FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION For Freedom.

East and Southeast Europe

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

EAST AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

ANALYSIS

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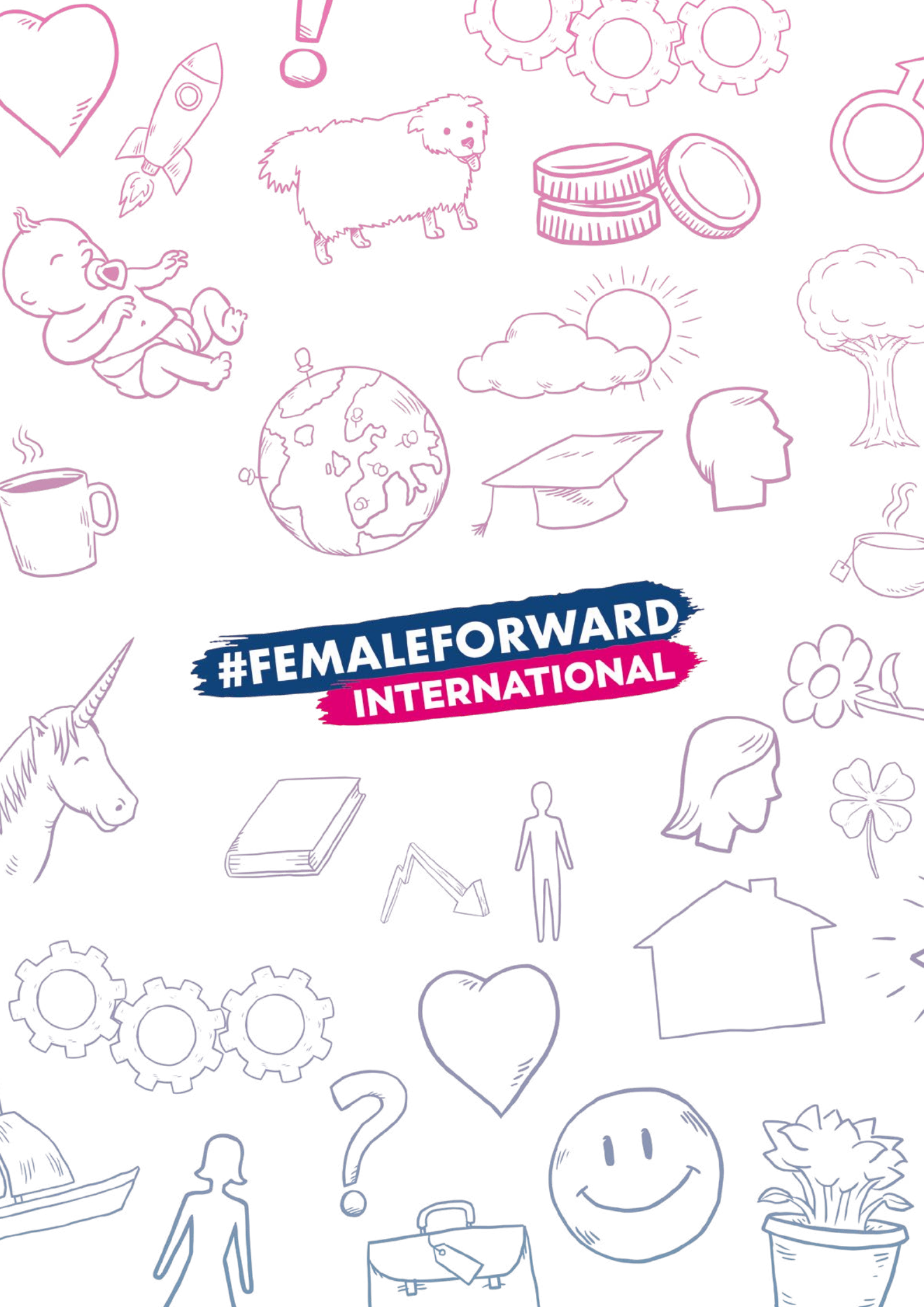

#FEMALEFORWARD
INTERNATIONAL

FOREWORD

I look at the disrespect into which democracy has fallen the world over, and I can't help thinking this maybe has something to do with "It's a man's world". Without doubt, democracy is in a dire need of change. It is high time that women step in leadership positions in all walks of life. As women bring change and balance on the decision-making table, they could help improve democracy, diversify the discourse, innovate, address inequalities, speak up for the disadvantaged.

As liberals we strongly believe in the potential of the individual, female empowerment and leadership. We are happy to feature female ambassadors, multipliers, role models and trailblazers from East and Southeast Europe in the global campaign "Female Forward" of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. In our Regional FNF office, we have supported female leadership for years with different programmes such the "Alliance of Her", in cooperation with ALDE Party and the European Liberal Forum.

We cover 16 countries with divergent levels of democratic development and economic progress, female representation and gender equity: Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Greece, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Moldova, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

The liberal stories worth sharing span across a wide spectrum – human rights, civil society, media, education, law, academia, art, entrepreneurship, business, economics, politics, public policy, international development, foreign policy, defence, diplomacy, migration, and more.

The readers are invited to take a more in-depth look in the analytical texts, shedding light into the gender equity in politics, civil society, and journalism. They could further explore the case studies of the Istanbul Convention, triggering waves of discord in the region; and of the pioneers of change from the women's movement in Turkey. The paper on the competence and confidence as keys to success for female leadership with some research from Romania is also an insightful read.

The underlying thread in all the featured interviews and analyses is the commitment and courage of these leaders to step outside the comfort zone, to put each other out in support of liberal ideas and freedom, to raise and fail, to learn and grow, to continue serving their societies, despite numerous obstacles, social norms, prejudices, inequalities, traditions, clichés. Sometimes regardless of their gender and sometimes because of their gender.

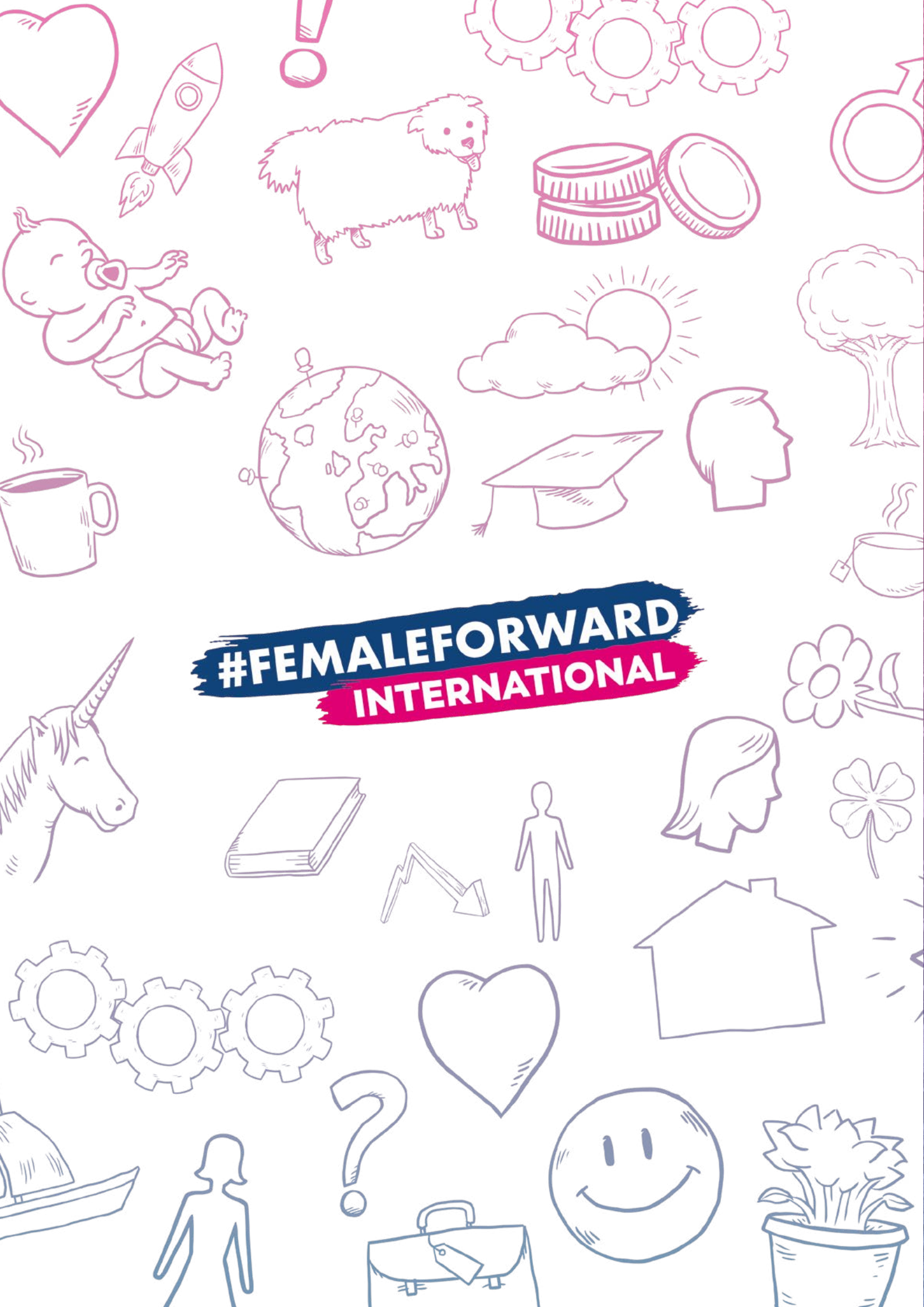
I would like to thank all of the ambassadors for their trust to share their personal journeys, success and failures, lessons learned and guiding principles with FNF. My gratitude goes as well to the excellent team of authors, editors and designer, who crafted the stories so beautifully. Please follow more stories with #FemaleForwardInternational on social media and our website.

As the saying by Thucydides goes "The secret of happiness is freedom. The secret of freedom is courage". I am confident that the prospects of happiness in the region are much higher with so many courageous women. I thank them for being our partners in freedom in East and Southeast Europe.

Martin Kothé

Regional Director for
East and Southeast Europe

Friedrich Naumann Foundation
for Freedom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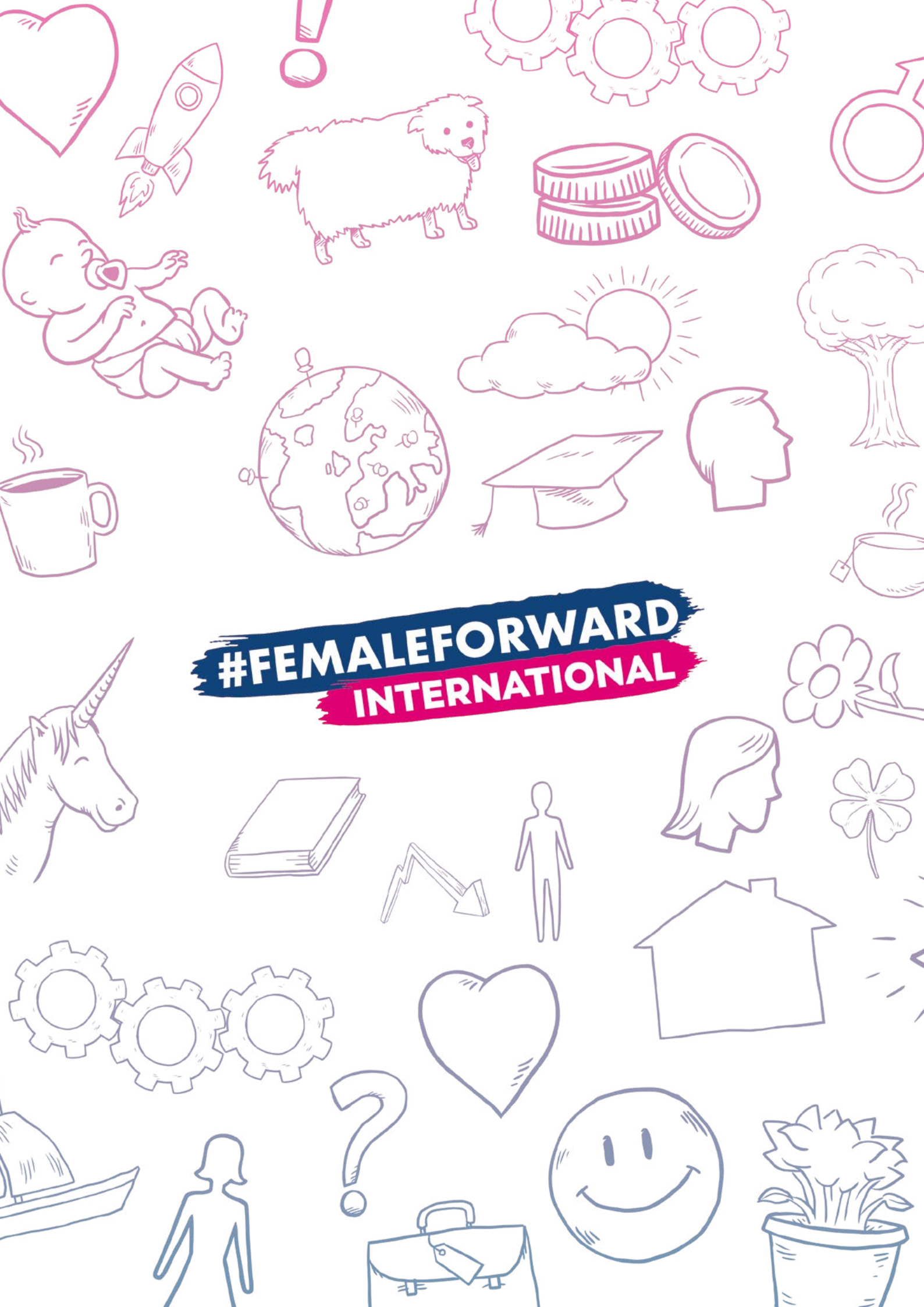
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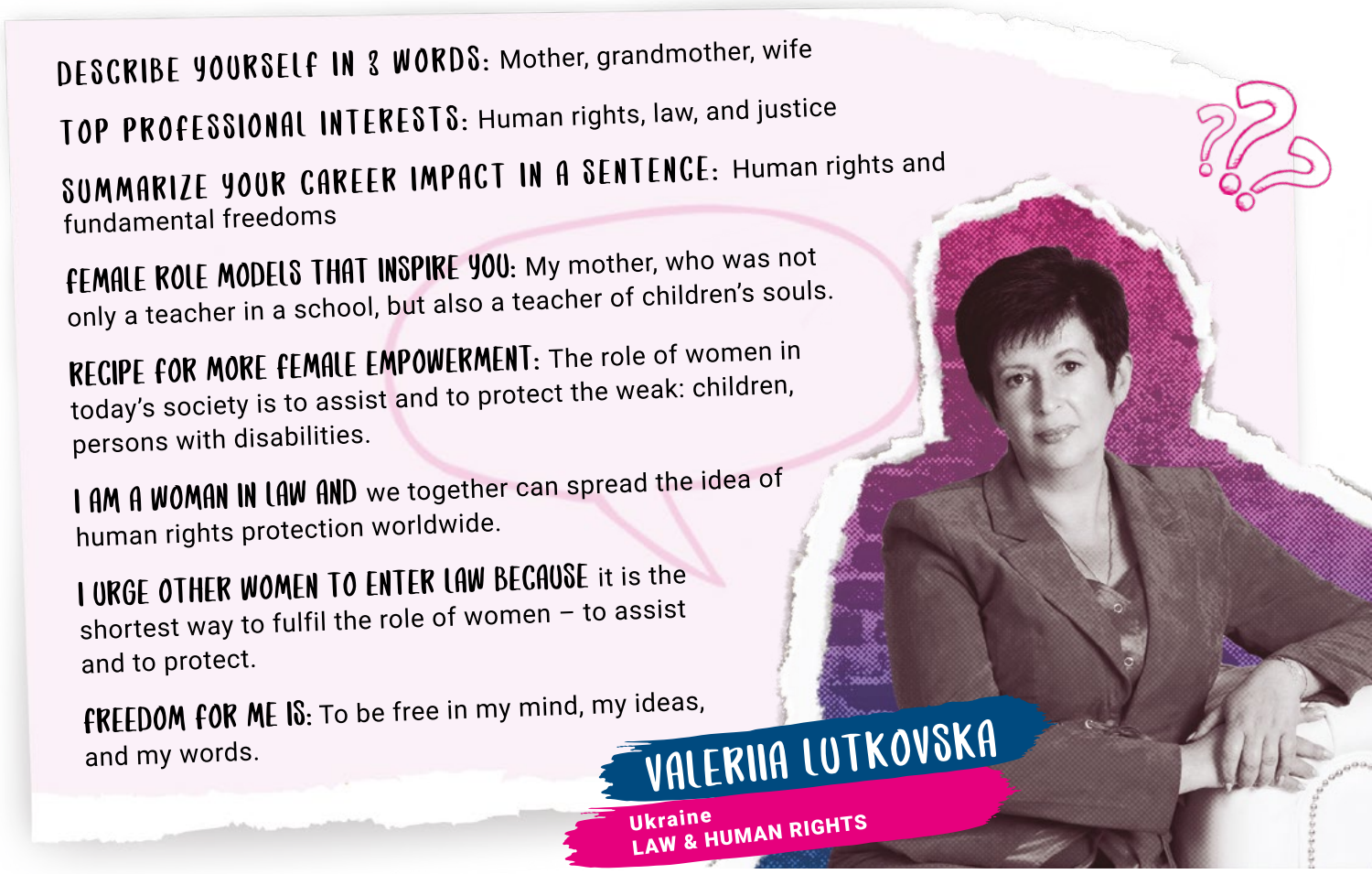
VALERIIA LUTKOVSKA: A WOMAN ON THE DIPLOMATIC FRONTLINE

The legal expert paving the way for Ukrainian human rights legislation

Author: Joanna Elmy



"It is not complicated for me to be a woman in my profession", says Valeriia Lutkovska when asked what it is like to be the woman who negotiates the release of prisoners from occupied Crimea or fights for the improvement of conditions in the Ukrainian penitentiary system. "For me, it is about human rights – not empty words but standards in each sphere of our lives. And everyone knows who I am and that this is what I stand for. So no, I would not say it is hard for me. For women who want to work in the field of human rights, I have to say this: if you want to advance in your career, you must isolate yourselves in an armour which will shield you. You must keep your eyes on the final prize and show no interest in how people see your clothes, your nails, or your hair; your personal goal is more important than anyone else's opinion."

Lutkovska's words are certainly a reflection of an ideal where a person establishes herself beyond gender. Her deliberate use of language reflects this too (Lutkovska has an excellent command of English, surely perfected during

her long career as a diplomat); while Wikipedia still lists her as an Ombudsman, she calls herself an Ombudsperson. Her life and career make it clear that clichés and stereotypes do not apply. And she is clear about it in a diplomatic fashion – imposing the rules of our conversation without elaboration, firmly yet gently.

