



2018 Think Tank Korčula School

Korčula, 24 – 26 August 2018

– Transforming Politics through a gender lens-

Conservative Counter-Revolution – Case in Point: Reproductive Rights and Demographics

FORWARD

2018 Korčula School dealt with the current, heated, politically and ideologically charged topic prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe "Conservative Counter-Revolution – Case in Point: Reproductive Rights and Demographics".

Unattended issues of declining birthrates, increased mortality age as people live longer and overstretched social welfare systems have for decades been harbingers of a demographic crisis. Today, the solutions to this crisis have been hijacked by an ideological aggressiveness conducted by the conservative right and a clerical deep state. This is a concerted attempt to dismantle the gains made on women's human rights and the concept itself of gender equality.

This political reality evolves as Europe faces increasing challenges to its identity, values, vision, negotiations on Brexit, new EU accessions, the upcoming EP elections. It is cloaked in the current political moment of rising nationalism, populism, xenophobia, racism, clericalism, social exclusion and rising poverty. A reality that urges reflection, responses, vision and courage. Complacency has historically been a risky and unsuccessful business.

In this framework gender equality as a concept and an achievement is under siege with examples ranging from Poland, to Hungary and Croatia. Gender equality has proven to be a litmus test for the state of democracy and respect for human rights. Gender equality is a volatile societal "acquis", politically challenging for those entrenched in a patriarchal, conservative vision of the world, values and societal relations.

The think tank addressed from a holistic perspective the above issues as they unfold in South Eastern Europe the key underpinning position being the woman's right to choose and make decisions on her own reproduction and sexuality. Denying these is a precarious attack on the foundations of our democracies and human rights with far reaching consequences in all walks of life.

The Korčula School participants (Annex 1) focused on low birth rates, attrition of the population due to the migration of youth and skilled labour force, social welfare systems which are being curtailed to the detriment especially of the young and those most in need. The participants offered progressive solutions drawing on best practices and lessons learnt in addressing the said issues.

Women's reproductive rights—a basic human right—permeate this political, economic and social reality.. Respect for the current, positive, legislation on human rights in the region is being jeopardized daily as conservative, and often very right wing, clerical and patriarchal solutions that are offered violate the human rights of women. Church and clerical forces have assumed the position of dominant arbiters infringing on the basic constitutional postulates of all the states in the region, i.e. the proclaimed division between the Church and the State.

The 2018 Korčula School was preceded by a joint discussion on 24 August 2018 on the theme "Making the EU enlargement process deliver for Western Balkan women" organized by the Global Progressive Forum and the CEE Network for Gender Issues.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Vesna Šarić Silović".

Chair, CEE Network for Gender Issues International

The 2018 Korčula School think tank was organized in partnership with the Olof Palme International Center, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Croatia and Slovenia), Party of European Socialists (PES) and PES Women. The CEE Network for Gender Issues is part of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, Member of PES Women and has observer status at the PES. The 2018 Korčula School full report and accompanying texts can be found at: www.ceegendernetwork.eu

GENDER EQUALITY ACQUIS UNDER ATTACK

Over the last decade there has been a visible rise in conservative, right, far right, clerical, xenophobic and neo-fascist movements. These have risen within existing political parties on the right, in the formation of new right wing parties, especially the far right ones, and within the civil society.

Religious entities, whether Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim or others are assuming an increasingly, more aggressive public and political stance. They are becoming “a state within a state”, meddling into state politics, institutions and public affairs in contravention to the secular constitutions and laws in the countries. They are allies and foot soldiers for the right wing governments and parliaments which by association are also not respecting the constitution and being complicit in the development of this state of affairs. Judging by their activities these movements are seeking to “infiltrate” state institutions, the health, education and the judicial system and they are professionally supported and well funded from sources within countries and as a part of a cross-border European and global movement. They have fashioned progressive civil society tools and language to suit their cause.

BOTTOM LINE

While the pendulum is swinging the clock is ticking. Progressives, socialdemocrats, the left cannot be by-standers but rather actors and leaders. The rising nationalistic, xenophobic and neo-fascist right should not be underestimated or taken as a normal face of democratic order. But the center left, socialdemocrats and progressives have to acknowledge that Europe, societies and people

The publicly proclaimed *casus belli* of these social and political forces is an attack on women’s rights, and especially the woman’s human and democratic right to decide on her body and reproduction. They promote a return to patriarchal values with three main proclaimed objectives: i. defense of life from moment of conception; ii. protection of the traditional patriarchal family; iii. their right as Christians to descent from certain laws e.g. LGBT rights, abortion. Their identified “enemies”, which they are trying to discredit, are progressives, the left, the cultural revolution of 1968, secularists, feminists, planned parenthood organizations.

This ideology feeds into the nationalistic and patriarchal standpoint that women are the bearers of the reproduction of the nation and a custodians of “traditional values”. A case in point was the way the political and parliamentary debate on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was conducted. **It is an enormous step back in terms of gender equality achievements, especially the concept of gender equality and sexual rights.**

seek new solutions, are unhappy with the current state of affairs and opt to vote for the “new”, often populist and “tribal” in search of security and answers. The center left, socialdemocrats and progressives still have to define a strategy that would be understandable, accessible to ordinary women and men and answer to their concerns. An important element in this is reaching out and cooperating

with civil society movements and acting as a conduit for their concerns and proposals in political institutional dialogue and parliaments.

“Renewing” socialdemocracy does not mean abandoning its core values, but rather strengthening these values by responding to the political, ideological and existential exigencies of the moment. The indivisibility of human rights and women’s human rights are not negotiable. They are our civilizational hard won acquis. Gender equality issues and women’s concerns need to be taken out of the traditional “women’s ghetto” into the mainstream.

This implies the design of a broader, more inclusive, strategy with adequate funding. It implies more cohesion and cross-border cooperation among progressives. Being in the political minority in countries does not exonerate socialdemocratic parties from their responsibility to the people and the country. On the contrary.

Demographic and population policies should not fog gender equality concerns and be formulated at the expenses of women and their rights.

It is a woman’s right to decide when she will have children, while the state needs to create conditions, implement measures to support this right. Financial stimuli for child bearing are marring the real problems and comprehensive solution to a viable demographic policy. Below are some key measures for a comprehensive and sustainable demographic policy:

- **Social measures:** supporting and encouraging paternal leave; diverting resources (for instance imposing tax on the Church) to child care facilities, ensuring child caring facilities free of charge
- **Economic measures:** implementing gender sensitive budgeting; creating employment opportunities and raising the minimum wage; supporting work life balance policies, rent subsidies; supporting millennials to adapt to the changing labour market

- **Health:** legal, accessible, free of charge abortion with adequate information provided to women in all parts of the country, free contraception, planned parenthood, universal and free health coverage

- **Education:** sexual education and information, lifelong education and professional opportunities adapted to the changing marketplace

- **Immigration:** creation of employment, housing, job advancement and overall social and political conditions for people to feel comfortable, in a democratic environment based on human rights and the rule of law, to remain in their countries and fulfil their aspirations.

These measures need to be formulated in cooperation with civil society institutions, accompanied by corresponding budgets, financial monitoring measures, including statistical follow-up. They are also especially important at the local level and local communities should be supported in formulating their plans and in strengthening their implementation and monitoring capacities.

Regional cooperation among socialdemocrats and progressives, and in this case women’s forums and socialdemocratic foundations, is necessary for exchange of information, lessons learnt and formulation of key responses.

