

Think Tank Korčula School
“Transforming Politics – Inter-generational Dialogue on Gender Equality and
Solidarity”²

Cavtat, Hotel Croatia, 26 - 27 August 2017



Key messages

1. **The problem does not primarily lie with young people but with the way progressives and social-democrats are able to reach out to the younger generation through issues, communication and activism.** Transforming politics is not possible without full participation of all the population, men women, young and old. Participants acknowledged that the progressives

² 2017 “Korčula School” Think Tank, in its sixth annual session, was held in Cavtat (Croatia) on Saturday, 26 and Sunday, 27 August 2017. Over forty participants from South Eastern and Western Europe from the academia, political parties and NGOs participated at the meeting. The meeting was very high level with party leaders and high ranking members of party leadership participating actively (Annex 1). They discussed the political and ideological challenges in fostering inter-generational dialogue and the inclusion of, especially young, women in political life. The School was organized by the CEE Network for Gender Issues and the Center for New Initiatives (Zagreb) in partnership with the Party of European Socialist Women, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and under the financial sponsorship of the Olof Palme International Center. International Union of Socialist Youth and YES also contributed to the meeting.

and social democrats are not doing something right. Participation, communication and outreach are key, and they are inadequate.

2. **New trends show that important change is possible in the region of South Eastern Europe** through a different approach resting on openness, clarity of message, solidarity and participation. Civic revolts are quite possible but how will they be directed, channeled and led? It is important to strengthen party politics to be able to channel popular demand. The conservative “revolution” is quite forceful and the young generation is looking for progressives and social democrats to provide responses. A new generation of politicians is in the making and needs to come onto the scene.
3. **This is a fast communication and issue based political moment.** It is not true that young people are not interested in politics. They, especially the 30-35 year old, just feel that the system has failed them and that they are unable to change the status quo. They do not believe in institutions, unlike most of the older people. They participate and communicate in much more concrete ways focusing on personal issues that they feel can change their lives. Young people also feel that the “privileged” social stratum are the elderly with their pensions while they, the young, have no jobs and have an uncertain future. They feel that they are the “historical losers”. Data shows that good connectivity and communication among the young goes in favour of left and progressive options, but that they do not feel that there is political space for this expression of political opinion. They can talk but they are not heard. Political parties need to change the way they communicate and how they communicate – from addressing key concerns of the young generation and women but also adapting to the ways of communication. Currently not enough substantive effort is made to reach beyond the “traditional” voters, who tend to be either the older generation or the middle one.
4. **A country in which basic human rights are not respected, cannot also respect the rights of women.** Women tend to be more open to change, for instance they were most active in the peace movements in the nineties in the Balkan region. Unfortunately, in a misogynous society, women politicians are the target of the press in most insulting ways. Women politicians are especially targeted.
5. **Authoritarian tendencies and the imposition of a strong leader figure stifle democracy and participation, while the economy, as the main determinant of progress is based on corruption and remains outside the law.** It seems that the authoritarian concept is more appealing to the young and the older generation seeking more security. A strong leader cum disbelief in the democratic system and the rule of law is perpetuating the democracy deficient and stifling political development. In this situation inequalities, poverty and corruption are on the increase. However, young women seem to be more open to a democratic society and to civic engagement.
6. **Tensions in the region prevail between and among countries, violence against the individual, and especially women remain in spite of legal measures.** This issue is not only a matter of changing legislation on violence against women (often half-baked partial legal and law enforcement solutions) but is strongly correlated to the overall state of democracy and wellbeing and is the consequence of the economic and social situation. Democracy is only a formal system in the Balkans while autocracy, kleptocracy and the rule of corrupt elites (linkages between the

political and big business establishments) is still prevalent. The system and the state cannot function better without the rule of law and when political ethics are lacking.