> **"For me, it is about human rights – not empty words but standards in each sphere of our lives."**

A stellar diplomatic career

Lutkovska raised her daughter with the help of her mother during Ukraine's Democratic Transition while managing to finish two higher education curriculums: philology then law school. In 1999, she began her work with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). She was the head of the National Bureau for the Questions of the European Convention of Human Rights at the Ukrainian Justice Ministry. She affirms that her interest in human rights is long-standing and, that while in government, she helped prevent human rights abuses.

At the time, Ukraine lacked the special legislation needed to execute ECHR judgements, meaning that European law could not be used by Ukrainian national courts as a source of law. Valeriia Lutkovska decided that needed to change. Despite difficulties, eventually the two systems were successfully harmonized and today, numerous judges understand and use these laws in accordance with European jurisprudence.

In 2012, Lutkovska was elected the Ombudsperson of Ukraine for Human Rights, a position she held until 2018. She describes this time as the six most important years for both her career and for human rights in Ukraine. In 2013, the Maidan movement swept Ukraine after pro-European legislation was blocked due to pressure from Russia. Less than a year later, the Russian Federation annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, causing an international outcry and fuelling the ongoing war in this region and in Donbas. "It is very difficult to be the person who controls the application of constitutional laws in occupied zones", she says.

Human rights in times of war

This war created a lot of victims, people internally displaced, tortured, or killed, Lutkovska says. She states that setting the international standards for the work of ombudspersons during wars was one of the most important issues in her career, as it should be for any ombudsperson. When she assumed her office, there were no international treaties regulating the functions of ombudspersons and decisions had to be made case by case. Lutkovska worked to create an international standard and a tool used by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), an organization that helps human rights institutions work with the United Nations. In 2018, GANHRI declared that it will make the standards developed by Lutkovska an international norm for the work of ombudspersons.

When the war in Crimea began, Ukraine lost a lot of people in its penitentiary system, since 30% of its prisons were now in territory it no longer controlled. This meant that more than 13,000 people were missing, Lutkovska explains. She started negotiations with the powers in the non-controlled territories to transfer these prisoners back to Ukraine. She regrets that not many were brought back, though a decent number – about 20 persons per month or 300 overall – were transferred due to her personal participation. She acted as a guarantor in the process, a neutral party between two adversaries, communicating with the authorities in both controlled and non-controlled territories. This was a strange, unconventional role for an Ombudsperson. She also documented systemic issues of how suspects were detained while their cases were investigated and contributed to the judicial understanding of the proper detention procedures in the Ukraine.

> **"What I can foresee is that after the conflict ends, we will get a lot of reports about domestic violence in controlled and non-controlled territories alike because the soldiers who return will suffer psychological trauma and problems."**

But for her, the most important cause during her ombudsperson work is the one Lutkovska calls "her lovely child" – the national Preventative Mechanism against torture. She set out to create this tool in May 2012, just a month after her election. It effectively opened the closed doors of the penitentiary system and the psychiatric hospitals, including institutions for children and the elderly. Her work on the Preventative Mechanism proved extremely important during the Maidan movement, when a lot of people were detained in abysmal conditions and Lutkovska and her team had the opportunity to enter the places of detention and appeal to Parliament about conditions there. She also worked on prison infrastructure, effectively closing an investigation centre in a 300-year-old building in Lviv. In another instance, she intervened and petitioned the Ministry of Health to improve conditions in a psychiatric hospital for felons.

When asked how she handles such heavy work, Lutkovska pauses only for a moment before answering: "While all questions concerning human rights were really interesting, it was only when I started my career as a government official that I truly understood human rights. While working with the ECHR, I saw that the Ukrainian state has many obligations that have never been clearly articulated. For example, the state must not only abstain from torturing people but also actively investigate when torture is committed. The state must not only prohibit, but also promptly investigate unlawful actions when they happen."

Change comes from the individual

"It is also a question of my understanding of human rights, which revolves around dignity", she continues. "Without an understanding of my rights as a human being, it is not possible to understand what human dignity is. Only the person who can protect the right of privacy, or education, or freedom of expression – only they can understand human dignity."

For Lutkovska, it is important to educate Ukrainian society in those ideals. Ukraine is very paternalistic, she says. For example, even though there is a right to appeal to national courts to protect human rights, people prefer to write to the President, because they see him as a guarantor of their constitutional rights. This is a simplistic understanding: "Mr. President, please protect my right to an education." But it does not work like that – one must appeal to the court for protection.

When she was an Ombudsperson, she received 20,000 letters per year. And it was terrible for her to read them and reply with the explanation that the person, first and foremost, must fight for their rights in court, prepare their case, and be ready to protect their rights. People would get mad, she says, and would say that she did not want to protect them. "But you must protect yourselves," she says. This inspired her to work with Ukrainian civil society on educational initiatives which explain the procedures of fighting for one's human rights.

"Without an understanding of my rights as a human being, it is not possible to understand what human dignity is. Only the person who can protect the right of privacy, or education, or freedom of expression – only they can understand human dignity."

It is a woman's world

As an Ombudsperson, she joined a coalition of civic society organizations seeking the ratification of the Istanbul convention. A lot of women in Ukraine complain about domestic violence, and she took that problem to Parliament, urging MPs to ratify this convention and improve the situation. Not only women, she says, but also men complain about discriminatory practices, especially after divorces. She says that her country has an active organization of men who would like to live with their children and she admits that, as a woman, mother, and a lawyer, it puts her in a strange position but that she understands and sees the problem: when courts decide where a child resides, they defer to the Declaration of Children's Rights, which states that after a divorce, a child should be with the mother, not the father. The problem was that this document was never ratified in Ukraine. Lutkovska resorted to the Supreme Court, asking judges not to use this provision because it is discriminatory. As far as the Istanbul convention was concerned, the Orthodox Church was against it – and no politician would go against the Church in Ukraine, she says.

On the other hand, Ukraine established a special police unit, called POLINA, just to respond to domestic violence. Also, there is new legislation with special penalties for aggressors in domestic violence situations. Lutkovska says that this new law is good judicial text but not yet popular with judges. In her opinion, the issue is the cultural norm that internal family problems should remain in the house and not be publicly discussed. Domestic violence is not spoken about. The solution, in her opinion, is to work with the women and men concerned, explaining that the more open a society is about this issue, the better the State can protect people and defend human rights. "What I can foresee is that after the armed conflict ends, we will get a lot of reports about domestic violence in controlled and non-controlled territories alike because the soldiers who return will suffer from psychological trauma but seeking psychiatric and

psychological help is not common in the Ukraine. The problems will remain in the family."

The end of the conflict is Lutkovska's priority now. Her country's situation pains her: the internally displaced people, those killed in combat, and the soldiers still protecting the territorial integrity of her country. But she does not let this deter her. "It is hard for me, because I know we have good people in this country who do not want war but right now, there is no political will to stop it. And we have people in unlawful detention, we have people who have not received their pensions for the past seven years because we do not have the mechanisms to pay that money in the non-controlled territories: it is a case I have fought with the Social ministry many times. But I hope that someday, this war will be resolved in the interest of our society. And for me, as a lawyer, it is important to be ready for that time after the war."

This is why in 2017, she began to prepare for "transitional justice", a very specific area since while there are plenty of international standards, each country still has a specific approach to post-war justice.

"The Orthodox Church pushed against the Istanbul convention – and no politician would go against the Church in Ukraine."

What is her advice to people who wish to work for human rights? They must understand that it is a very difficult field, she says. "You will not be liked by the state and society, because human rights are about everyone, not just about the people who are in our party or those we agree with." She tells the story of a case she recently started, representing the position of a toxic Ukrainian political party. She received a lot of criticism for her stance, but she fends it off: "The right of assembly – which this case is about – is a general right, not just for you or for people who share the same ideology as you. It is about all of us, and I will protect the right of assembly even if I disagree with the political position concerned. And this is one of many examples of the complexities of my field. You must be ready to defend human rights nevertheless."

"When shifting from teaching knowledge to teaching skills, children's success is not measured by grades, but rather by the level of development of those skills."

Lutkovska continues the fight for these ideals in her private practice, where she works side by side with her daughter. When her child was 16, Lutkovska asked her to visit the Law Academy in Kyiv to understand what an advocate does, and to see if she would like it. "Once I was free from civil service and had my own law firm, she came to work with me and it is great to have my daughter by my side as a professional," she says. They worked an interesting case together recently, contesting the detention of a person who was accused of murder. They won that case. Her daughter also specializes in European law.

When asked whether she thinks she was the inspiration for her daughter's career, Valeriia Lutkovska gives a shy smile and shrugs: "I hope so."

There can hardly be any doubt.

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THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Leading with integrity and persistence, former teacher Liliia Hrynevych managed to transform the education system in Ukraine.

Author: Zornitsa Stoilova

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: For me, what is important is to study, to serve, and to love.

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: Creating education that unites my country and provides its people with successful self- fulfilment.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: Do the thing that you love. Strive to be perfect in your profession. Never give in to hardships. Enjoy life.

I AM A WOMAN IN EDUCATION AND I'M sure that thanks to better education for everyone, we can change my country and all of the world for the better.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Different women in different moments of my life. To name a few – the scientist Marie Curie and the Ukrainian female poet Lesya Ukrainka. They both had one important trait – they understood their own dignity, and they listened to themselves to make the world around them better.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER POLITICS, BECAUSE: They have the right to represent the interests of their voters and to introduce positive changes for society.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: To choose your own opportunities that would fit with your nature and your abilities, while at the same time feeling responsible for your own choices and respecting the freedom of choice of others.

LILIIA HRYNEVYCH
Ukraine
EDUCATION & PUBLIC POLICY

It was a hot summer day in August. Liliia Hrynevych took a taxi and the driver was in a particularly good mood. "My daughter has become a student in the Medical University", he beamed. "She will be the first doctor ever in my family".

Up until this point, this man couldn't dream of this moment, because the university admission system in Ukraine was corrupt. Working families like his couldn't afford to pay a bribe to get their children into university and even talented kids didn't stand a chance of pursuing higher education.

What changed the game was the system of external independent testing that Liliia Hrynevych helped get introduced in Ukraine as the first director of the Ukrainian Center for Educational Quality Assessment. Thanks to it, the taxi driver's daughter could pass her entrance examinations and apply to higher educational institutions.

Stories like this prompted Hrynevych, a former teacher and a school principal, to pursue a career in public policy. There she could address and fight the corruption she experienced first-hand working in the educational system.

A firm believer in Nelson Mandela's motto that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world, Liliia Hrynevych used her authority to engage others and managed to transform the old, Soviet style school system into one where every child is encouraged to form and defend its own ideas. As the first female Minister of Education in the country, Hrynevych initiated a broad and systemic reform which created more open and democratic schools.

She spent three years in office (2016-2019) as part of the government of Volodymyr Groysman, but it was her long and productive career before this role that enabled her to make such a difference. She laid the foundations for this reform while working as chair of the parliamentary committee on education, adopting legislative initiatives that allowed changes both in the school system and in academic research. Prior to that, she led the creation of independent external testing for university admissions.

"I think all of my professional life has prepared me for these positions where I could achieve something", Hrynevych says, reflecting on her experience. "If I hadn't worked as a teacher or as a school principal and then as the director of a department of education, I would not have been able to conceive of such fundamental reforms", she adds.

Bringing the change to schools in Ukraine

Liliia Hrynevych first started teaching in 1988, when Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union and the main goal of the educational system was to raise typical Soviet citizens.

It was certainly not an environment that valued the individual approach or teacher freedom. "The most important thing at that time was not to look different from the others and to be like a regular part of the machine", Hrynevych remembers.

A third-generation teacher herself, she enjoyed working with children immensely and it was important for her to be their friend. As a young teacher, she drew her inspiration from the ideas of the Ukrainian humanistic educator Vasyl Sukhomlynsky. He used to say that a child's success is a source of internal strength and energy, which the child could then use for future studies.

To understand that success is individual for every child and to create an environment that nurtures and values each child's way of achieving success is an idea deeply rooted in the "New Ukrainian School", a concept that Liliia Hrynevych introduced with her reformation efforts.

It reflects on the changing role of school in the new dynamics of the technologically advanced world. The school is no longer the only place one can get knowledge, it is rather an environment where children are taught how to study, to form their own ideas and develop their own role in society. In other words, school is supposed to teach children how to use their knowledge to solve life's problems.

As Liliia Hrynevych explains, the "New Ukrainian school" concept placed an emphasis on values, competencies, and soft skills; it taught children the art of emotional intelligence, how to cooperate with each other, and to not give in to problems.

"A child should be able to form its own thoughts, to argue those thoughts and to be able to defend one's position, rather than just comply with the orders coming from the top", she points out and adds: "And a good teacher should not dictate rules, but rather develop those rules together with the children."

While the old system would set standards for what every child should know or be able to do, the new one evaluated the ability to use this knowledge and to put it into practice. This idea was linked with the change in the culture of assessment. Before, the teachers would focus on pointing out a child's mistakes. Now, their approach was to point out the things they should learn. When shifting from teaching knowledge to teaching skills, children's success is not measured by grades, but rather by the level of development of those skills.

This required a lot of energy from the teachers, but it also yielded very good results, Hrynevych believes. It also demanded that teachers work with a different methodology, one that was oriented towards group effort and encouraged children to express their ideas. It values discussions, active listening, and working on projects.

Being able to implement this change and shift society's mindset that children need to be taught differently than previous generations was a huge endeavour, but Liliia

"A good teacher should not dictate rules, but rather develop those rules together with the children. It is also very important to create an environment of success for every child."

"From my own experience, for a woman to be in a management position, she has to be a professional of a much higher level, at least in our society, which is still oriented towards male leaders, especially in education."

Hrynevych said that riding on the momentum of the Ukrainian revolution helped them a lot. "The Revolution of Dignity that took place in Ukraine in 2014 and the events after that changed the value system of very many people", Hrynevych says. "It opened up a huge window of opportunity. That's why we were able to start this reform, to adopt the education and reform laws, because it was a voice people could hear. The system that used to suffocate new ideas suddenly collapsed and society now demanded new ideas and had new opportunities", she adds.

Getting the teachers on board

But as a teacher herself, Hrynevych also knew that the success of the reform depended largely on their efforts to get the teachers on board with their plan.

There were 440 000 teachers in Ukraine with an average age between 45-48 years old, which meant that the majority were experienced teachers with an already formed mindset. The reform meant updating the educational content, the curriculum, and the methodology that they were teaching.

"We would always find that about 10% of the people were always actively pro-reform. We would always find about the same number of people who do not want any change. Our job was to propose to the remaining 80% of the people, who were just sitting there and looking at where the boat was headed, a programme of change that they would adopt", Liliia Hrynevych explains.

This meant setting clear goals for the reform and communicating them very well to the teachers.

And because no reform is possible without investments, during Hrynevych's time as a minister, direct funding for the school system and its infrastructure was increased twofold. The pay package for teachers grew 50% when the reform started. Every teacher was offered the possibility to advance their qualification level and those who got certified received bonuses. Liliia Hrynevych points out that she was lucky in this sense because education was one of the government's priorities from the very beginning.

But what truly ensured the success of the reform was her team's efforts to create a network of parents, teachers, opinion leaders, and civil society organizations that understood the value of this educational reform, believed in their vision for its implementation, and supported it publicly.

"The only way to carry out the reform and to defend it is to get as many stakeholders as possible to engage with your reform platform. What we created was an educational reform ecosystem", Liliia Hrynevych exemplifies.

"The second important thing is to be able to explain to society, to all those interested, and even to those who are not interested, why you want to carry out this change. It is very important to find the people who are hesitant and turn them into your advocates", she explains.

This, of course, doesn't mean that Hrynevych didn't face any criticism while trying to implement the reform. But having this support network ensured that her life work will continue even after her time in office is over. The civil society organisations she engaged with have kept working and pressing the current administration to ensure that the reform works properly.

The former minister says that when you work on something so fundamental, you inevitably get attacked by other people and the only way to survive this is to really have faith in what you're doing.

"When they start criticising you, when you start reading all sorts of true or untrue things in social media, when people start using that derogatory tone that they use against politicians, then you really have to have a lot of energy and faith in order not to give up", Hrynevych says.

"The important thing is to have those people united around the main mission of the reform. It's also crucial that everybody in your team supports the idea and feels their own value in it. I call it shared leadership."

“When shifting from teaching knowledge to teaching skills, children’s success is not measured by grades, but rather by the level of development of those skills.”

Never give up and never not learn

Liliia Hrynevych is not the type of person that likes to take all the credit for her administration’s accomplishments.

“Clearly I didn’t do everything myself. It wouldn’t be possible for one person to do that because it’s a very broad, systemic change”, she says. What she did though was to gather a team of professionals who shared the same values.

“The important thing is to have those people united around the main mission of the reform and then to correctly distribute their roles”, Hrynevych believes. “It's also crucial that everybody in your team supports the idea and feels their own value in it. I call it shared leadership”, she adds.

Hrynevych believes that her role as a leader was to be the face of the idea and to share the responsibility. Of all the qualities needed in someone people want to follow, Liliia points out her determination to constantly study and learn new things.

As a woman, a mother, and the first female leader in her position as a minister, she believes that in order to succeed as a woman in management, you have to be a professional at a much higher level. Especially when in the public eye, it is essential for a woman leader to never forget to look after herself.

Liliia Hrynevych’s advice for the next generation of women in leadership is to be the best professionals in whatever they do, to learn to defend their position, and to never, ever give up.

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"A good teacher should not dictate rules, but rather develop those rules together with the children. It is also very important to create an environment of success for every child."

"The Revolution of Dignity that took place in Ukraine in 2014 opened up a huge window of opportunity. That's why we were able to start the reform and to have the law of education adopted, because it was a voice people could hear. The old system that used to suffocate new ideas suddenly collapsed and society demanded new ideas and had new opportunities."

"There's only one way to carry out a reform and to defend it is to get with as many organisations and stakeholders as possible to engage with your reform platform. What we created was an educational reform ecosystem."

"From my own experience, for a woman to be in a management position, she has to be a professional of a much higher level, at least in our society, which is still oriented towards male leaders, especially in education."

"We do have advantages as women – we are more sensitive, we better sense the inequalities in life, whatever is unfair and unjust. This is why it's up to the women to bring up those social and humanitarian problems that men would sometimes ignore."

"I received the most important qualities that are needed to manage any process, by constantly studying and learning new things. Sometimes I learn from my own mistakes. Sometimes I learn proactively."

"The important thing is to have those people united around the main mission of the reform. It's also crucial that everybody in your team supports the idea and feels their own value in it. I call it shared leadership."

