "work of equal value" and to pass laws on these issues. This encouraged women's organizations to use the EU to pressure their government and they began publishing EU documents to make them publicly accessible, including *The EU Manual for Women* and a Polish edition of *100 Words about Equality Between Women and Men* (Regulska & Grabowska 2008: 145). In 2001 the social democrats came back to power and the new plenipotentiary was more willing to cooperate with NGOs, including cooperation on producing a *National Plan of Action for Woman* (Regulska & Grabowska 2008: 147). Even this social democratic government did not really take the Plenipotentiary very seriously, but it remained under EU pressure to produce some documents, which gave gender issues greater legitimacy in the mass media. For example, during a visit to Poland in 2004, Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka, who was then head of the Plenipotentiary for Women, confided to me that although the head of the party had campaigned on the need for re-establishing the plenipotentiary as one dealing with women's issues, after elections, in his role as prime minister, he asked her "do we really

¹¹ Interview with Dagmar Zelenková, head of Department for Equal Opportunities of MPLSA, May 31, 2007; see also documents of the Council on web pages of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs—mpsv.cz.

need this organization?”¹² When the conservative government came to power in 2006, it abolished the Plenipotentiary, although the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs still had a section dealing with gender equality (Saxonberg & Szelewa 2007).

In Slovakia, the government introduced the Department of Equal Opportunities (Odbor rovnosti príležitostí) in the Ministry of Labor, Social and Family Affairs in 1999. In 2002 the name changed to the Department for Equal Opportunity and Anti-Discrimination and then in 2005 it changed once more to the Department for Family and Equality Policies (Filadelfiová & Búterová, 2006: 7). As in the other countries of this study, observers claim that this department has little influence on policymaking. In 1999 Parliament also set up a Women’s commission under the Committee for Human and Minority Rights). However, they too did not have much influence and attempts at setting up an independent women’s committee in parliament failed (Filadelfiová & Búterová 2006:8). From 1996-2002, a coordinating committee for Equal Opportunity for Women and Men was set-up, which was supposed to advise the government. It included members of parliament, ministries, research organizations, women organizations and leaders from the Catholic Church. It only met twice a year, although its expert commission met more often. However, it stopped functioning in 2002. Even though these groups did not have much influence on policies, they did produce some reports that gave greater legitimacy in the mass media to the issue of gender equality. This includes the *National Action Plan for Women* in 1997, the *Conception for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men* in 2001, the *National Strategy for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Families* in 2004 and the *National Action Plan* in 2005. Women’s groups criticized these documents for not being clear enough, not taking up the gender dimensions of violence and not providing enough economic support for the measures that they suggested (Filadelfiová & Búterová 2006: 9). Despite these problems, the mere fact that these committees existed and that they produced these documents, gave gender issues greater legitimacy in the mass media.

In summary, it seems that the various organizations that the Central European governments set-up under pressure from the EU and the Beijing Conference, have not had much actual influence on policy-making. However, they *have* granted greater legitimacy to the issue of gender equality and thus, forced the mass media to take these issues more seriously. This is not to claim that the Central European mass media has suddenly become very sympathetic to feminist ideas, but it definitely has become more open in general to feminist thoughts that before the accession process began. Consequently, women’s groups have been able to gain greater access to the mass media. Of course, legitimacy through the EU is not the only reason for this change; experience has also taught women activists how to deal better with the mass media. In other words, paying lip service to gender equality still does a service to the lip, as the mass media picks up on the topic, even if the government does not take its own lip seriously.

As one representative from the Polish NGO the Rights of Women observed in an interview:

I think now we have much more contacts with the media also and they recognize us and they call us for different comments when there’s something happening concerning women. So we have much bigger media attention now than 13 years ago [when the organization was founded];

¹² We discussed this at an event in which the Plenipotentiary gave the award of “Swedish glasses” to a person or organization, who/which had done the most to promote gender equality, in April, 2004.

obviously, and there are many more journalists now who are more sensitive on the issue [of women's rights], who write better and know more in a more essential way, for example, violence against women and who are more aware of gender issues.¹³

A Czech feminist observes that the mass media has become more open to gender issues since the country joined the EU: "I think that [the fact that] the word 'gender' started to be used more is a big change, and that the people can pronounce it and understand it... and that you can read about it in like mainstream magazines is a big change."¹⁴