7. **In the name of regional stability the West, especially the EU as the biggest player, is supporting authoritarian regimes and turning a blind eye to this democracy deficiency arguing for “stability”.** The Balkans is living a moment of distortion of democracy and democratic values. The EU seems coerced to force ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Balkans. This, in the situation of a democracy deficit means perpetuated stagnation. International support for authoritarian and conservative (even neo-fascist) political elites limits the political and ideological space for progressive forces in the region. With a simmering discontent one may ask the question is it really stability or a transitory phase until a social eruption? Do we have a substantive analysis of emerging social movements and their issues of concern? Could openness and clarity on issues of ethnicity, nationalism, gender equality, worker’s rights rally civic support? Could regional partnerships and cooperation especially among progressive forces strengthen and maximize our messages and potential for action?
8. **Poverty and inequalities are on the rise.** Young people are leaving the region which will soon be devoid of the economic potential to grow. This is an issue far beyond the demographic populist solutions offered by the right and the church. Even those who are employed either work in precarious conditions or do not receive wages regularly. Economic development goes beyond GDP and economic, and human security, escapes the radar. There has not been concerted effort to address the IT economy impact on the lives of people and their future employment and other economic opportunities. This especially affects women as they are dominant in administration and the service industry. Will it impact the security of jobs that women and the young have acquired with great effort? Is education in sync with economic opportunities? Progressive political parties are not addressing these concerns and solutions seem to have a 10-20 year time lag as parties compete in national elections and make unrealistic, and long term dubious, promises. And yet nationalists are presenting seemingly simple, populist solutions which can get the region into a new spiral of populism and nationalism but also economic decline.
9. **Is SD losing its appeal and engagement with the civil society?** Are the new left parties taking over our partnership with the progressive civil society? SD should be alert to civil society initiatives and be open to partnerships (and vice versa). But it should also be ready to grasp specific issues, often quite individualistic, that are in the focus of non-governmental organisations. Women’s NGOs often feel that the left has abandoned their cause and has not been able to engage substantively and through political and social activism. Can SD lead and go beyond being reactive? The importance of this partnership, but on an equal footing and with mutual understanding on the mission. Partnerships at the local level, as well as issue based partnerships and joint advocacy campaigns are equally important and there are many good practices from the region and Europe to draw from. Unfortunately, there is also a challenge: many civil society initiatives are initially espoused widely but the upward curve of their appeal often quickly declines as the activities do not fruition into a substantive political change. This is an opportunity for progressive parties, since these activists tend to turn their back on left traditional political parties. As “individualistic” topics dominate, public space for the political left is shrinking. It is necessary to identify avenues and space for a discourse on substantive issues of democracy, human rights, development, equality, solidarity.

10. **Political parties also need to change/transform** – internally and in external campaigns. They seem to project themselves as political elites, above civil society. More space for views, dialogue, interest groups and issues. More substantive internal and public dialogue should go beyond just public relations. Maybe a broader discussion on political identity and ideological direction as parties prepare new party platforms and election strategies. Communicating these clearly is important, since left parties have alienated their own constituencies, including women who continue to be excluded and serve often only as party organisers and not ideologues/leaders.
11. **Can political parties have the dual function of being a political party and a movement?** History shows that social movements led by political parties on the left have shaped the last hundred plus years. Are we weakening political parties by creating left leaning social movements and demonstrating that they are outdated? Or should we change political parties first and then rally the public opinion and action? The left in Croatia, for example, was never in power on its own but in coalition with others. There is constantly a pull and push on the issue of what is more important - our values or assuming power.
12. **Trade unions seem to have been marginalized while traditional well protected workers used to be TU and SD key constituency.** Lack of cooperation and joint action among the political parties and forces on the left result in fragmentation, marginalization and unwarranted bickering among politicians and parties. This is in the interest of the right wing. How to stop this party and political left fragmentation – could there be the minimum common denominator to drive concerted action against the right, beyond daily politics?
13. **Women’s and youth forums do not have corresponding influence in the parties,** but are generally subject to follow decisions of party leaderships. Leadership selection of these forums is still not autonomous. This is why quotas are giving results in numbers, but better formal representation did not bring substantive representation of youth and women. Quotas are giving results, especially at local levels, for instance in Albania. Close cooperation between WFs and YFs is important to strengthen their influence. It is not easy to attract women to training programs. There are many good examples of successful activities of WFs, for instance in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the law regarding rape; in Slovenia on the issue of availability of free contraceptives; in Montenegro activities regarding the PES youth guarantee which resulted in strengthening linkages between women’s and youth forum; success of women’s academies in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; youth networks promoting gender equality; cooperation between women’s and youth forums in Albania in lobbying for the 50/50 quotas; the establishment of feminist networks within youth forums. There are also problematic examples whereby those elected into women’s forums cannot be also elected into youth forums.
14. **Young women seem to show more interest in public life and politics and are less disenchanting.** However, they do not see substantive change in the space for their political participation and are confronted with an entrenched system of male politics and positioning. A real change could be brought about by concerted effort to promote women in strategic, often legislative and power centered positions, based on political meritocracy and not personal preferences and loyalties. This would empower women politicians and allow them to maintain their “autonomy” of opinion and contribution. Men and women seem to have different priorities in public policies – women MPs often feel the pressure of having to represent women first, they

acknowledge the existence of “women’s interests” which brings them nearer to their women voters. Women’s participation in politics brings a change in political discourse. However, the “critical mass” of women (as represented by the quota system) does not automatically bring the gender lens to political discourse and decision-making. “Critical actors” seem to be more important. Instead of asking ourselves “who represents women” or “do women in politics produce change” one could pose alternative questions – who claims that their action is to the benefit of women and where, why and how is substantive change made in women’s representation.