"To understand that success is individual for every child and to create an environment that nurtures and values each child's way of achieving success is an idea deeply rooted in the "New Ukrainian School" reform concept."

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LIBERALISM AS THE ANTIDOTE TO CORRUPTION

Romanian MEP Ramona Strugariu on taking the rule of law agenda of a protest movement to the EU level

Author: Martin Dimitrov

The 2010s have been a turbulent, but also extremely fruitful, period for Romanian democracy. In ten years, the country has changed governments eleven times, with mass protests blocking Piata Victoriei in Bucharest for countless nights, in winter as well as in summer. Civil society has risen up on many occasions: against the development of a silver mine in the Rosia Montana reserve, in defence of the rule of law and, most dramatically – against the corruption and mismanagement that lead to the death of over 60 people in the Colectiv nightclub fire incident of 2015. One after another, the protests swept away cabinet after cabinet and politician after politician, all largely seen as obsolete at best and dangerous at worst.

This civic mobilization produced much more than a series of reshuffles of the same old faces. In a process that can be described as creative destruction, the unrest on the streets of Romania's big cities spawned new movements that grew into parties – mostly liberal – and gave rise to fresh political faces. One that stood out belongs to Ramona Strugariu.

From the squares of Bucharest to the Espace Leopold

Strugariu, who is currently a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from the Renew Europe Group, is a law graduate with more than a decade of experience in the NGO sector. She ran for office on the ticket of the liberal PLUS (Freedom, Unity, and Solidarity Party) fraction, a movement born on the squares of Bucharest in 2018, which is now working alongside another rising political party that started as a civic movement, the Save Romania Union; both groups lean towards the centre-right of the liberal spectrum.

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So, why join a new movement and not the classical Romanian liberal party? "I didn't trust them," says Strugariu, who says that until the anti-corruption protests of winter 2017, she never thought about entering politics, focusing instead on her work in the NGO and international trade sector in Brussels. "At the same time, I was involved with what was happening in civil society in Romania, I was one of the civic voices at the time. Of course, I was one of these people who took to the streets when something profoundly wrong happened with our legislation on justice... and I had seen the high-level corruption that led to the big fire in the Colectiv club," she says.

A turning point

For her, that tragic event that shook Romania in 2015 was the turning point. "[It] revealed the absolute incompetence of the ruling party and the government, the weakness of the medical system, and the fact that if we do not make profound changes, the consequences will be absolutely tragic," Strugariu says. In the aftermath of the incident, she and other Romanians from the diaspora tried to help the survivors of the fire by organizing fundraisers, but for Strugariu, it became obvious that the problems ran much deeper. "We were discovering the absolutely incredible elements of a very, very sick system that led to a situation where lives were lost on a whim due to indifference and incompetence. And that was my wake- up moment, when I realized that, ok, as a member of civil society, you can make a difference by offering prompt support for a specific community for a limited time. But if you want to change things systemically, you need to take the next step and get into politics. Because systemic changes happen only with political will."

Now that the USR-PLUS coalition has risen to become a formidable political force represented in the European Parliament, Strugariu is taking this sort of attitude to the European level. "This is the ultimate battle to fight: for these values, for the fight against corruption, for the independence of the judiciary. And this is a message I have been repeating constantly – that democracy is not a given. It is not something that just happens and we can continue having it without doing anything, nor is the EU a given that can easily be preserved," she warns. To her, processes similar to those in Romania, where civic voices are raised and clash with a wall of incompetence, corruption, and authoritarianism, happen everywhere around Europe today.

She cites the recent protest movements in Bulgaria and Belarus as examples – both of which she backs vocally. Her tweets in support of the Bulgarian anti-government and anti-graft protests ("Bulgaria, you are not alone. We are not blind. Basic democratic rights are not negotiable," she wrote) received huge applause in Sofia. Her Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs Committee in parliament adopted a resolution on Bulgaria's rule-of-law failings, which gave a boost to the protesters, signalling that they were not alone, that someone in Europe still cared about the rule of law in their country.

Democracy is an everyday exercise

Strugariu believes that another essential element for keeping democracy healthy is a vibrant media landscape. "If you want to have a true balance of power in a state, it is not enough to have a separate judiciary, executive, and legislature. You always have to refer to the fourth fundamental cornerstone, which is a free media," she says. "Because when the oligarchic system, or any kind of foreign interference, propaganda, or disinformation, influences our media, it shakes our democratic structures to a degree that we don't even realize," she adds. Yet, as a liberal, she does not see the answer to this problem in restrictions. "The response... is not censorship, but a powerful independent media, education, and a very well-informed society which knows how to get information, has access to a variety of sources, and believes in pluralism. This requires solutions that you can't build overnight; they take a lot of resilience and a lot of effort, a joint effort by government and society at the same time."

The MEP believes that the EU could do much more in order to boost its people's understanding of the Union's mechanisms, how it works for them, and why it is important. "We lost a lot of time organizing conferences about the importance of the EU, talking to ourselves in these closed bubbles, instead of going deep into the member states and discussing, with very clear examples, how it truly helps their economies," she says. "It is not surprising to me that we have such episodes like Brexit and outbreaks of populism all around Europe."

Yet, she is reluctant to accuse the people for this upsurge of poor leadership. Looking at the example of Eastern European countries turning back to conservatism and patriarchal values, Strugariu stipulates that change takes time and adjusting to the new realities is never easy – and often leads to backlash. "Part of it has to do with culture and history. I wouldn't point an accusing finger and, say "oh, it's the people's fault", and that a government is a mirror of its society. It is true that this is the case sometimes, but at the same time, looking back at my own country, at all of those years of communism, I remember very well how my mother spent half of her life at home, bringing up me and my brother. That was the ultimate goal of her life. Abortion was forbidden because of Ceausescu's plan to increase the population.

Also, a very large part of Romania's population – as in many other countries – is religious and it has to do with a certain attitude and position of the church towards liberal ideas and female empowerment," she says, concluding that societies

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don't change overnight and a lot of educating needs to take place before a change of attitude occurs.

Even then, the battle between the liberal worldview and conservative values will not be over, she says. "I don't believe that society will ever close these chapters really. They come up on the agenda as the society changes and it evolves," Strugariu notes. And she warns: "Populism can rise again, conservative ideas can gain momentum, illiberalism is growing – that is a simple fact. History shows that it is possible to move from a period of flourishing development to a period of extreme backlash in terms of liberty, freedom, and prosperity."

"It is such a huge and profound wound to see that, instead of focusing on the topics that are important, some governments and parties are excessively preoccupied by their own personal agendas, with their corruption schemes and special interests, or seeking ways to interfere in the judicial system to promote their chosen people and hide their indiscretions."

The contested role of women in politics and society

It is only natural that, in Romania, change comes slowly and painfully on touchy topics like female empowerment. "And if you go to the Romanian region of Moldavia, one of the poorest regions in Europe, you'll still hear people saying that the women who take part in political meetings or debates are just there to bring the cookies and coffee. We are talking about a country where 60% believes that physical violence and domestic violence are justified in certain situations. It is considered normal that you slap your wife or kid, or – once in a while – your husband – because it is ok, that this is something that actually works."

She says that she had faced her fair share of misogyny but does not let the pain overwhelm her during these moments. "It has happened to me, without affecting me as much as it might have hurt other women. But I know how it hurts, I've seen it with people, and it will not stop by itself. We need to take an active stance against it. We've seen it in the plenary of the EP, it is not as if it is happening only indeep rural Moldavia," Strugariu says. What keeps her going is her perception of the responsibility she has. "I didn't care. I truly believe in my own head, my two hands and two feet, and in everything I stand for and was fighting for, and I don't do it for myself. I am representing people now, it is a huge responsibility," she says.

To her, this can only change through the systemic implementation of social and economic policies that help women to fend for themselves. "We say that we want

women to have more and more time to gain a bigger role in society and in leadership, to take over the political agenda as well, but the next question is – what does this system look like?," she asks. "Are there schools that will keep their children in after- school programs until 5PM? Are their domestic partners able to take paternity leave as well? Do they understand the importance of supporting each other in this process? There are many aspects affecting women's empowerment and a lot of them have to do with economic models, with social measures, and with the mentality, of course. But we need to make very concrete steps," Strugariu concludes.

The politician says it is urgent to take steps in this direction now if we want to see results in our own lifetime, giving the example of the Nordic states. "The first time countries like Sweden and Denmark started talking about sexual education in schools was in the beginning of the 50s. It took 70 years since then for their societies to consider the need for female representatives in the political scene." She knows that is hard from her own experience in the NGO sector. "I have been part of programmes that profoundly change communities in a matter of years, where children were abandoned by their extremely young mothers. I saw the reactions of these parents and young mothers, because they were afraid, they were in this whole context of poverty, violence etc. I also saw the reaction of part of the specialists who were supposed to help them and explain birth control and life choices. There was plenty, plenty of work to do."

"Self-confidence is so important – women don't have to look at themselves through the mirror of a certain culture or past prejudices. They should be looking at the mirror, seeing themselves today, and looking at the future because they are building it."

Focusing politics back on the real issues

The problem for her is that instead of focusing work on this issue, many politicians are excessively preoccupied with their own personal agenda, or as she puts it: "With their corruption schemes and special interests, or seeking ways to interfere in the judicial system to promote their chosen people and hide their indiscretions. It is so, so sad." This, however, gives liberalism a chance to shine. "I think that liberal parties can contribute these days because we can see these problems. It is our time now," Strugariu says.

What she brings to Brussels is her can-do attitude and an understanding of her responsibilities. "In terms of policy, the EP is responsible for the destiny and the decent living conditions of about 500 million people. This is what I am doing, it has nothing to do with myself, and I don't care if some man is stubborn about it. I just do my job, this is it," she says, adding that if there is one quality that women bring to politics more than the average man does, it must be sensitivity. Maybe this is the reason why Strugariu is considered "one of the ten most influential members of the European Parliament in terms of networking and the ability to build bridges", according to the Brussels watchdog VoteWatch Europe.

As a conclusion, her message to women is simple and concrete – be more self-confident. "Let's just do the things that are worth doing, and actively encourage other women to take a lead. Self-confidence is so important – women don't have to look at themselves through the mirror of a certain culture or past prejudices. They should be looking at the mirror, seeing themselves today, and looking at the future because they are building it."

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A LEADER'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

The story of Kosovo leader Edita Tahiri – from the struggle for independence to wartime peace negotiations and on to today

Author: Martin Dimitrov

Very few women in the world can start their life's journey as one of an oppressed people in their country, grow to become the voice of their new-born nation to the world, help it earn its freedom, and then not only live to tell the tale, but also make a successful political career. Edita Tahiri from Kosovo is one such rare example, and she has many stories to tell.

These tales range from being a founder of a movement for independence from Serbian occupation, the Democratic League of Kosovo, to her relentless political and diplomatic work for the liberation and international recognition of Europe's youngest country. But they all simmer down to one, which she describes as her most significant life achievement: "I am proud that we brought Kosovo freedom and independence and ensured that Albanians would never again suffer from genocide."

A Kosovo patriot is born

Tahiri was born in 1956 into what she describes as a very patriotic Albanian family. Her father was a native Kosovar, her mother an Albanian, and they married in Kosovo during World War II when borders between these two countries hardly existed in practice. Her father longed for

the reunification of Kosovo with Albania and was not only a patriot in principle but, as an underground politician, he suffered imprisonment and torture at the hands of the repressive post-war Yugoslav apparatus led by the Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Ranković. "I saw oppression against Albanians through my father's eyes and the division of Albanians through my mother's eyes – that shaped my personality and my attachment to my nation's destiny," Tahiri says.

She was not a politician by nature or education – in fact, her first degree was in Telecommunications and though she dreamed of studying Psychology, ("I wanted to understand my father's suffering"), she could not ignore the plight of her family and her people. Fate, however, would soon reward her prudent choice of education, pushing her in a direction she could not have dared imagine. After earning a bachelor's degree in Pristina, she would move on to a Master's in Essex, UK, becoming one of the first Kosovars to experience the West. This educational detour would shape her path soon after she joined the movement for Kosovo's independence.

In the first days of the independence movement, Kosovo's best and brightest nominated her to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs of this still non-existent country. There were two main reasons for that, she says: "I came from a credible, patriotic family that fought in defence of Albanian rights and I was already educated in the West, so I was not only English-speaking, but also exposed to Western culture and its system of education."

"At the time, it was very important to have people who were patriots, well-educated, and not nostalgic for communist times. Our movement's leadership were all nationalists, we were the elite of Kosovo," she recalls. The fact that she was a woman was secondary at that time. "When the nation is in danger, there is no place for gender," she laughs.

From the corridors of diplomacy to the White House

Then came the difficult part. In 1991, the international order was changing rapidly due to the end of the Cold War and of communism in the Soviet bloc. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia, dominated by Serbs, had pursued a "third way" between East, West, and the Global South; a policy which made it many friends in high places. It was no easy task to convince the world that Kosovo now deserved the same independence from Serbia as the other federal units of the former Yugoslavia and that its people had already spent a century fighting for their country's freedom.

The difficulty was that the international community did not understand Kosovo's situation while her country, in turn, lacked access to the international community. Edita Tahiri recalls: "A chief diplomat that is denied access to international institutions and important countries requires a lot of creativity to make progress. When I started as foreign minister, diplomats didn't like to meet with me because they didn't understand what was going on during the dissolution of Yugoslavia and because Serbia was much better at networking, which became a barrier between me and the other diplomats."

Yet, the tragedy of her people, the Albanians, and of her country motivated her to never give up and to seek any opportunity to meet with diplomats and ministers. "I remember that in the beginning, they would not even receive me in their offices, but in corridors, or in the cafes at international conferences. Alternative spaces, corridors, and cafeterias became places for me to lobby," she says. "I define this diplomatic journey as 'from the corridors of diplomacy to the White House'." Tahiri's perseverance started to pay off. Washington, which had sent observatory missions to the country since the early 1990s, started to take Kosovo's plight more seriously and its patronage helped Tahiri open more doors to advance her cause.

These open doors would not be enough if she couldn't make a convincing argument but Tahiri managed to do just that. "I would encourage everyone to take on such a role but it is a difficult mission; it is possible to change international opinion if your arguments about what you are fighting for are coherent and consistent," she says. Her talent of sticking to the principles Kosovo was striving for, but also leaving space to create compromise where it was possible, helped her – and her nation – gain ground.

Rambouillet

Her years of dedicated work as Minister of Foreign Affairs led to the cornerstone Peace Conference of 1999, negotiated in the French castle of Rambouillet, where the fate of her new country was decided. "In Rambouillet, we preserved the principle of Kosovo's self-determination despite pressure from the Serbian delegation," she recalls. "We insisted that, after an interim period, Kosovo has to have a mechanism to decide its own political future. We would only accept an

"Freedom should serve everybody, not only the winners."

> **"When the nation is in danger, there is no place for gender."**

interim agreement that left a door open for independence and placed Kosovo under a NATO protectorate," she adds.

It was not an easy struggle, Tahiri says. Belgrade's negotiators would claim that Kosovo had always been an integral part of the Serbian Yugoslav republic, while Kosovo's delegates would respond that Kosovo had been a federal unit of the former Yugoslavia. "Few in the world at the time knew that Kosovo had a dual status in Yugoslavia, that it benefited from its position as a federal part of Yugoslavia and was not simply a part of Serbia. I had to discredit the Serbian narrative with arguments and present Kosovo's point," she says.

In the end, the diplomatic mission in Rambouillet was a success. Kosovo received not only an implicit recognition that an independence referendum could one day take place, but also an explicit international pledge for Kosovo's protection by a NATO peacekeeping force. Tahiri claims this was her most important diplomatic achievement by far, dwarfed in significance only by her signing the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Kosovo on 17 February 2008.

A realist in times of war, a liberal in times of peace

With the end of Serbia's occupation of Kosovo and the return of normal life, this self-described 'realist in the international realm' has turned towards liberalism and domestic reform. How – and why – did this happen?

"Personally, I think that during the 10 years of occupation I was more of a realist in many ways, especially when it came to the recognition of my country. That's because the international system is based on realism when resolving conflicts," she says. "When the war ended and we gained our freedom, I started believing that this new freedom should now serve everyone. That idea led me to the ideals of liberalism and, to this day, I believe that equality of opportunity and the supremacy of the law are the basis of any democratic state and that government is there to serve the people."

However, being a liberal woman in a relatively conservative Balkan nation is not an easy task. "From the beginning to a free Kosovo has been a transformational process, and I'd say now that it takes time for a real transformation towards real democratic values to take place," Tahiri says. There have been many positive and progressive developments, like giving equal (and even preferential in some respects) freedoms to Kosovo Serbs and other minorities ("freedom should serve everybody, not only the winners," Tahiri notes) and introducing gender quotas to boost female participation in politics. Some problems that seem traditional for the region remain, the most significant being, of course, corruption and the lack of accountability for the politicians in power.

"In the aftermath of the war, when my party, the LDK, began governing, corruption and autocracy appeared. That was something I could not change," says Tahiri. To her, autocracy and corruption have remained part of the fabric of every government – even the ones that she was part of – during the first 20-odd years since Kosovo's liberation, and no cure has yet been found. "Politicians come into politics in order to get more out of it than they give. This has been known since the time of [German sociologist Max] Weber. While I was Minister, I remained ethical and fought corruption", says Tahiri. "I want to see more idealism in our political leadership. I want to see the idealism that we had when we founded the independence movement in 1989 and that carried on until we attained our independence, freedom, and self-determination. However, in the post-war period we seem to have abandoned idealism," she laments.

Taking a direction of her own

Tahiri says how, after the end of the war, she was committed to democratic reforms in the LDK movement she had been part of for over a decade but her reformist efforts hit a brick wall.

"When the LDK independence movement transformed into a political party, I hoped that LDK would stick to the values and principles on which it was created," she recalls. "Given that it was an elitist movement, I thought it could act as a leader of the post-conflict peacebuilding process in Kosovo. It is very important to create internal democracy in a political party and that was lacking in the LDK. Our system of values was undermined. After the war, instead of those who led during wartime taking higher office, you saw people of lesser merit suddenly climbing to the top," Tahiri adds. She had to move on so she launched her own reformist project, the Kosovo Democratic Alternative (ADK), in May 2004.

From the start of her new political project, Tahari took the cause of gender equality to heart. "Personally, I never

experienced any discrimination, although I was the only woman in the leadership of the independence movement," she says. "However, in the post-war period the traditional barriers returned, this idea that power belongs to men, that women are not entitled to public positions. Women found themselves sidelined. Not me personally, because I already had strong credibility as a leader. But the picture was not good in terms of gender equality," she adds.