Gender is becoming such an acceptable issue now that even business magazines are giving some space to organizations such as the Association of Business and Professional Women in the Czech Republic. The organization's president notes that sometimes the business newspaper *Hospodářské noviny* has written short notices about their activities and that they have also cooperated with the economic weekly *Profit* as well as the business magazine *Prosperita*, which allows them to publish a special supplement called Madame Business.¹⁵

Some activists also believe that with time the mass media has simply become more professional, which makes it more open to reporting on NGOs, although they still tend to do it in a sensational manner. As one Slovak medical doctor put it:

[The] media are doing better and also good job sometimes, but usually they want to sell something which make emotions and because of this, they sometimes prepare some space for you to explain your ideas. But usually really, they have only one, one reason to use your ideas to sell messages, but these messages usually have to be emotional as much as possible.¹⁶

Again, even if the media is becoming more professional and women's organizations have learned better how to utilize the media, and even if the EU has given greater legitimacy to gender issues, which has made it easier for NGOs to get access to the mass media, this does not mean that the media in general is pro-feminist. A huge difference still exists between the manner in which the Central European media cover gender issues and the Scandinavian media; however, the point is that the media's coverage has improved greatly since the early 1990s.

Personal Experiences with the West

When the communist regimes collapsed, it became possible for Central Europeans to travel to the West and come in contact with Westerners, both through traveling and by meeting Westerners, who visited Central Europe. In the 1990s in Prague alone, around 50,000 Americans chose to live in the city. Thus, Central Europeans came into increasing

¹³ Interview with Urszula Nowakowska, Centrum Praw Kobiet, Tuesday, May 22, 2007.

¹⁴ Interview with Katerina Saldova, junior researcher and project manager, at the National Contact Center–Women in Science on August 8, 2009.

¹⁵ Interview with Hana Sutarova President of APM-BPW CR –Association of Business and Professional Women. August 5, 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with MD. Michal Kliment, PhD., president of the Slovak Family Planning Association (Spoločnosť pre plánované rodičovstvo) in Bratislava on February 27, 2007.

contact with westerners and ideas, such as feminism, that were popular in the international discourse. In addition, already in the 1990s many Central Europeans took that opportunity to study at Western universities, which further exposed them to ideas, such as feminism, since gender issues are often discussed in the liberal arts and social science faculties at most major Western universities. The possibilities for studying at these universities increased both because of individual cooperation agreements between universities, national scholarship programs (such as Swedish Institute scholarships in Sweden), and various EU programs, such as the Socrates/Erasmus Exchange Agreements. In the 1990s, it also became easier for Central Europeans to work in Western Europe and once these countries joined the EU it became even easier, even if some countries still enacted temporary limits on labor market immigration.

The fact that an increasing number of Central Europeans gained experiences in the West does not mean that all became interested in feminism because of positive experiences in encountering Western feminist thought. Some became interested in feminism because of *negative* experiences in the West. A typical positive experience comes from a Czech activist, who began to become interested in feminist issues when she studied in Finland, as she experienced life in that country, visited the university library and got to visit the high quality Finish daycare centers (which helped her come over Czech stereotypes about the supposed harmful effects of daycare on children under three).

An example of a negative experience that got someone interested in feminism comes from a Czech woman, who had been the head of Gender Studies and later worked for the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. She explains:

... when I finished the university and my future husband as well, he got a scholarship from the University of Cambridge and I agreed to go with him The issue of discrimination of women had never ever come to my mind, never ever since I was born, because my mother was working, my father was working and it was never even an issue and there [at Cambridge]. ... [Our] friends there, they were mostly Italians and some English men, who liked international people and they didn't talk to me. I noticed a strange thing, like they didn't talk to me about interesting issues. I didn't know why and then once I said, for example, I already want to go home to Czech Republic, because I need to start to do something. I can't do anything here and what I meant was a proper job. And then I remember one girl saying, so you can take drawing lessons and I didn't understand what she meant. And then later on I understood that for these people I was a housewife, but it never even occurred to me ... So, I somehow got interested in these issues of why they behave towards me so strangely, which took me really long time. And then when I came back I somehow accidentally met some women involved not directly in Gender Studies but in other organization and then when, the Gender Studies in the beginning was looking for some director at one point.¹⁷

Similarly, the Polish economist, Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc, who is President of the Pro Femina association became a feminist after following her husband to the USA, when he received a job the cultural attaché. She had a PhD in economics, so was not used to being a housewife. She recalls:

¹⁷ Interview with Michaela Marxová-Tominová, former head of Gender Studies, then former head the department of Family Planning at the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, interviewed in Prague in June 28, 2007.