Once she and the progressives around her agreed to oppose women being treated as underdogs, they acted. "We – women in politics and civil society – stood up for gender equality immediately after the war. We established a quota of 30 percent in Parliament after the first post-war election in 2000, becoming the first country in the Balkans to do so and a role model for the rest," she says.

While she agrees that quotas are an artificial instrument, Tahiri notes that it helped expose more women to high-level politics and showed Kosovo's society that without them in positions of authority, the country cannot hope to develop a real, working democracy. "Today, as we speak, Kosovo is better in terms of having women in government; the President is a woman, and Parliament has over 30 percent [female representation]. These are good achievements but challenges remain – we still have to build sustainable gender-inclusive systems," Tahiri says. Her fight for gender equality and gender-inclusive peacebuilding continues at the regional level – she has been the leader of the Regional Women's Lobby in South-East Europe (RWLSEE) for over fifteen years.

"I would like to see sustainable gender equality in my country and the world; I would say there is no real functioning democracy without the equal participation of women in decision-making," she underlines, saying that women have to step up in the key areas of politics and civic activism, especially in peacebuilding. "When it comes to the formal peace processes and decision-making, discrimination continues," the diplomat says, adding that she still remains the only woman in the Balkans to have led formal peace negotiations.

Kosovo and the world today

After the tragedies of war and occupation, where is Kosovo heading today according to this long-serving diplomat? "For Kosovo, our foreign policy is clear and it is Euro-Atlantic," Tahiri underlines. "We don't want to see Russia in the Balkans, and neither do any of the new states that emerged from the former Yugoslavia except Serbia, which uses Russia as a Trojan horse. Our goal is to see the Balkans and Kosovo attached firmly to the West. Anything else is not an option," she adds.

At the same time, she does not spare criticism about the role of the West, and especially that of the European Union, in the troubles that have engulfed the region during the past three decades. "To speak historically, after the Cold War, the EU failed to play an important role in the wars happening in the Balkans, despite them taking place in its own backyard. But the UN was failing as well. Only when the USA took the leadership role did the wars end and the conflicts were resolved."

In more recent times, the EU's role has improved, but remains dualistic, Tahiri reflects. "After the war, the EU played a much more important role, as it became one of the four pillars of state building at the UN's mission in Kosovo and I appreciate the contribution of the EU to our economy and recovery," the diplomat notes. At the same time, she is far from happy with the overall geostrategic approach (or lack thereof) that Brussels has taken.

"When it comes to geostrategic issues, the EU's failure is serious – not only vis-a-vis Kosovo, but with regards to the entire Balkans. In the past 20 years, the EU failed to consolidate a strategic approach towards the Balkans although all the Balkan countries (except Serbia) were determined join the West," she claims, adding that the EU ought to have done more in order to integrate the ex-Yugoslav nations quicker, without allowing non-Western actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey to establish a foothold. "The EU needs to find a way to build unity in its foreign policy if it really wants to grow into an influential strategic player," she concludes. She also states that the transatlantic block should strengthen its protection of the Balkan's western orientation, which has weakened recently.

Hopes for the future

There is a lot Edita Tahiri can be proud of when it comes to the progress made by her nation during her lifetime – from an oppressed and sidelined people throughout the 20th century to a free, independent country today. What future does she envision for her nation now?

"There are many challenges ahead of us, first of all – achieving economic progress and opening job opportunities so our youth can fulfil its dreams in Kosovo and not outside it. The emigration of our young generation is the bane of our society. At the end of the day, the present and future of our nation rests with the energy of our youth," Tahiri says, adding that retaining its younger citizens ought to be Kosovo's strategic goal.

"In foreign policy, our strategic objectives are the integration of Kosovo in NATO, the EU, and the UN while also improving neighbouring relations, including the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue," the diplomat says, adding that the latter ought to conclude with a mutual recognition of the two states under current borders. "And third is to finally close the chapter of wars and hostilities and to start the next one – of peaceful relations," Tahiri concludes. "We should not leave this burden to the next generation."

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"Freedom should serve everybody, not only the winners."

"At the end of the day, the present and the future rest with the energy of the young generation and mustering this energy is a very important strategic aim."

"I want to see more idealism in politics, I want to see the idealism we had when we founded the independence movement in 1989."

"When you have a dream in your life, it stimulates you, it gives you the strength to develop whatever tools you might need."

"If you are in the position of an oppressed nation, you do not have time to define your ideology. I think that during the 10 years of occupation I was more of a realist in many ways, especially when it came to the recognition of my country. However, when the war ended and we gained our freedom, I started believing that this new freedom should now serve everyone."

"I see a lot of young women in politics, so I am happy to say we have reached one goal – of mobilizing women; however we need to improve the leadership and capacity-building of women, which requires more investment and this needs political will on all levels."

"When the nation is in danger, there is no place for gender."

"I remember in the beginning they would not even receive me in their offices, but in corridors, or in the cafes at international conferences. Cafeterias were where I did my lobbying. I define this diplomatic journey as 'from the corridors of diplomacy to the White House'."

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"We established a quota of 30 percent women in Parliament after the first post-war election in 2000, becoming the first country in the Balkans to do so and a role model for the rest."

DEFENDING WHAT IS RIGHT

Georgian politician and civic mover and shaker Tinatin Khidasheli has been immersed in the fight for justice for 30 years – and is ready for the next 30 to come.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Unconventional, controversial, crazy about my job and my family.

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS & CIVIL SOCIETY AND I strongly believe that whatever choices we make about our careers, it should be our decision.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS & CIVIL SOCIETY BECAUSE it's fun, not at all like it's perceived — if you do it properly, you do something that makes so many other people happy. And what could be a better reason to get involved?

ARE POLITICS & CIVIL SOCIETY PLACES FOR WOMEN: Definitely. If it is a place for men, if it is a place for human beings, it is a place for women — we are neither better nor worse than men are and we should be given the exact same opportunities.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: There are many women in politics in my country, but unfortunately, there are not many in leading positions. To a large extent that is because of their hesitation. So please do not hesitate.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: My biggest achievement up till now is that I am not tired, even after 30 years on this roller coaster, despite for the past 30 years there not being a single day nor a single week without a public appearance. I am ready for the next 30 years to come, and then I will be able to summarize my impressions and write about them.

TINATIN KHIDASHELI

Georgia
DEFENCE & CIVIL SOCIETY

Tinatin Khidasheli is the type of person for whom the use of "fighter" in the expression "freedom fighter" is well deserved. In her three decades of civic activism, she has gone from clashing with the Soviet-era militsiya (police) in the final year before the fall of the USSR to defending in court the basic rights of those ostracised by the new Georgian state, from advocating the need for EU integration of her country in Parliament, to reforming its military. And she has done all of this during a time when public life in her native Georgia has been dominated by men, but still holds no grudges against them. What is more, Khidasheli has thrived as a liberal in a socially conservative environment where defending the rights of the marginalized often gets you in trouble. But she doesn't mind it, because she always knew why she was in the struggle. How did this come to be?

"I am not simply a conscious liberal," she says. "I am an instinctive liberal – it is not just from the books, it happened to me naturally." It all started with her joining the anti-communist protests in Tbilisi in 1989 as a teenager, when thousands of Georgians clashed with the army and police in the last days of the Soviet Union. "When I was at that age that determines your long term choices, I was on the streets fighting communists. This fight for freedom defined the whole structure of my life forever," she adds.

What followed was enrolment in the law programme at Tbilisi State University, an unusual choice for a woman at the time. "I was a very good high school student and my teachers were really disappointed because they could not believe that a woman could have a successful legal career. They were begging me to go to medical school, where successful girls should go," she recalls. Yet, she had little doubts about her choice, as there was a clear vision in her head about what she wanted to achieve. "Defending human rights was not an expression we used at the time, but instinctively that's what I always wanted to do — to serve the most disadvantaged, to help them go through the difficulties of life."

"When I was appointed Defence minister, me being a woman was a secondary issue. Number one was the politics I had always followed."

What it means to be liberal

If there was a moment that can mark the start of the 'liberal' Tinatin Khidasheli, it must have been the first TV broadcast when she, as a young lawyer, defended Jehovah's witnesses persecuted during the early years after the fall of communism in Georgia. "I was so different from the mainstream understanding of these matters in my country, despite being from a famous Orthodox family. It was unacceptable that I was defending such people. Then there was fight against the death penalty," she remembers.

Khidasheli puts an important caveat – she does not consider herself a "leftist liberal", as the term is often understood today. To her, the very use of the textbook definition of liberalism is problematic for those living in the post-Soviet space. "What does it mean to be liberal here? It is not about details of your political theory, but is more about answering questions: what is your opinion on gay marriage? Are you for adoption of children by gay couples? What about religious minorities — do you believe all religions should have the right to practice in the same way as the monopolistic Orthodox Church?," she says. "So it is not about what kind of educational policies I defend or what sort of health or social care I want, no — it is still about the big issues we are discussing, the basics of freedom — mainly equality and equal access to life's basic things."

In any case, the fact she was always ready to swim against the tide helped her overcome the taboo that public affairs is not an appropriate field for a woman. Later, it got her into politics — against all odds. "I have been asked very often why women are not represented in Georgian politics so much. In social life, in public life, and in normal life, you don't really see women being discriminated against in most professions and most fields. If you watch TV, most of the political, business, NGO commentators are women. Statistically, a majority of Georgian judges are women, which was completely unimaginable a few years back. We have dominance in sectors such as in NGOs, and there is, accordingly, strong advocacy of women's issues. These good examples of smart, outspoken women in public should be like a trampoline bouncing them into political life. And this is somehow not happening."

Why Georgian women eschew politics

"My explanation was that women are looking for more safeguards in life, because in this country they take care of the families and politics is a very risky job, you are in and you are out, like that, overnight," she concludes. "And if you are the one off the scene, it is really hard to find a job after that. For example, when I left my job as a minister, so many people asked me what I am going to do now. As if my life had ended. That's the kind of attitude that you get in a society dominated by post-Soviet mentality. People see politics as an endgame rather than as just one of the jobs that you have in your life."

So, she went on to become an example of someone who can go into politics, do their job as best they can, and then go on to have a productive life after that. During her years in active politics, she went from being a city councillor in Tbilisi to chair several committees in Parliament, and then to the culmination of her political life – becoming Georgia's first female Minister of Defence. "That was a mistake they would not repeat," Khidasheli laughs, when she talks about her appointment. At the time, it was much more of a move on by the Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, on behalf of his Georgian Dream party, which wanted to preserve its coalition with Khidasheli's Republican Party, rather than a statement about Georgian progressiveness.

"Yes, after that everybody got excited that we will have the first women-defence minister in the region, not only in the South Caucasus but in the entire ex-USSR except for the Baltic States. The issue of me being a woman was raised, but it was secondary. Number one was the politics I had always followed," she exclaims. It was her image as a leading pro-Western, pro-NATO politician that secured her the job, since post-2008 Georgia wanted to send a strong message to its Western partners and its domestic audience alike about the direction the country was taking.

The nasty side of public life (as a woman)

This is where the nice part of the story ends. “I say that my appointment was a big mistake by that government because they did not particularly understand what NATO is about and had even less understanding of why women should take stronger stands in public affairs,” Khidasheli remembers. Her appointment led to a wave of public attacks against her, based on the causes that she had defended during her legal career. “When I became Minister of Defence, the very first orchestrated and systematic attack against me was that I'd bring gays into the army,” she says. She also recalls moments when she was simultaneously “accused” of being Jewish, an agent of Jewish-Hungarian financier and philanthropist George Soros, a Jehovah’s witness, and a Satanist (“because I am for gay marriage,” she notes) who wanted to defile Georgian children.

Khidasheli laughed off all these attempts to break her psychologically because she had strong convictions, yet they were not the only problems she had to face as a high-profile female persona. “When I was Minister of Defence the only comments I heard were about the size of my earrings and what kind of lipstick I was wearing. It was funny, but for me it was not an issue — I didn't become Defence Minister out of high school or because my father promoting me. I fought in front of cameras with the most powerful men in this country, so I did not really care what those people said about me. But psychologically it damages you and you ask — don't you have anything to say about the policies I am implementing, the budget I am spending, about the projects I am approving?”

This sort of subtle misogyny, she believes, only happened because she was female. At the same time, she believes that the ability to endure such attitudes is probably the only strength that women politicians possess and men don’t – because they don’t have to. “I have never heard in my life, at least not in this country, somebody saying about a male politician — "oh, look what he is wearing” or what he looks like. When it comes to women, the very first reactions are personal.” Those like her who manage to endure this attitude come out much more resilient, she says.

“I don't believe that strong, qualified, conscious leadership depends on the gender. I think it comes from the honesty and professionalism of the person.”

Belief in equality always prevails

On the other hand, she would not go as far as to say that there is something intrinsically different between good male and female politicians. “I don't believe that strong, qualified, conscious leadership depends on gender. I think it comes from the honesty and professionalism of the person,” Khidasheli states. She has personally worked hard to encourage the more active participation of Georgian women in the country’s public life (“Nine out of ten women you see on TV today had my name on their CVs regarding their first jobs,” she says). But she definitely does not share the belief that women would be better at a job just because they are women. “I know it is important [to encourage women to join politics], I do it every day, but at the same time, I don't believe that we should get in this position and have this attitude that just because we are women, we can do a job better if we are given the opportunity. It's not like that.”

That’s why Khidasheli has a more nuanced view of the attempt by the country’s parliament to establish quotas for female representatives, saying that if she were an MP now, she would likely back the quota system of 25% women in each party’s candidate list, but only as a temporary measure. Because it is the culture of politics needs to change, not simply the numbers.

So how did she feel during her stint in the manly field of defence? Excluded, an outsider? Not at all. “I always believed that the most progressive part of Georgian society has been the military for the very simple reason that their profession is one that has travelled a lot. They've seen a lot, fought shoulder to shoulder with women soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. For them, more than for anybody else in our country, that is kind of business as usual. They've been in situations where women have saved their lives, they've been in situations where women showed particular bravery. And for them, it is absolutely normal.”

Her public image of a fighter also helped. “I was a human rights lawyer, fighting for the rights of tortured prisoners against police abuse and sort of doing a man's job all the time. I was fighting policemen in the streets, I was fighting for my defendants in the court, so in a way it made me a soldier to them,” she shares. The army, she claims, knew that in her, they had someone who would have their back.

As for who does have her back, Khidasheli is clear – her husband, also a lawyer and politician, and two boys. “The family I have made it possible for me to become who I am,” she says. The simple principle they follow is that they should be happy with what they do, be it in their personal or professional lives. “The only reason why nothing broke my family is that we always did what we were happy doing, regardless of all the pressures we had to endure because of our public lives.”

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"When I was appointed Defence minister, me being a woman was a secondary issue. Number one was the politics I had always followed."

"I am an instinctive liberal, it didn't come just from reading books. First of all, when I was at that age when a person's character is determined, I was on the streets fighting. This fight for freedom defined the whole structure of my life forever. Then the profession I chose — I went to law school with a very clear vision of what I wanted to do, to serve the most disadvantaged, to help them get through life's difficulties."

"From a very young age, I was 19 years old when people saw me for the first time on their TV screens and I've been there ever since, I was a human rights lawyer, fighting for the prisoners tortured by police abuse and doing a sort of man's job all the time."

"I don't believe that strong, qualified, conscious leadership depends on the gender. I think it comes from the honesty and professionalism of the person."

"I have been asked very often why women are not represented in politics enough. My explanation is that women are looking for more safeguards in their life, because in this country, they take care of families and in Georgia politics is a very risky job, you are in and you are out, like that, overnight."

"I have never heard in my life, at least not in this country, somebody saying about a male politician — "oh, look what he's wearing" or what he looks like. When it comes to women, people can judge how you look, what you wear, and how you behave."

A DIPLOMAT OF PRINCIPLE

Maia Panjikidze, the first female Georgian foreign attaché, always loved her profession, but was never afraid to leave it when its demands clashed with her beliefs.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Reliable, curious, and accurate

I AM A WOMAN IN DIPLOMACY AND I am very proud of that.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN THE FOREIGN SERVICE BECAUSE it is a very interesting field.

IS DIPLOMACY A PLACE FOR WOMEN:
Yes, it is. Diplomacy is a very good field for women because we do it better.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: No, I wish more women were in the diplomatic field, and also in other policy fields.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: My signature on the association agreement between Georgia and the EU.

MAIA PANJIKIDZE
Georgia
FOREIGN POLICY, ACADEMIA, PHILOLOGY

In 2010, Maia Panjikidze resigned her position as head of the Georgian mission to the Netherlands over a disagreement with her government's domestic policy. She went back to her first profession – teaching literature and German language to high school and university students – and did not think she would ever join the ranks of the diplomatic corps again.

Yet join she did – just two years later – with what seemed at the time a ticket to change her country for the better, the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia coalition. "A new era started in Georgia and everybody wanted to be part of this new wave that offered a new perspective and new opportunities for the country," she says. In a whirlwind of events, Panjikidze first became the spokesperson for the coalition, then a MP when it won the elections, and immediately afterwards, Foreign Minister.

Her first visits, symbolic as they always are, were booked: Brussels, then Berlin, then Washington DC. Everywhere she went, she was meeting old friends and acquaintances from her ambassadorial days in Berlin and The Hague. Among them was Stefan Fule, a Czech career diplomat and, at the time, Commissioner for EU Enlargement, who wanted to be convinced that the Caucasian country was still on track to

join the European family.

"I told him: Stefan, as long as I am in the Georgian government, you can be sure that we will go the European way. But if I leave the government, I can't be sure we will remain on it," Panjikidze recalls saying. Two years later, when she announced her resignation, the first call she received was from Fule: "Dear Maia, what is going on, are you still on the way to Europe?", he asked. And I said, unfortunately, I am not sure anymore."

"Imagine – it was 1994, Georgia was a very young independent country, and of course we did not have diplomats – because we did not need ones during Soviet times. I was asked by the designated ambassadors in 1994 to join the staff as the first female Georgian diplomat."

A Euro-Atlantic at heart

For Maia Panjikidze, who proudly holds the claim to be not only Georgia's first female diplomat, but also a very early joiner to the young country's budding foreign service, the direction has always been towards Europe. This has been true since before she became a diplomat and remains true to this very day, when she works for the European integration of her society, albeit not from the frontlines of diplomacy. "I am a professor at the university and I am working in my first profession, which is philology. I teach students how to interpret texts from world literature," she says, adding that this is, in practice, a continuation of her old job. "Throughout my life I have seen myself as doing things for Georgia's European integration, so providing young Georgians a chance to become familiar with foreign literature and ideas also contributes to that end."

She took this path a long time ago, even before what we now understand as "Euro-integration" really existed as a concept. In the late 70s, the mature years of state socialism, an 18-year-old Panjikidze went to study German philology at the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena in the German Democratic

Republic. She then returned to Tbilisi and started her career as a language teacher in the capital's German school.

But her career path would take a sudden swerve in 1994, when the newly established Georgian Republic, freshly out of the Soviet grip, had to establish foreign relations for the first time. "The first embassy that Georgia opened in Europe was the one in Bonn. Imagine – it was 1994, Georgia was a very young independent country, and of course, we did not have diplomats – because we did not need ones during Soviet times," Panjikidze remembers.

As one of the few people available who had actually lived in Germany and was proficient in German, out of the blue she became the first Georgian female diplomat. "We had established only one embassy before that – in the US, with all men, and next this German one, where I was the only woman."

A second career as a prolongation of the first one

The teacher-turned-diplomat suddenly found herself in an unknown world where she and her colleagues had to piece together a puzzle from scratch, without much preparation or knowledge of what exactly they had to do. "We went to Bonn without knowing anything and it was a process of learning by doing," Panjikidze says, and adds with a smile: "We were pioneers."

In such a situation, her youth, gender, and lack of experience did not mean much, as there was work to be done: "My task, as the only one with professional training in the German language, was everything that had to do with that language – to write, to speak, to translate. It was amazing, of course, because it was a completely different situation and experience."

The Georgians did not have much to start with – no embassy building, no bank account, and no car while their office and living quarters remained in a hotel for weeks. "Many things were very ridiculous. Young people with no experience came

"If you don't love what you are doing, you can't be successful."

to Bonn to establish an embassy. But it was amazing, a very good time in our lives, and we all became life-long friends," she remembers.

What followed was a ten-year stint in the diplomatic service of her country, rising up the ranks in the Embassy of Georgia to Germany (which moved to Berlin when that city became the capital of the reunified German state). After the (supposedly) pro-Western "Rose Revolution", Panjikidze moved back to Georgia to become a deputy Foreign Minister, and then back to Berlin – to head the embassy there between 2004 and 2007. Then she was appointed ambassador in The Hague, where she remained until 2010 – and where she thought she would be leaving her second career for good.

A Janus-faced domestic policy

"In 2010 I was fired from my position as ambassador to Holland for political reasons – I did not agree with the government's domestic policy. I have always believed that diplomacy is not policy, that they are different fields, but you can never divide one from the other completely," she recalls. To understand what she means, Panjikidze gives an example. "Someone who doesn't know anything about Georgia should understand that the country was part of the Soviet Union, and Russia still thinks of it as part of its sphere of influence. So, this small Georgia tries to find friends in Europe and the USA in order to strengthen its independence and freedom. But Russia is not willing to allow that. It occupies 20 percent of our territory, we had a war in 2008 and of course, Moscow is not willing to see a strong and independent Georgia emerge. One has to fight for this independence every day, and the only way you can do that is to have many friends in Europe, many friends in the USA, and by making your country and its democracy stronger," she says.

To her, it appeared that both the Saakashvili government after 2010 and the subsequent Georgian Dream coalition from 2014 onwards backtracked from this primary goal. "Here in Georgia, you only hear declarations – "we want to be part of the EU, we want to be part of NATO, we will apply by 2024 to the EU." When you say something like this, you need to do your homework very, very well. Saying that these are our priorities yet simultaneously doing the opposite of what we were supposed to was something very difficult to explain to our foreign colleagues," Panjikidze says.

The particular issue that led to her resignation in 2014 had to do with a military procurement gone wrong – and showed a deepening division within the Georgian Dream coalition with regards to the outward orientation of the country. "The Defence Minister at the time was in France to sign a contract for defence systems but at the last minute, he got a call from the Prime Minister that ordered him to come back without signing the agreement. Because of this conflict between the Defence Minister and the Prime Minister, the former was fired and that was the reason why the faction in the parliament belonging to the pro-European circle resigned,"

"What I always tell young women is: try to get a good education and you will be free, and if you are free, you can move things. To know at least one thing in your life very well is very important."

she says. She concludes: "It was the struggle between Russian and European influences. It was just normal that we wanted to warn everybody of what was to come."

The downfall of the pro-European consensus

The incident that broke the camel's back for Panjikidze also turned into a political cornerstone for Georgia as a whole. One by one, parties that defined themselves as pro-European and liberal withdrew from the Georgian Dream coalition. As Freedom House wrote in their Freedom in the World report, "democratic progress has stagnated in recent years. Oligarchic actors hold outsized influence over policy and political choices, and the rule of law continues to be stymied by political interests." Since October of last year, the country has, in practice, been without a working parliament since the opposition has demanded new elections, calling the 2020 ones rigged. The two sides only recently agreed on a ceasefire, after an EU-US brokered mediation in late April.

"Many people today think they should have listened more closely to the words we said at the start, because all the problems we see today started in 2014. Not because we personally left the Georgian government, but because of what we identified back then," Panjikidze remarks. This shift prevents her from being too nostalgic about her diplomatic career. "If you don't believe in the things that are going on in your country, then you can't carry out a good foreign policy, you can't be comfortable with promoting it in front of your foreign colleagues," the diplomat says. "I can't accept that we needed European and US mediation to sit at the same table, to speak about our very Georgian problems, and boycott the work of parliament. I can't understand this inability to have a normal political process, I can't accept and I can't imagine being in foreign affairs now, supporting the things going on. I don't believe that we are doing the right thing," she concludes sombrely.

Despite all, she still sees the light at the end of the tunnel –

and it is connected to the Euro-Atlantic values she remains devoted to. "With parties accepting only Western mediators, it makes me feel that everybody in Georgia now recognizes how important our Western friends are. This positive influence of the West on the political process will show the people how important this partnership is and somehow make them believe in the need for European integration. When people believe that this is the right way, this is a very strong factor in politics," Panjikidze says.

Admission of luck

Curiously, despite practically spearheading the role of women in Georgian diplomacy, Panjikidze has little to say about gender empowerment. She is honest about that: "There are many brave women fighting against discrimination. I am not among them, I am not an active fighter for equality, but I can be an example that shows if you use the chances life gives you and you have a strong will, you can achieve anything."

The diplomat does not shy away from talking about the luck she had on the way. "I always said I was very fortunate in my life. I had the chance when I was 18 to go to study in Germany. This is where I got the fundamental knowledge that helped me excel in my profession. I was very fortunate to have very good parents who gave me everything they could and a very good education. Education is fundamental to everything else in life. And that is what I always tell young women: try to get a good education and you will be free, and if you are free, you can move things. To know at least one thing in your life very well is very important."

The sense of not being any different from male colleagues remained with her during her diplomatic years. "Then I did not see any difference between men and women. I can't tell you why, maybe because I was privileged and had very famous parents in Soviet times, but I never thought that I was getting or not getting something because I was a woman." She agrees that there are indeed fewer women in the high ranks of the foreign service in her country, but, on the other hand, Georgia has produced quite a few female ministers, most of whom are very well-known and respected.

"If there ever were at least some people that understood what your mission was when you worked with your whole heart and energy, then that was enough. You don't need to have complete public acceptance; you are not a film star."

Interestingly, it was the age she embarked on her diplomatic and later ministerial career that mattered more than gender to Panjikidze. When she left for Germany in 1994 with her two young boys, it turned out to be a blessing for the family. "It was a very difficult time for our country, and many people left for Europe as economic refugees. Conditions were terrible, there was no electricity, it was dangerous to walk in the dark. It was an opportunity for us to live in good conditions in Germany," she recalls. She became Foreign Minister at 52, describing it as "the most beautiful age to become a minister." "You are already experienced so you can face difficulties, both the good and the bad things, and you can't do that when you are 25," she laughs.

Like most politicians, Panjikidze suffered her fair share of public attacks while holding office. But she did not flinch, because she knew what she was working for and she had the self-confidence not to give in. "If there ever were at least some people that understood what your mission was when you worked with your whole heart and energy, then that is enough. You don't need to have complete public acceptance; you are not a film star – you don't need a big audience to know that you've done something for your country," she says.

Today Panjikidze has left the limelight of the diplomat and its public persona in the past. She is back to her original profession as a philologist, translator, and teacher, one that she still adores. Recently, she has translated a novel by the Austrian writer Peter Handke called "The Moravian Night" and also juried a literature prize on tolerance and human rights sponsored by the German embassy in Tbilisi. Does she feel comfortable doing this? Yes, she seems to be enjoying a newfound freedom: "It is a very good feeling, to be honest, because you can express many things through literature, especially when you mix foreign and Georgian authors. I believe that everything that happens in our lives is logical and now it was time for me to do other things. You can fight for the things you believe in in so many different ways."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

“Imagine – it was 1994, Georgia was a very young independent country, and of course we did not have diplomats – because we did not need ones during Soviet times. I was asked by the designated ambassadors in 1994 to join the staff as the first female Georgian diplomat.”

“When I tried to explain this to the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Stefan Fule, I told him: Stefan, as long as I am in the Georgian government, you can be sure that we go the European way. But if I leave the government, I can't be sure we will remain on it.”

“One can never separate domestic policy from foreign policy, and foreign policy is determined by domestic policy and the priorities of a country. If you don't agree with what is happening in domestic policy, you can't produce a good foreign policy.”

“If you don't love what you are doing, you can't be successful.”

“What I always tell young women is: try to get a good education and you will be free, and if you are free, you can move things. To know at least one thing in your life very well is very important.”

“If there ever were at least some people that understood what your mission was when you worked with your whole heart and energy, then that was enough. You don't need to have complete public acceptance; you are not a film star.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF DREAMING BIG

Syrian human rights activist Ravda Nur Cuma believes that education can save lives. She supports sending refugee girls back to school, preventing early marriages.

Author: Zornitsa Stoilova

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: A phoenix – always burning from its fire.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To fight for equality and human-rights-oriented politics. I support peace with a smile.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: As a woman, the biggest thing that you can do is to believe in yourself, be brave, and speak up for yourself.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Malala Yousafzai. Angelina Jolie.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, BECAUSE, it's really important for women to take their place in politics.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: Having my rights.

RAVDA NUR CUMA
Turkey
CIVIL SOCIETY & MIGRATION

When Ravda Nur Cuma was a child, she dreamt of becoming a doctor. Being good at school and brave enough not to be scared by blood, she imagined she would perform operations that save peoples' lives.

That was before the war that destroyed her home and changed the trajectory of her future.

Ten years later, at 23, the young Syrian woman wants to be a doctor of peace. She is indeed saving lives, preventing refugee girls from the trap of child marriage.

While still studying International Relations at Gaziantep University, Ravda is running her own foundation, helping families living in refugee camps provide a better future for their daughters through education. So far, the RavdaNur Foundation has supported more than 40,000 children in the Euphrates Shield area and 3,000 in Gaziantep to go back to school.

She also tries to support Syrians beyond the border, working with the International Blue Crescent to supply the area controlled by Turkey with drinking water and basic healthcare.

Her work and devotion won her the 'Peacebuilder' award in 2020 from the HasNa organization, based in Washington DC.

Ravda is a tireless defender of human and migrant rights, and she has already spoken up about these issues at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and at the European Parliament. Helping people is the main driver of her advocacy, her humanitarian work, and her personal life.

The barefoot walk

Ravda Nur Cuma grew up in Idlib, the middle child in a family of nine siblings. Her father was a businessman. Her mother was a homemaker, tending to their family and garden where each child had their own tree, planted by their father.

Education was the first priority for her family and Ravda's father made sure that she and her sister went to a good private school.

When the war started, Ravda was 13 years old.

One evening at the end of 2011, her father came downstairs and urged his family to get ready to leave. They packed some warm clothes, fetched their passports and IDs, and left in the middle of the night, walking towards the mountains.

Ravda remembers the chaos on the streets, the sound of a tank approaching, women crying, kids running around barefoot, and people fleeing their houses.

Her family walked for four hours to the border with Turkey, where the Turkish army directed them towards a tent camp.

"When we left, my father was thinking that in a few months, the crisis would end and we would come back. But we haven't seen our home since", Ravda says.

Slowly and unwillingly adjusting to her new tent life, Ravda took her father's advice to learn Turkish while they were there. It will be of use, he said, even if the war ended and they could come back to Syria. He also wanted to distract his kids from the hardships of refugee life by keeping their minds busy.

Ravda was a fast learner and in two months, she was the Turkish language course's top student, winning the appreciation of the refugee camp's director. Soon after, her family was moved to a container camp near Kilis, where they had better living conditions and the children could continue their education.

By that time, she was in high school and Ravda noticed that her female peers had stopped coming to class. She realized they were either getting married or being sent to work.

"Because of the economic situation and because they didn't know what will happen in the future, many Syrian families thought they needed to marry their daughters young to keep them safe", Ravda explains. "I didn't want to have that kind of life. The idea of getting married at 14 years-old and having a child while I was still a child – it was destroying my dreams.

"The idea of getting married at 14 years old and having a child while I was still a child – it was destroying my dreams. But my father always told me: "Don't worry, I will do my best to educate you, even if we are now refugees, I will do my best."

But my father always told me: "Don't worry, I will do my best to educate you. Even if we are now refugees, I will do my best".

Her family was peer-pressured to marry her as well, but Ravda's father didn't succumb to this. He gave his daughter the freedom to choose for herself.

But instead of feeling discouraged and disheartened, Ravda decided to speak with these families to convince them of the importance of education. Some of them closed doors in her face, some listened but said they weren't brave enough, but others she managed to persuade that school was a safe place to send their daughters to and that education was the only way forward.

Speak up and tell your story

Her own hard work at school was recognized and Ravda obtained Turkish citizenship and a scholarship to Gaziantep University. "So many people asked my father if he really was sending his daughter to another city alone and he would answer: Yes, I am proud of my daughter and I trust her", Ravda recalls.

In 2016 she registered her foundation that supports refugee girls' education. She also started working to support herself through her studies.

With her first salary, she rented an apartment in Hatay (a Turkish province on the Syrian border) to get her parents out of the camp. “When I told them, my mom said: “You are our mother. We are not your family; you are our family.” And then my father said: “I never dreamt that after four years of living in the camp, I will be between four walls”, Ravda fondly remembers.

The young woman took her sisters to live with her and continue their education. The younger one dreams of becoming a volleyball player, while the older one is studying to be an airplane engineer. “My sisters inspire me”, Ravda says. “They are strong and successful girls, who can fight for their lives and don’t need any help from men.”

As for her own future, Ravda hopes she will one day be able to help in the restoration of Syria and its society. After graduating in International Relations, she would like to get a master’s degree in Middle Eastern politics.

Now, she’s also working as a cross-border coordinator with the International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation, an NGO working on sustainability and development projects in the area of Syria controlled by Turkey. “I'm really thankful for this foundation for their trust in me and now I'm taking care of a project inside Syria. I have started to improve and develop myself, and I also get to see my country again. I feel hope now that I can go to my country and do something for the people there. And one day, I hope my country will have peace”, Ravda wishes.

Though still in university, she uses every opportunity to speak publicly about how every refugee deserves access to education.

When Ravda went on an exchange program in the US to study English, she used this time to advocate and even got to speak at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

“I was always dreaming big. I was always telling my father that I want to be a strong woman and make a change. So,

“We weren’t born as refugees and the war in our country is not our fault. I just want us to be seen as human beings because we are not just numbers. Everybody has a different story. Every refugee needs an opportunity in life.”

“When I have hard times in my life, I remember when I was feeling cold in the winter in the refugee camp. But now I support my family and have a good life. I'm trying to be a good role model for every girl.”

informing world leaders about the problems millions of girls face every day was a big success and I need to keep doing this. I cannot stop because on social media, I get a lot of messages from girls who want me to speak up and tell their stories”, Ravda adds.

The human rights activist believes it is very important for refugees to represent themselves, to question publicly why the war happened, to speak up, and to come up with solutions themselves, even when they are met with ignorance or distrust.

“One day I opened Instagram and I saw somebody asking: do you really believe that you, a Syrian woman, will do something?”, Ravda recalls. “I was really upset because girls are growing up with these hateful words, with the idea that a man is stronger than a woman, that the woman should stay in the other room and wait for the man to finish with his food so that she can eat. My family was different, but we faced this anyway because we lived in a society that believes in this. We need to make a change as women. Waiting for somebody to help us and save us will do nothing.”

Ravda adds that she has always considered herself a feminist. One of the role models that inspires her is the actress and humanitarian Angelina Jolie.

She even laughingly shares the story of how she missed an opportunity to meet Jolie in person, while the actress was visiting her former refugee camp. Ravda was in another city at the time and was so disappointed that she couldn’t see Jolie. “I really admire her. She always gives me power. When I look at her face, I feel hopeful for the future”, Ravda admits.

A safe space for every woman

Even if Ravda is living a good life in Turkey and making a difference through her work, she still faces a lot of discrimination and even hatred as a refugee living in a

foreign country.

After a TV appearance, she was verbally attacked by a female member of a political party in Turkey, which as a consequence, triggered many hateful social media messages and even threats directed at her.

Ravda's response was to speak up against discrimination, to try to explain the complexity of the Syrian war and how refugees didn't choose this life for themselves. "Many platforms share false information about refugees to create the wrong perception. They say that Syrian students go to universities without exams and get good scholarships really quickly. I tell the truth – how hard it is for Syrians to go to school, that every Syrian refugee's life is destroyed", Ravda says.

What helps her through these dark moments and gives her hope is meeting children from the refugee camps. They are always smiling and full of hope despite their hardships.

"Whenever I have hard times in my life, I remember when I was feeling cold in the winter in the refugee camp. Sometimes we didn't have any food to eat, but now I'm supporting my family, I'm taking care of my sisters so they can go to school and have a good life. I'm trying to be a good role model for every girl", she adds.

Her goal is to continue to support the effort to educate a large number of girls and children. She also hopes to extend her work to help women in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

"I support peace with a smile. My mission is to fight for equality and to have human-rights-oriented politics."

"Every woman needs a safe space and has the right to be a part of society. We need to make a space for those women in Afghanistan so they can be a part of society", Ravda exclaims and then concludes: "My aim is to really fight for human rights. We weren't born as refugees and the war in our country is not our fault. I just want us to be seen as human beings because we are not just numbers. Everybody has a different story. Every refugee needs an opportunity in life."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

“The idea of getting married at 14 years old and having a child while I was still a child – it was destroying my dreams. But my father always told me: “Don't worry, I will do my best to educate you, even if we are now refugees, I will do my best.”

“I was always dreaming big and telling my father that I want to be a really strong woman and I want to make a change. Today I receive a lot of messages from girls who want me to speak up and tell their stories.”

“We weren’t born as refugees and the war in our country is not our fault. I just want us to be seen as human beings because we are not just numbers. Everybody has a different story. Every refugee needs an opportunity in life.”

“When I have hard times in my life, I remember when I was feeling cold in the winter in the refugee camp. But now I support my family and have a good life. I'm trying to be a good role model for every girl.”