I read about feminism before I left, but I thought: what do these American women want? They have everything: washing machines, refrigerators. The fact that a girl goes to high school, then to the university, that she gets a job and sends her child to a nursery was something obvious for me. The communist regime was making life very active for women. In the USA I had to stay home with children and I had to ask my husband for money if I wanted to buy some clothes. That was humiliating. I became an American housewife and I understood why they needed feminism (Zawadzka 2007).

Even if tensions arose sometimes during the initial meeting between Western feminists and activists in Central European women's organizations, by the second decade after the fall of communism, most major Central European universities had founded their own gender studies programs. For example, in Poland Warsaw University, the University of Łódź, and Jagiellonian University all have programs in gender studies, while the Institute of Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences has a group working on gender issues called "women and family." In the Czech Republic both the Charles University in Prague and Masaryk University in Brno have programs in gender studies, while the Institute of Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences has a department of gender studies. In Slovakia, the Comenius University in Bratislava has a Gender Studies Center and although the Institute of Sociology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences is too small to have its own sub-departments, several researchers there publish on gender issues.

The initiation of university programs on gender studies has enabled a new generation of scholars to emerge, who can frame issues in accordance with local cultures. In contrast to the stereotype of the early 1990s, in which western feminists, with little or no knowledge of local conditions and traditions, supposedly tried to force women activists to accept their western versions of feminism, now the Central European countries have their own scholars, who are capable of taking into account the international discourse, but framing issues that make sense to the local population in a manner that are attuned to the local problems. As scholars pointed out previously, feminism would have little chance to develop in Central Europe if Central Europeans themselves did not frame their arguments in a manner that could receive "resonance" (Heitlinger 1996 and Saxonberg 2003).¹⁸

I would go one-step further and claim that the academic world has become so internationalized and integrated now that little tension exists among academics between "East" and "West." In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a line between the two, as scholars from post-communist countries often work at Western universities or received their PhDs there, before returning to their homelands, while Western scholars are also beginning to work at universities in post-communist countries.

Summary

This article shows that feminism has become more acceptable in Central Europe. Women's groups are more willing to openly declare themselves to be feminist; and the mass media is giving women's groups more coverage and more positive coverage, even if the media is still far from being pro-feminist. A discursive-institutionalist can go a long way in explaining these changes. The political opportunity structures changed radically

¹⁸ For a discussion about frame analysis and social movements, see, for example, Benford (1993), McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, (1996), Snow & Bedford (1992), Snow et al. (1986) and Tarrow (1992).

after the communist regimes fell, as women could begin to organize freely. Integration into international organizations, such as the EU has given these international organizations some influence. An especially important issue was EU's demand for gender mainstreaming. Even though the EU generally follows a liberal-feminist strategy that places emphasis on laws that forbid discrimination rather than on promoting steps that would radically change gender role, the demand for mainstreaming at least forced the Central European governments to set-up various organizations dealing with gender issues. These organizations did not have much impact on actual policymaking, but their mere existence gave gender issues much greater legitimacy and pressured the mass media to take these issues more seriously. Women's groups could utilize this to gain more access to the media.

Another important development has been the greater interaction between people from post-communist countries and the rest of the world. This has included the ability to travel and work in Western countries (and for westerners to travel and work in Central Europe) and especially the increased in academic exchanges. Today the major Central European universities either all have gender studies programs or at least have researchers working on gender issues and teaching courses on this. Consequently, a new generation of feminist scholars are emerging, who can frame gender issues in a manner that can get greater resonance in their own countries. Despite this emphasis on institutionalism, institutions cannot explain everything. Women's organizations have also learned from experience in how to interact better with the mass media. Some organizations even have people who are specialized in dealing with the mass media and lobbying.