“Every woman needs a safe space and she has the right to be a part of society. We need to make space for those women in Afghanistan to be a part of society.”

“I support peace with a smile. My mission is to fight for equality and to have human-rights-oriented politics.”

THE UPHILL BATTLE FOR A BETTER UKRAINE

Human rights activist and head of Centre for Civil Liberties Oleksandra Matviichuk on the need of major reforms in Ukraine and the often complex relationship between authorities and society

Author: Svetoslav Todorov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Optimism, intellectual courage, empathy

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To build a world where my work to protect human rights will simply be unnecessary.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: When the forces run out, you should proceed with character.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: There are no simple recipes. Go ahead and do it!

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: My 4-year-old niece.

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Protection of human rights, building networks and communities, culture

OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK

Ukraine
HUMAN RIGHTS & CIVIL SOCIETY

"Unfortunately, our government and authorities are not in favour of human rights", says Oleksandra Matviichuk, with a voice that has been trained in explaining complicated topics in a simple way. She is a human rights defender working on issues in Ukraine and the Eurasia region with a focus on creating horizontal structures that increase civic involvement in human rights activities to protect rights and freedoms. The importance of her work grows daily.

Matviichuk was born in 1983, when Ukraine was still part of the USSR. She has witnessed first-hand the struggles of her country, which gained independence at the end of 1991. At

present, Ukraine still faces major challenges in establishing a healthy democracy, overcoming poverty, dealing with civil unrest, introducing much needed reforms, and navigating a particularly tense relationship with Russia, which annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. That event was preceded by mass protests against Ukraine's former President, Viktor Yanukovych, who, as an ally of Vladimir Putin, had rejected the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement a year before and brought further tension to the Russia-Ukraine border.

Though this region has few obvious answers to how its many riddles can be solved, people like Oleksandra are part of the solution. How did it all begin for her?

Before the Euromaidan

Matviichuk has a law degree from the Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv. "I didn't have very specific plans when I was in school. I wanted to be a producer in theatre but instead decided to study law to protect human rights", she says. Eventually, the activist in her took hold. "I was always very sensitive to injustice", she says and explains this by citing her background, part of Ukraine's often turbulent and traumatic history as part of the USSR.

At present, she heads the human rights organization Centre for Civil Liberties (CCL). She began working for CCL in 2007, when it was first established with the goal to promote the values of human rights, democracy, and solidarity.

"I hope women will experience a "revolution of dignity" and that Ukrainian society in general will move closer to European values."

"Before I started at CCL, I had professional experience in youth organisations and commercial law. It was a way to combine and balance everything I'd learned up to that point." Currently, CCL is engaged in introducing legislative amendments to assist the democratic transformation of the country and to help the public control law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. It also conducts training events for young people and implements programmes promoting international solidarity.

Standing up for the oppressed

Would she say her life today is split between before and after the events of 2013-2014, when the Euromaidan mass protests peaked?

"It was indeed one of the most crucial moments in our history since independence", she says but notes at the same time that she had already been engaged with human rights and activism. What changed was how the Centre for Civil Liberties became even more active in providing aid. "For example, we never provided direct legal support to people in need before. We had to be quick and flexible to adapt to these new challenges, to offer an effective response to the events", says Oleksandra, also the initiator of the #SaveOlegSentsov, the global initiative for the release of illegally imprisoned people in Russia and the occupied territories of Crimea and Donbas. She also coordinates 'Euromaidan SOS', an initiative started in 2013 during Euromaidan to help locate protestors gone missing.

In 2016, Oleksandra received the Democracy Defender Award for "Exclusive Contribution to Promoting Democracy and Human Rights" from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In 2017, she became the first woman to participate in the Ukrainian Emerging Leaders Program of Stanford University in the US. Through the years, she has been the author of a number of reports on violence against peaceful protesters, political prisoners, and various human rights violations in the region to several United Nation bodies, such as the Council of Europe, European Union, OSCE, and the International Criminal Court.

One focus of her work is the updating of Ukraine's Criminal Code, a topic she has been particularly interested since the 2013-2014 events. During the Euromaidan and while Russia has been occupying the Crimea and the Donbas region, she has been documenting the different kinds of violations inflicted by the armed forces on hundreds of people. They often sound like medieval tortures: abduction, killings, beatings, rapes, and the mutilation of bodies. "It's dramatic. People have suffered."

Ukraine's national investigative body and its associated prosecutors don't have access to the occupied territories and, at the same time, she finds that the way the relevant laws and regulations are drafted is insufficient to kick start any legal process on international crimes. "In contrast to international laws, here there are deadlines for certain investigations and when a deadline expires, the case simply closes. This means few results because it is hard to collect evidence. Criminals go unpunished, including war criminals."

In 2021, Matviichuk was the Ukrainian nominee for a position on the United Nation's Committee against Torture.

Progress (un)locked

Matviichuk and her team at the Centre for Civil Liberties have kept busy during the pandemic, to say the least. "When the pandemic started in early 2020, Ukraine also imposed a lockdown. We were worried that there would be human rights violations once the government began setting limitations." There was no guarantee that restrictions would be carried out in the best way possible. "According to the constitution, the government can't limit freedom of movement or other human rights, it doesn't have the laws to do that. And laws must be created to secure the legitimacy of the process and the rights of people", she adds.

This means that many restrictions are unconstitutional and gives room for the authorities to go unchecked. "We started an oversight of police activity, we feared that people would face problematic situations." In many cases, their fears were confirmed. "In the summer of 2020, we offered the government our recommendations on how to handle the second lockdown that we sensed was coming. These ideas are still on the table."

Gender-based and domestic violence are also topics she has been concerned about because during lockdown, those living in abusive conditions continue to live with their partners. "The COVID-19 pandemic adds fuel to old problems so they ignite again."

A further complication is that Ukraine has yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. In Ukraine, as in several other East and Middle European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria, this human rights treaty has attracted controversies and conspiracy theories. Some religious and conservative voices see the Convention as a threat to traditional values and national identity because they believe it imposed an "ideology" of LGBT rights. Apart from people falling for this fake news, Oleksandra sees a deeper nuance in the way societies in the region think. "But what are traditional values? So many things we take as traditional are actually not that deeply rooted in the past."

For over half a year now, a draft law on international crimes has remained unsigned by the current President, Volodymyr Zelensky, a former TV host and producer who entered politics in 2018 and won the presidential elections in 2019, taking 73.2% of the popular vote in the second round and defeating Petro Poroshenko. For Oleksandra, his stance is puzzling. "There hasn't been any explanation for his silence. Journalists have also inquired but received no answer. You see, the system in Ukraine requires total loyalty to the President – he is the one who chooses the General Prosecutor. If he stays silent on a subject, the whole system is silent."

During the last year and a half, the events in Belarus, where protests against the government of long-ruling President Alexander Lukashenko resulted in riots and arrests, come as a strange déjà vu for the activists in Ukraine. "Of course, in Belarus' case the events are much more encompassing and serious – it has lasted much longer than in Ukraine plus it is harder to leave the country. Many more people were arrested", says Oleksandra, who along with her team has initiated peaceful demonstrations in support of the movement. "We also follow the development of a very cruel practice of Belarusian authorities: when family partners actively protest or are imprisoned, their kids can be taken away and sent to a boarding school."

"In contrast to international laws, here there are deadlines for certain investigations and when this deadline expires, the case simply closes. This is a path to impunity."

Pushing the invisible ceiling away

Oleksandra Matviichuk finds that discrimination against women is not that visible in Ukraine but still present if you know where to look. "A lot of women here will say there is no discrimination against them but that is because prejudice only starts when you reach a certain level. I started to feel it a bit later in life", says Oleksandra who confides she has faced inappropriate situations. "There's a glass ceiling which limits one's development."

Being a woman has also created situations where she hasn't been taken seriously enough by people in power. A former Minister of Internal Affairs once commented on her beautiful dress. "Well, thanks for the compliment but it's not like he would say to a man that he has a beautiful suit just to avoid answering a question", she adds.

She hopes that women will experience a "revolution of dignity" and that society in general will move closer to European values. "Sooner or later, I hope that women in Ukraine will not see the glass ceiling to their professional development that I'm seeing right now."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"The Euromaidan is one of the most crucial moments in Ukraine's history."

"Unfortunately, our government and authorities in Ukraine are not in favour of human rights."

"A lot of women in Ukraine will say there is no discrimination against them. But there is no prejudice only until you reach a certain level."

"The COVID-19 pandemic adds fuel to old problems so they ignite again. I am concerned about gender-based and domestic violence, especially during lockdown."

"Sooner or later, I hope that women in Ukraine will not see the glass ceiling of their professional experience that I'm seeing right now."

"In light of the Istanbul Convention, what are traditional values? So many things we take as traditional are actually not deeply rooted in the past."

"I hope women will experience a "revolution of dignity" and that Ukrainian society in general will move closer to European values."

"In contrast to international laws, here there are deadlines for certain investigations and when this deadline expires, the case simply closes. This is a path to impunity."

WHEN ACTIVISM MEETS LAW

Denitsa Lyubenova is a human rights lawyer and LGBTI activist who helps people live normal lives and enjoy equal rights.

Author: Mila Cherneva

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Free, loving, and giving

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Human rights, Law, and Investment

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: The school on gender issues and politics because that school became a school of common sense in time.

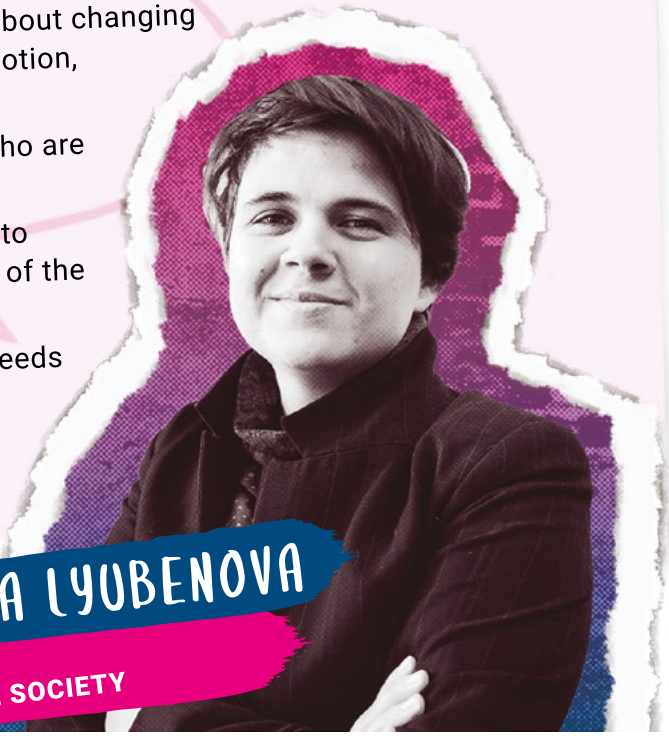
FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: My colleague Veneta Limberova because of her support and strength. In the early years, when we started talking about changing legislation in Bulgaria, she displayed enthusiasm, devotion, fearlessness, and an ability to talk to anybody.

I AM A WOMAN in law and I want to see more women who are ready to speak out for human rights.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: The mission of my career is to change legislation in Bulgaria to tackle the problems of the LGBTI community.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: Words and deeds go hand in hand.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: To know yourself, your goals, and the means to achieve them.



DENITSA LYUBENOVA

Bulgaria
LAW & CIVIL SOCIETY

The lawyers we see in movies are usually strong and confident but not always concerned with protecting innocent people or noble causes — they just do their job. However, Denitsa Lyubenova is not a stereotypical lawyer — her mission for many years is to achieve justice and equal human rights for people from different communities. She helped establish the LGBTI organisation Deystvie (meaning "action") and now, as its legal expert, helps it change the lives and protect the rights of all groups in society.

She has helped children receive citizenship, made marriages legally acknowledged, and facilitated access to medicine for HIV patients.

A police station disaster

Denitsa's work as a human rights lawyer is difficult because Bulgaria is not a tolerant and progressive environment. She gives the following example of the predicaments she finds herself in.

She was responsible for security at the 2016 annual Sofia Pride parade. As she recalls, two people in the Pride parade, when attacked by neo-Nazis, used pepper spray in response. The police then arrested both the attackers and the attacked. "I went to the police station, and I wanted to see the people who were attacked. Because I had my lawyer's ID, the police had to let me talk to them", she remembers. Initially, the police let her in to see the two people who were attacked but after a few moments, things abruptly changed. One of the police chiefs ordered some officers to remove her just as soon as he heard she had been let in. "A couple of police officers just grabbed me and threw me out of the station. Immediately after this, they made the two people sign a declaration that they refused legal help, promising to release them if they agreed", Denitsa says.

"The case in the Court of Justice of EU will be important not only for Bulgarian couples and their children, but for all rainbow families and couples around Europe and their rights regarding their children."

Meanwhile, ten neo-Nazis had gathered in front of the police station. "They started approaching me, taking pictures of me, threatening me, while the police officers just sat there, smoking their cigarettes", the lawyer recalls. So she texted her colleagues and about ten minutes later, "there was a 'mini pride' right in front of the police station".

Even faced with situations like this, she has not surrendered and has kept seriously focused on helping this community in its battle for rights.

Law and rights

Denitsa decided to become a lawyer because she was inspired by an uncle who was one. She studied law in Bulgaria but, as she puts it, felt there was something missing — it didn't feel like the right time and place. She completed a second master's degree in the Netherlands, where her interest in human rights deepened.

Her activism had begun before that. In 2012, while she still a law student in Bulgaria, a group of friends decided to organise a music festival as a fundraiser for registering Deystvie. "We were in the beginning of our 20s, full of enthusiasm and we had free time. We managed to organise a four-day festival at four different locations in Sofia. The owners of these bars and other places were very receptive and we got over 500 people to attend, even though there was no advertising like nowadays", Denitsa explains. Two years later, in 2014, the legal defence programme started when Deystvie received grants for pro bono legal support for LGBTI people.

While studying law, she did not notice discrepancies in legal rights. "The thing is that legislation in Bulgaria looks equal for everybody, at least in theory. It is only when you submit an actual complaint or ask for a certain right, that it turns out there is a gap in the legislation and it is unequal for LGBTI people", Denitsa mentions. However, now she believes that law is the key tool to changing fate. "I wanted to change the system and reduce inequalities in society, and I believed that in order to change whatever the system lacks, you need to know the legislation, the system and how it works", she explains and summarizes: "Human rights are law and law is human rights."

She explains that in Bulgaria there is a lack of hate crime legislation on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. There is no protection for families of LGBTI people. "We don't have a legal procedure for trans people to change their gender. This creates a very wide gap between the general public and LGBTI community. This reveals not only the legal inequalities, but also that the general public doesn't get what kind of rights LGBTI people are asking for", the lawyer says.

Lately, Bulgaria has suffered from an intolerant atmosphere and propaganda wars. Events, campaigns, and similar instruments are great, but they will only take progress to a certain point. "What we have seen in the last couple of

"Human rights are law and law is human rights."

years in the so-called 'gender backlash' or the 'anti- gender movement', is that they are using legal tools. I believe that to change the condition of LGBTI people living here in Bulgaria, you need to use legal tools too", she explains.

Deystvie: the legal battles

Deystvie has been providing pro bono legal support since 2014. One important victory that Denitsa Lyubenova is proud to point out happened in 2018. This 'win' was achieved by working together with Veneta Limberova, the chair of Deystvie, and Yavor Konov, who then was the director of the Deystvie's health programme, now the chair of the Ivor Foundation. They organised a campaign to change the legal act, which specifies how people living with HIV can get their prescriptions. "Before our campaign, people living with HIV had to go to their doctors every month, so they had to travel to the nearest infection centre in a big city far from where they live. After our campaign, the prescriptions were given for three months ahead. This was a very big success for us and for all people living with HIV", Denitsa remembers.

Another topic the lawyer works on is family recognition. The latest case she is working on involves two women, a Bulgarian and a UK citizen. They got married in Spain and their child was born there. However, the child has no citizenship because the English mother cannot give the child UK citizenship and the child cannot get Spanish citizenship because neither parent is Spanish. The only way to get any citizenship for the child is for the Bulgarian mother to come back to Bulgaria and to register the birth certificate here", Denitsa explains.

The parents came to Sofia and went to the local municipality office. However, there they asked the Bulgarian mother to provide evidence that she is indeed the birth mother of the child. Denitsa explains that was not right, it was pure discrimination because no heterosexual couple who comes back to the country to register their child is asked for DNA tests.

"The Sofia municipality refused our request for the child's citizenship. We appealed that and the Administrative court decided to refer the case to the Court of Justice of the European Union. Our hearing was on February 9, 2021", the lawyer says. The latter court analysed the EU legislation and decided whether Bulgarian laws contradict EU ones.

"This case is important not only for Bulgarian couples and their children, but for all rainbow families and couples around Europe and their rights regarding their children. This problem does not exist only in Bulgaria, it exists in all countries that disregard the rights of EU citizens", Denitsa says.

On the 14th December 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) issued a ruling on a request for a preliminary ruling from Administrative Court Sofia City. According to the CJEU judgment, once a child's parentage is established in a Member State, it should be recognized throughout the Union, regardless of the parents' sex or of national law. ACSC will have to implement the judgment of CJEU, obliging the Bulgarian administration to issue identity documents for the child so that Sara can exercise her right to move freely in the European Union as a European citizen.

Denitsa Lyubenova said: "The judgment of CJEU is fully in line with the principles on which the European Union is built and also with the case-law of the Court of Justice so far, namely that all European citizens should be treated equally. Bulgaria is obliged to recognize Sara's legal relationship with her two mothers. Bulgaria cannot rely on its national and constitutional identity and public order to derogate from the fundamental rights of EU citizens. According to CJEU, the child Sara is the heir of her Bulgarian and British mother, and the two mothers have the right to inherit each other."

Another exciting project Deystvie has worked on was training police officers how to address hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity. They have trained over 200 investigative officers from around the country.

New days are coming

Right now, the organisation has more supporters than ever before. Denitsa says that they have the support of companies, ministries and municipalities, and the general public; it is not just from the LGBTI community anymore. Overall, there are four LGBTI organisations who work in Bulgaria and all of them are based in Sofia. "I don't think that the rest of Bulgaria needs new NGOs because establishing their structure and administration is difficult and requires administrative and financial capacity, But I do think these four organisations should go around the country more and work with local people", Denitsa believes. She says that Deystvie is creating a national legal defence program to create focal points in five big cities in Bulgaria, each with one person from the community and one lawyer. "We are training these people in order to find discrimination cases, to find people and explain what discrimination is and to encourage them to seek their rights. What we have noticed is that most cases outside of Sofia are hate crime cases but people don't recognise them as such", she adds.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"In the last two years, LBGTI people started realising that there are certain type of rights they lack and they want to take action to remove these inequalities."

"I wanted to change the system and inequalities in society and I believed that in order to change whatever the system lacks, you need to know the legislation, the system, and how it works."

"Human rights are law and law is human rights."

"What we see in the last couple of years in the so-called 'gender backlash' or the 'anti- gender movement', is that they are using legal tools. I believe that to change the condition of LGBTI people living here in Bulgaria, you need to use legal tools too."

"Legislation in Bulgaria looks equal for everybody, at least in theory. It is only when you submit an actual complaint or ask for a certain right, that it turns out there is a gap in the legislation and it is unequal for LGBTI people."

"The case in the Court of Justice of EU will be important not only for Bulgarian couples and their children, but for all rainbow families and couples around Europe and their rights regarding their children."

CHANGING THE WORLD ONE FIGHT AT A TIME

Achieving legal and social victories, Nino Bolkvadze does not wait for a better world: she creates it.

Author: Joanna Elmy

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Survivor, fighter, defender

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: Protect one, empower a thousand.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: From the beginning of their childhood, girls should be taught independence, critical thinking, and self-confidence.

RECIPE FOR MORE EQUALITY FOR THE LGBT COMMUNITY: To begin with, we should start overcoming the stigma within ourselves, then reach out to other members of society and introduce ourselves as we are; because just as we have, they have been taught our fears and hatreds.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: The role model for me is, first and foremost, my own mother, who came from a poor family with many children and, despite her hard life, was always ready to help the women and girls around her. Also: Rosa Parks for her courage; Lia Mukhashavria, Georgian human rights activist, for her faith in human capabilities; and Rusudan Gotsiridze, Bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church and women's rights activist.

I URGE OTHERS TO JOIN LGBT ACTIVISM BECAUSE no one is obliged to obey the rules that harm him, and the rules of a patriarchal society harm us all, more or less.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: There is a need for us to be treated in accordance with our human dignity and also a need for us not to lose our humanity towards others.

NINO BOLKVADZE

Georgia
LAW & CIVIL SOCIETY

"I finally understood the meaning of the Rainbow flag. When your life blossoms and takes on new colors, your emotions become clear and sound, life fills with joy. Coming out brings struggles, of course, but they are incomparable to caving in – that's not the solution", says Nino Bolkvadze. She came out on national television in Georgia, a former Soviet country often presented as lying "on the intersection between Europe and Asia", where LGBTI rights are still violently contested. Growing up between the city and the countryside, married by the age of 16 with two now grown children, a successful lawyer and a political activist, it took Nino 20 years to find acceptance. Her coming-out was a milestone of personal liberation but also a message to others – one that forever changed her, and numerous other lives, as well as the history of Geogria's LGBTI community.

Hate as a diversion

Georgian society is still highly conservative, with religious and political powers seeking political gains by discriminating against the LGBTI community. A comparative study by the FNF foundation shows that "the severity and frequency of hate crimes against LGBTI people in Georgia remains a challenge despite the progress made in recent years", confirming Nino's assessment that most hate crimes towards the LGBTI community go unpunished. Abuse is not only related to far-right or hate groups; domestic and psychological violence by family members is also a persistent issue. After her televised coming-out on in 2015, Nino's husband was ostracized because "he could not control his female family member". Both Nino and the FNF's assessment underscore that Georgia has sufficiently progressive legislation when it comes to human rights; it is the implementation that proves problematic.

In 2013 this divide became evident. During the International day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOT) on May 17th, a peaceful LGBTI community assembly was attacked by counter-protestors. Nino was already an established lawyer at the time but had not yet come out publicly. After the violent events of what is now known as just May 17th, she realized she could not hide anymore. She divorced her husband and revealed her sexuality to her friends and family, losing some in the process, but also receiving a lot of support and meeting numerous new friends. For the first time, she belonged. It was not revenge towards the system to come out publicly on national TV in 2015. It was a revanche.

Nino is a believer in education and its ability to tear down artificially erected walls between people. But she also sees identity politics as an important factor. "I don't want to call it a fight, since we are not fighting anybody. This is not between two sides; I don't believe in the divide East and West. It is a question of old approaches and thinking about an issue, which leads to changing our minds and ways to match the times. In all societies, sooner or later, we will have acceptance. I don't see it any other way. War is not a tool, war brings no good to anyone".

"Coming out brings struggles, of course, but they are incomparable to caving in – that's not the solution."

Leading by example, Nino decided to run in the self-government elections on the Republican Party's list, because the LGBTI community in Georgia has little opportunity to advocate for their rights. She was the first openly lesbian running for office in the history of Georgia. It remains difficult for the community to gain access to public forums without being bullied, discriminated against, or subjected to violence. Nino's participation in the elections gave her a large platform to voice the problems of the community, and she also managed to present herself to the public not just as herself but as someone who shares the values of an established political party.

Helping others

She developed a sense of human rights already as a child when she was in the second grade. She saw the school system as compartmentalizing, trying to separate children. One time a teacher told her not to be friends with a particular girl from a poorer minority background. Nino could not obey. Her strong sense of justice and desire to help her father, whom she saw as permanently crushed by the harsh Soviet penitentiary system, led her to law school at the age of 16.

As a lawyer and an activist, Nino tirelessly supports the LGBTI cause in Georgia, giving talks in universities and creating various artistic projects, inspired by her love for reading. There are still places she dares not go, but her home village in Guria is not one of them: she is accepted by her family and visits with her partner. Sometimes life brings people together in other ways: a few years back Nino was admitted to the hospital with a thrombosis, her chances of survival unknown. Doctors recognized her, but they did not care about her sexual orientation, spending nights on end helping her. And when other patients saw her with her partner, who was taking care of her, holding her hand at her bedside, the initial shock gave way to understanding through shared experience.

"Politicians are mistaken when they think mobilization "against" something works in the long-term. Christianity has helped Georgia survive as a country, but persecution and hatred are not Christian values and will backfire. This is why reforms in education and the judiciary are necessary, the Georgian democratic scaffolding will collapse without these two pillars."

There are also rays of hope: after an attack on two lesbian couples several days before our interview took place, the Labor party issued a statement speaking out against hate crimes on the LGBTI community, an unprecedented political act. Nino also receives letters from young girls writing her that after listening to her talks and lectures, their parents accepted them. Another man recognized her

“It is unrealistic to wait for a flourishing democracy with no discrimination, there is no Utopia. But our own fate is in our own hands. If not us – than who else?”

“Everyone should come out whenever they are ready and if they need and want it. But acceptance is different. You should always accept yourself.”

on the bus and offered his unconditional support, should she ever need it. She is proud of her legal victories, which include successful cases against sexual discrimination towards women at the workplace, or discrimination against gay men in prison.

The latter case involved a young prisoner who was gay and was working at the prison while serving his sentence. For parents and relatives, a child convicted of a serious crime such as murder or rape is more acceptable than one who is a homosexual. Unofficial prison code prohibits gay inmates from touching others’ personal belongings, holding their hands, eating together and similar activities. Other prisoners told the warden that if he does not take care of “the problem”, they would have to solve it themselves. The gay prisoner was subsequently fired. Nino demanded that the court dismisses this order as illegal and discriminatory, and succeeded.

They said gay people don’t exist in Georgia

Nino also had to fight her own battles to become the woman she is today. When she was 15, she fell in love for the first time – with the new girl in class. It caused a scandal. The girl’s parents found out and moved her to a new school, while Nino had to change schools. The worst thing that could happen to a girl, in her parent’s opinion, was not something in school, not the war or the poverty ravaging Georgia at the time but failing to marry and to have children. And so, she married early in life, in denial of her true self and hoping to be “cured”.

Needless to say, her life unfolded in a different direction. She believes not everyone can or should come out – they have to do it when they are ready and prioritize safety. But acceptance is different than coming out. And a person should accept themselves no matter what. Nino is a big believer in individual action and acknowledges that Georgia has good legislation, but cases arise only if discriminated parties file a complaint. Only then lawyers like herself can defend and fight for better enforcement of human rights texts.

Homophobia is not the main issue – political obstacles are far more difficult to overcome. The main political forces in Georgia prevent media coverage of homophobic attacks and pander to constituents with a “traditional” rhetoric. In a poor country where the promises of the ruling classes have failed and the pandemic exacerbates existing economic hardships, maintaining power comes with consolidation against various enemies – Western values and the LGBTI community, “the cutting edge” of negative political mobilization. The fear of strangers works well psychologically as history shows: the fear of the “others” coming to steal the resources.

This identity which is used to brand and reject the community needs to be turned around to show that LGBTI people are the same as everyone else, that they are not monsters; they are first and foremost people with differing values and political tastes, so even discerning a community is sometimes difficult. But if they want their rights to be recognized, they need to mobilize around this identity. Identity politics has its own challenges, of course, but some of the strategies it provides have worked in Ukraine, an example of a homophobic country influenced by Russia and a former Soviet member, comparable to Georgia. The community is not aiming to provoke and instigate, no matter how the status quo is trying to present it. In Georgia they used to say gay people did not exist. They had rumors homosexuals were brought in from the West. A person with a different sexual orientation used to be invisible. This is why visibility is necessary, people need to come out, tell their story, have the media reflect and report on these issues.

“In a poor country where the promises of the ruling classes have failed and the pandemic exacerbates existing economic hardships, maintaining power comes with consolidation against various enemies.”

An uphill battle

In 2019 activists saw how deep the government is entrenched in its hate politics, and how far from human rights values and European values it has led Georgian society. Alongside other organizers of the first Tbilisi Pride, Nino received threats for her life, the lives of her children and partner, and was subjected to disinformation attacks online. It was a miracle no one was injured. On June 14th Tbilisi pride activists protested against the Georgian government’s refusal to protect the community during the scheduled Pride events. Community members gathered outside of the Chancellery where they were met by far-right activists. The Pride eventually took place on July 8th 2019 with no protection for about 30 minutes, before being disbanded due to threats from representatives of far-right organizations. But Nino still considers it a success for the community. She is relentless: “Step by step we will win. We will show who we are, and we will gain more and more support.”

Now, for the first time in Georgia’s history, 15 political parties are signing a memorandum urging for LGBTI protection. Nino maps out three goals which she would like to reach in the future: she wants to continue advocating for liberal values in Georgia; she wants to use her professional skills in legalizing civil partnerships; and she hopes for political advocacy for the LGBTI community, who need representation.

“There are community members everywhere, in all walks of life, even in the Church. If you want happiness, you have to serve your community, serve people, love yourself and others and treat them well. And we do not have a choice, we need to speak out. It is unrealistic to wait for a flourishing democracy with no discrimination, there is no Utopia. But our own fate is in our own hands. If not us – than who else?”

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"Coming out brings struggles, of course, but they are incomparable to caving in – that's not the solution."

"Everyone should come out whenever they are ready and if they need and want it. But acceptance is different. You should always accept yourself."

"Sooner or later, we will have acceptance. I don't see it any other way. This is not a fight between two sides but our society simply changing for the better.

"It is unrealistic to wait for a flourishing democracy with no discrimination, there is no Utopia. But our own fate is in our own hands. If not us – than who else?"

"If you want happiness, you have to serve your community, serve people, love yourself and others and treat them well."

"Reforms in education and the judiciary are necessary, the Georgian democratic scaffolding will collapse without these two pillars."

"In a poor country where the promises of the ruling classes have failed and the pandemic exacerbates existing economic hardships, maintaining power comes with consolidation against various enemies."

ACTIVISM WITH NEVER-ENDING ENTHUSIASM

Vukosava Crnjanski on promoting fact-checking in Serbia and being resistant to the country's complicated politics

Author: Svetoslav Todorov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: A hard working optimist

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Civic activism, democratic transition

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: Founding and running a CSO that brought fact-checking in the Western Balkans region and that mobilises thousands to defend free and fair elections in Serbia.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Kamala Harris

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: Not giving up empowering people with a vision for a better future.

RECIPE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: Solidarity

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: Not for sale.

VUKOSAVA CRNJANSKI
Serbia
CIVIL SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT

Serbia is a country which has been through a lot and so have this country's tireless activists. Against all odds, the years of slowly building a healthier dialogue about politics, independent journalism, and human rights have not left a mark on Vukosava Crnjanski's motivation.

She has been an important figure in Serbia's activist scene for more than 20 years and is the founder and the director of CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability), an independent NGO committed to developing democratic culture and civic activism. Vukosava's work has been commended at an international level: she received the W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award in recognition of her innovation, commitment, and contributions. In 2018, Vukosava and her CRTA team received the Democracy Defender Award from the OSCE. For nearly two decades, Vukosava has worked as a trainer, helping members of other organisations, the media, and political parties develop their political skills, strategies, and organisations.

It all started in the late 90s, when she was an active participant in the Civic Alliance of Serbia party's youth group. Founded in 1992, the Civic Alliance later that decade became the only political organisation in the country led by a woman – Vesna Pešić.

“I don’t have the right to give up, I’ve invested so much in empowering the citizens.”

“We were in love with promoting civil rights and pushing democracy values forward”, reminisces Vukosava. She describes the Civic Alliance of Serbia as an “NGO among the parties” – they were engaged in anti-war rhetoric, promoting democracy, and fighting against the authoritarian politics of Slobodan Milošević (1941-2006, President of Yugoslavia between 1992-2000).

In the early 2000s, she realized that she could be more effective operating outside of traditional politics. “At a certain point, I realised I didn’t have the stomach for compromises. There’s this thing embedded in the political culture of our country “if you’re not fully with me, you’re against me.” We still don’t know how to discuss the decision-making process. If I critique a process, that doesn’t mean I’m against it but usually that’s how the other side takes it. This is, so to say, the “male way” of dealing with it.”

This led to the creation of the Liberal Network (Linet), an NGO focused on media freedom, preventing hate speech, highlighting cases of conflict of interest, introducing the idea of limiting obligatory army service, and engaging students at faculties and universities, which she describes as “islands of freedom” during the Milošević era. She remembers the early 2000s as a period of hope whose window of opportunity quickly closed. She points to the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003 as a sad turning point for local politics. “He was a person with a vision.”

In 2008, inspired by the fact-checking models used during the John McCain / Barack Obama presidential campaign, the team introduced their own platform, “Istinomer” (“Truth-o-meter”) and in turn, started to fact-check elections in Serbia. “What can I say, we’re passionate about facts!” she exclaims.

The challenges in front of Vukosava and the discussions she wants to create are also reflected in the way she talks about certain words and meanings – how the Serbian word “odgovornost” can be translated as “responsibility” but that it’s hard to find the right local word for “accountability”.

In 2010 she was also helped found the Open Parliament, a new initiative on transparent politics, focused on building a bridge between citizens and their representatives. “We have a system where we don’t vote directly for our representatives – it’s the leading political parties that select the MPs. As you can guess, monitoring of what was promised versus what has been done is needed.”

The culmination of her work and these ideas was transformation of Linet into the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) in 2010. Its abbreviation CRTA is pronounced almost like the word “cherta” – a Serbian idiom meaning to “take a challenge” or to “sum up”. Currently, more than 50 people work for or collaborate with this organisation and a lot of them are women. Vukosava says that although they’re not exclusively focused on women’s rights, she likes to think of CRTA as a “women’s organisation”. With this platform, she continues to introduce tools and initiatives in fact-checking, as well as what Vukosava cites as the most inspiring part of her work – leading training sessions with youth organisations and aspiring activists, empowering those with a vision for a better future. “It’s those a-ha! moments in the eyes of the younger ones which are so crucial for me.”

Vukosava doesn’t sugar-coat anything and is direct about the political climate of Serbia. “We’re experiencing setbacks. We don’t have the experience living in a functioning democracy”, she says. “We have a lot of unresolved issues – facing our role in the Bosnian War, our treatment of Kosovo, the thinking that stability just means we don’t kill each other. These are always behind our backs. We’re essentially a non-reformed country, as we never developed parties that could create a functioning democracy.”

Crnjanski also criticizes the lack of condemnation of war crimes and of any significant steps towards eradicating criminal structures – issues far too familiar, in different variations, for many countries in the region.

“If you had asked me about the state of political transparency

“We were in love with promoting civil rights and pushing democracy values forward.”

“In the current political climate, a woman in power is not addressing women’s issues and an LGBT politician is not addressing LGBT topics.”

in Serbia in the early 2010s, I’d say we passed the exam for creating a basic platform for free and fair elections. Today, we have some serious issues.” After the last parliamentary elections in June 2020, which saw President Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS coalition winning with 60,65%, Vukosava feels this is another major setback as Serbia is now led by an almost one-party system. “And in this state of an absolute majority held by the ruling coalition, institutions simply succumb.”

One year later, this system clashed with CRTA’s activity in an expected way. In March-April 2021, CRTA, along with the investigative reporting outlet KRIK, which runs the anti-disinformation site Raskrikavanje, were a target of what they describe as a slander campaign. It all started when several members of parliament verbally attacked CRTA, accusing it of supposed involvement in an attempted coup d’état and an assassination of President Vučić – a reaction against the organisation previously filing a complaint against several MPs for violating the Parliament’s code of conduct.

“It’s usual for NGO’s and activism collectives to be labelled as “foreign agents”, and usually this is cranked up by the media across the country, especially around elections – it’s a mechanism that works. But this slander campaign came as a surprise”, Vukosava says. “We faced a similar narrative in the 90s and this type of hate speech is coming back.”

As a woman in Serbia, standing against the regressive rhetoric of the politicians, Vukosava says she sees more of a structural problem. “In the current political climate, a woman in power is not addressing women’s issues and an LGBT politician is not addressing LGBT topics”, she says, referencing to openly gay but ambivalently received Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, part of the political status quo. “There are welcoming steps in all of this, but from the outside there’s a perspective that it’s all okay, when from the inside, it’s like window dressing. At the end of the day, it's a system from which men benefit.”

The MeToo era has affected Serbia but according to Vukosava: “We don’t have strong institutions to back up these stories and bring big results.”

At the end of the day, what keeps her motivated? “I don’t have the right to give up, I’ve invested so much in empowering the citizens.”

Would it be a right guess if we say she has much more work now in comparison to when she started? “Yes”, she says with an ironic smile, “Unfortunately.”

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"If I critique a process, it doesn't mean I'm against it but that's usually how the other side interprets it. This is, so to say, the "male way" of dealing."

"What can I say, we're passionate about facts!"

"We were in love with promoting civil rights and pushing democracy values forward."

"It's those a-ha! moments in the eyes of the younger ones which are so crucial for me."

"In the current political climate, a woman in power is not addressing women's issues and an LGBT politician is not addressing LGBT topics."

A REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Journalist and former MP Gayane Abrahamyan on fighting for a better future, judicial reform, and awareness of domestic violence in Armenia

Author: Svetoslav Todorov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Righteous, a visionary, an initiator, committed to change and reform.

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Human rights, education policies, equity and access to qual education, women's and children rights

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: I'm creating a space and educational opportunities for women, people with disabilities, youth groups, and refugees so they can fight for their rights.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Emmeline Pankhurst, who fought for equal rights, including the right to vote, which enables subsequent generations to achieve equal rights for women. And Rosalind Franklin – the scientist whose work was crucial for discovering the structure of DNA, thereby breaking the stereotype that major scientific discoveries are made by men.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: Justice, equity, and social justice

RECIPE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: Think of failures as new opportunities, never give up and always strive to do more.

Armenian politician, journalist, and activist Gayane Abrahamyan has long been devoted to different causes – from increasing awareness of domestic violence to advocating long- needed judicial reforms. Through her work, she has been challenging the status quo in her country and the dismissive rhetoric often coming from the strong men in power. "I'm showing that there are no limits to what a woman or anyone else can do", she says and her work and life so far definitely serve as a case study of where one can go, despite an environment that certainly doesn't help women in politics.

Born in 1979, she's part of a generation which saw the country achieve independence from the USSR in 1991 but then continuously face challenges to establishing a healthy democracy. All of this while also being in a region where conflicts erupt in a way which, though they might surprise a Western reader, are painfully familiar to generations of Armenians.

Before entering politics and becoming a member of the centrist My Step Alliance, Abrahamyan was building a profile as a journalist in the press, online, and on TV. Her media

> **"For three years, being one of the most active MPs in the parliament, I was the most targeted, my family was the subject of continual intimidation, and I received death threats."**

experience spans two decades; she won the "Best Political Journalist" award in 2008, and she is involved with training and mentoring sessions with other journalists. In the mid-2000's, she was one of the journalists trying to raise the topic of domestic abuse in Armenia and promote awareness of this issue.

"When in 2006 I started writing about domestic violence, sharing the numbers of cases and requesting officials to take preventative measures, their answer was that there's simply no domestic violence happening in Armenia. But it not only existed, it was rather widespread and was perceived as a normal part of family life."

Abrahamyan is cautiously happy that now this absolute denial has been replaced by a certain acknowledgment. In 2017 a law on the prevention of domestic violence was adopted. "It was only in the past two years that government programmes were launched to introduce protection and prevention. Still, there is an immense amount of work that has to be done and it's hard to inform the public, which is surrounded by fake news and manipulative impressions created by the nationalistic, conservative groups."

Through the years, she has been actively fighting to shine more light on these issues. Abrahamyan has been engaged with media campaigns and educational projects, one of which is the NGO "For Equal Rights". "As a journalist, as a leader of a non-governmental organisation, and as an MP, I have always spoken about this problem, taken measures to protect the victims, and fought against the culture of violence through education." Her NGO's building was attacked several times because of her organisation's stance. "But the protection of human rights is our priority and we won't surrender."

Yerevan was not built in a day

There's a definite "before and after" effect in the way she talks about her projects and this watershed moment is Armenia's Revolution in 2018, the large-scale protest movement against the third term of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, a former President and the long- time leader of the Republic Party, who eventually resigned. Because of these demonstrations' massive attendance and peaceful nature, the protests have often been called Armenia's "Velvet Revolution". The movement led to the rise of the current Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan of the Civil Contract party and of the My Step Alliance.

Abrahamyan decided to become active in politics after this protest wave, seeing the move as a way to contribute in a more meaningful way to the fight against corruption and to implement a functioning judicial system. "I agreed to join since I was sure that this was a historic chance for our country to build a real democracy." She knew the restart would not come easy. "Joining Armenian politics was a challenge per se, since the political culture is not yet mature, and its criminal-oligarchic context required steadfast efforts to foster a certain culture, thinking, and substantive debate about political issues."

Abrahamyan's long-time work as a journalist and her recently adopted role as a politician in a party which managed to win 2021's snap elections are helping her to see Armenia's issues through different perspectives. She says that the previous political status quo, now in opposition, still has a huge influence in the country's media landscape. "The spread of fake news, manipulative information, and hate speech have all dramatically increased, which often leads to the violation of human rights. This has the potential to become a threat to national and public security. Last year, as an MP, I initiated the drafting of the law on the financial and ownership transparency of the media, but I didn't manage to get it adopted. I hope that will happen in the near future, since the issues are extremely serious. There's no transparency."

She finds that the rhetoric around changing the political system is often hijacked by those in the society who want, in her words, "the re-establishment of the corrupt and authoritarian system".

This led to Abrahamyan being targeted and threatened, mostly because of her stance that the judicial system should be upgraded. "I was ready to fight back. For three years, being one of the most active MPs in the parliament, I was the most targeted, my family was a subject of intimidation many times and I received death threats. I expected such challenges and knew that the former ruling authorities would strive for revenge through insidious means."

A revolutionary in resignation

If Abrahamyan could imagine all of these challenges beforehand, were there any surprises later? "I didn't expect one thing – that I would also have to fight inside the government system." Despite the changes, she sees a lot

of the state's governing system as still unreformed in terms of members and ideas. "In terms of its values, the system still incorporates all the principles of the corrupt system we thought we had left behind and resists all potential changes. It was harder when it became obvious that our revolutionary team was also stepping back from their democratic values and principles. I confess to having failed in fighting it."

"It made no sense for me to stay in the Parliament, since it was impossible to fulfil my major goal – judicial reform." Her disagreements with her colleagues at the My Step Alliance prompted her resignation 25 September 2020.

She saw that the party was losing strength in implementing judicial reform while surrounded by individuals who, according to her, had only legitimised the former corrupt system for decades. She announced her resignation but decided to stay on-board when the Nagorno- Karabakh conflict, the long-time ethnic and territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, reignited on 27 September 2020. She decided to stay and act. "It was also something demanded by the public, since I was leading the Armenian

"I didn't expect one thing – that I should also fight inside the government system. Despite the changes, in terms of its values the system still incorporates all the principles of the corrupt system we thought we left behind and resists all potential changes."

delegation at the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, which is the key EU platform for the Eastern partnership countries. I had an extensive network and different international platforms through which I could address this problem."

A peacemaker during war

After the fires of war were doused on 9 November 2020, she submitted her second and final resignation on November 17th , amid further frustrations over how little influence she had as an MP. "The resignation was also a consequence of the parliamentary system's immaturity. Decisions are essentially taken by just one person, and the Parliament essentially confirms these decisions. It turns out that Parliament was mostly a platform to raise problems, rather than solve them."

As the war has been present for much of her adult life, she's now even more aware of the role it has in contemporary Armenia. She finds that throughout Armenia's independence, even in moments when its democracy appeared healthy and fundamental liberties were intact, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has played an instrumental role in shaping her country's identity, its overall political discourse, the creation of state institutions, and phases of development. Abrahamyan sees the conflict and the past 30 years of independence as a moment when her society should think about what it did wrong and what lessons were learnt. "The most important acknowledgement we need to make is our failure to create and develop democratic institutions, to establish a real balance between them and to strengthen liberal democracy as a catalyst for the country's development."

Being a woman in Armenian politics

"Stereotypes still prevail in Armenian society – the pressure on women is permanently present in all spheres." For Abrahamyan, this pressure was most noticeable in politics. "The biggest challenge is the much higher milestone that women must chase in comparison to men. Female public figures are not forgiven even the slightest mistakes, they are required to be much more professional, much more active. This is, of course, not something specific to Armenia." There's another side of the coin, though. "While being in politics, I realized that society requires more from women, but also has more trust in them. Over the last few years, there has been growing trust in female politicians. Last year, there was a survey which suggested that 45 percent of the respondents are ready to see a woman as a potential leader of the country. This is a new tendency for Armenia, which I hope we'll see more of."

This tendency also reflects on how she's perceived in the country: "After my resignation, I received multiple letters from people not only expressing regret that I'm not in parliament anymore, but also insisting that I should continue and reach the position of the country's leader. Which they would definitely not have said years ago."

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"Stereotypes still prevail in Armenian society – the pressure on women is permanently present in all spheres, most noticeably in politics."

"I show that there are no limits for what a woman or anyone else can do."

"As a journalist, as a leader of a non-governmental organisation, and as an MP, I have always taken measures not only to protect the victims, but also to prevent violence, to fight the culture of violence through education."

"For three years, being one of the most active MPs in the parliament, I was the most targeted, my family was the subject of continual intimidation, and I received death threats."

"I realized that society requires more from women, but also has more trust in them. Over the last few years, there has been growing trust in female politicians."

"It made no sense for me to stay in the Parliament since it was impossible to fulfil my major goal – judicial reform."

"Throughout Armenia's independence, even in moments when its democracy appeared healthy and fundamental liberties were intact, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has played an instrumental role in shaping the country's identity."

"The most important acknowledgement we need to make in Armenia is our failure to create and develop democratic institutions, to establish a real balance between them and to strengthen liberal democracy as a catalyst for the country's development."

"I agreed to join politics since I was sure that this was a historic chance for our country to build a real democracy. It was a challenge per se since the political culture was not yet mature."

"I didn't expect one thing – that I should also fight inside the government system. Despite the changes, in terms of its values the system still incorporates all the principles of the corrupt system we thought we left behind and resists all potential changes."

"My resignation was also a consequence of the parliamentary system's immaturity. Decisions are essentially taken by just one person, and the Parliament essentially confirms these decisions. It turns out that Parliament was mostly a platform to raise problems, rather than solve them."

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING REGIONAL JOURNALISM ALIVE

Editor Anastasia Sechina speaks about the meaning and difficulties of being an independent journalist in Russia.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

Update (December 2021): Following the publication of this article in March 2021, the organization lead by Anastasia Sechina – "The Fourth Sector" came under the intense scrutiny of the Russian state apparatus and, in the end, decided to cease its operations. In July 2021, the Ministry of Justice launched an unscheduled inspection of the organization and in August labelled it a "foreign agent" – something Sechina herself predicted in the interview for this piece. According to her, the Justice Ministry claimed that "The Fourth Sector" had received money from foreign organizations and had engaged in political activity because in some of its publications, journalists had expressed criticism of actions by the law enforcement agencies and the penal system. Furthermore, the authorities claimed, some of its publications promoted "tolerance of LGBT people", an action "contradicting state policy". Lastly, they claimed "The Fourth Sector" organized a rally in support of the persecution of fellow journalists – Ivan Golunov and Ivan Safronov, when in fact they had initiated these actions in their personal capacity, as citizens and fellow journalists, and not on behalf of "The Fourth Sector" itself.

"After our organization was recognized as a foreign agent, we decided to close it for several reasons. The status made cooperation with our organization unsafe; everyone who worked with us would be at risk of being recognized as individual foreign agent. We are a small initiative and do not have the resources to afford the administrative costs that bearing this status implies. And we risk a large fine because we did not voluntarily register as a foreign NGOs," Sechina says. Despite the formal closure of "The Fourth Sector," Sechina insists that the journalists who worked as part of it would continue cooperating, one way or another, despite the continued risk associated with this. "We released a sequel to the "Accusatory Clones" project, which talks about how the presumption of guilt works in Russia and why a political motive is not necessary to imprison an innocent person. We have released a large research project on humanitarian forensics, in which we research how this expertise helps to imprison and fine people for words and pictures," the editor of "The Fourth Sector" adds.

"Small, local media can become a point that attracts civic activism on a particular topic, it can inspire and educate citizens to join together to change something."

"In [Russia] I am afraid of two things as a journalist — of my state authorities because of their laws, and of the psychos, the crazy people."

It is a well-known fact that it is not easy working as a journalist in Russia. With laws regulating media and freedom of expression that are described as "draconian" by the Reporters Without Borders media watchdog, the country ranks 149th in the organizations' latest World Press Freedom Index. "Journalists work in an environment of fear, maintained by physical and verbal violence, imprisonment, censorship, economic and political pressure," concluded Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom's own Freedom Barometer. So how does an independent reporter survive in that environment? Especially when they are a woman and are not based in Moscow, where – limited as it is – support from international organizations and famous colleagues can mitigate some of the worst excesses of the authorities.

Anastasia Sechina has an answer. For almost 20 years she has been fighting – and surviving – in the inhospitable Russian media tundra from her hometown of Perm, deep in the Federation's heartland. Currently, she is coordinating an independent journalistic project, the award-winning "The Fourth Sector" media collective, as well as the platform for journalist tools "Gribnitsa" ("Mycelium" in Russian) that aims to spread much-needed knowledge among reporters from local media that hardly ever get access to such things. What motivates her to endure this uphill battle? "Federal media does not care about our regional and local issues, and if there aren't strong local media projects, who will talk about all of these problems? I don't know," she says.

The start of a journey

She did not take that difficult road entirely on her own accord. Actually, before 2016 she had spent 14 pretty successful years as a radio host, editor-in-chief and, finally – programme director of the "Echo of Perm", a regional partner of the "Ekho Moskvy" (Echo of Moscow) radio station, one of the oldest and most respected broadcasters in Russia at the time. Yet, this abruptly came to an end with the purchase of the station by a businessman who wanted to run for office in the State Duma. "He started to use the station for his own political purposes, so we tried to resist him, but it was not successful. Then the new management of the station made it clear — you either do the things that we want, or you go. And I left the station, with most of the journalistic team as well," Sechina recalls.

This felt like an end of an era. Fourteen years earlier, Anastasia Sechina, fresh out of high school, wanted to travel a lot and thought that a reporter's profession would allow her to do just that. "I tried to apply to the Faculty of Journalism in Moscow, but I was not successful, and I returned to Perm, my native town, and I wanted to get a job as a cloakroom attendant in a school," she says. Then, in a turn of events, a friend of her mother introduced her to the editor of the local

radio and broadcasting company, who asked her if she had ever written anything – poems, stories – that he could read. "He then said [my writings] were a bit naive, but there was something in them, and that they would take me as an intern," Sechina laughs. The senior journalist she got assigned to was pretty straightforward with her, saying that he didn't have time for interns and he would throw her into deep water. "You will either swim out, or you won't – and we will be very sorry," he said. A week later – on her 17th birthday – Sechina swam out and got the job. Just a few years later, after a couple of brief stints at the local broadcaster and at local newspapers, she was entrusted (even to her own surprise) with the editor-in-chief position in "Echo Moskvy's" Perm branch.

After the shock that came from her sudden parting with the broadcaster, a whirlwind of events ensued for her. "It was unexpected for me, but I won a grant for investigative journalism, and then one human rights activist offered me the chance to lead an investigative journalism project. And in the autumn of 2017, we founded "The Fourth Sector'' project. Some texts were picked up and published by [the internationally renowned independent media] "Meduza," Sechina says. Two of the signature stories produced by Sechina's team that were featured by "Meduza" were on the refusal of the federal government to pay compensations to the families of dead soldiers and on the impunity enjoyed by people committing homophobic crimes in Russia.

"The Fourth Sector" is now publishing not only investigative pieces, but all sorts of interregional and cross-subject stories that bring reporters from across Russia together. And Sechina is there to make sure it all works out. "As for me, I am less of a journalist and more an organizer of journalistic processes. Coordinator, editor, and a person who creates a breeding ground for my colleagues."

Keeping on pushing

What keeps her going despite all these difficulties is that, as a regional journalist in Russia, one still has the opportunity to affect outcomes in local cases of injustice or arbitrariness. "Small, local media can become a point that attracts civic activism on a particular topic, it can inspire and educate citizens to join together to change something. In small places, its influence is real," Sechina says. "Here, in Russia, you can't influence more than that. Only on this local, regional level – and only partially," she concludes.

Then, on the less negative side, she says she never felt special forms of pressure because of her gender. "I think there are some problems, but they are common to everyone in the world – it is not something unique about women-journalists in Russia. For example, when it comes to promotions, employers will chose men, because they won't give birth to children and won't need maternity leave," Sechina says, adding that the low salaries in the profession are also taking a toll. Yet, she is reluctant to make generalizations – Russia is a big country and the situation in Voronezh and that in Chechnya and Ingushetia, for example, are entirely different.

"I don't think that the number of readers is the most important thing in our work. Sometimes, your text is aimed at one person — the governor. And it is important that the governor reads this. Just one person."

Crashing into walls

The problems for reporters start when they raise the stakes of their work. "When you start to talk about some systematic problem, a problematic project that the authorities try to implement, or about the dealings of a very important person, it is like trying to move a wall," Sechina claims. She recalls the case of the investigation into alleged illicit property deals carried out by Russian Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev, which caused huge public uproar and no repercussions – at least not for Medvedev himself. Ivan Zhdanov, the journalist and head of opposition leader Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption group, was indicted by the State Prosecution for refusing to take down the video of the investigation into this property scandal. His situation is not unique.

"Being a journalist in Russia is difficult primarily because of our laws. I am talking about the law on fake news, the so-called ban on the propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation, the law about foreign media agents, and the law on justification of terrorism and various others," lists Sechina. "These laws are written in such way that if they want, they can convict you, they will find a reason if they really want to. There are no clear criteria and the application is selective."

That is why when she and her colleagues start working on touchy subjects, they know what can come out of this. "We all understand that, at one moment, one of us could be charged under an article of one of these laws and you don't know who it will be. This is our reality now and there are not any methods to minimize these risks. There are none, apart from stopping to be a journalist and, in this way, you are safe. If you continue your journalistic activities and you deal with complicated topics, you are running these risks."

Help is rarely on the way as well. For example, when Sechina

and her team were pressured by the then new owner of the local branch of "Ekho Moscvy," they did not receive much support from other media or watchdogs. "If you can draw attention to your situation and people from these big organizations and media say that it is really a serious situation and start a campaign, you have a chance. But if you can't draw attention to your situation... if you are from small, local media, what will you do?," she asks rhetorically. To her, the number of people who have visited an article's web page isn't the most important thing. '"I don't think that the number of readers is the most important thing in our work. Sometimes, your text is aimed at one person – the governor. And it is important that the governor reads this. Just one person," she claims.

Fighting hate and finding purpose

The authorities are not the only force of nature Sechina is scared of. "In my country I am afraid of two things as a journalist – my state authorities because of their laws, and of the psychos, the crazy people," she says, giving examples of the readers' backlash that followed the publication of one of a series of articles on the lives of LGBT people, part of the "We Accept" project done in cooperation with Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. "It was bullying," Sechina remembers. "I know that my name is used by this haters' community, they also mention it often, and write that I am an LGBT-loving person. And I think it is a risk... if I meet one of these people in a dark street and they recognize me... this is a risk that we take."

At the same time, the journalist is also very well aware that only by bringing these topics up they can sow the seeds of change. "We created "We Accept" as a project about LGBT people who decided to come out, and of parents of LGBT people accepting their children, and hoped a parental community will start, as in Kyrgyzstan, and they can then help campaigns on LGBT rights later. It is a very small step, we know that we can't change the state policy towards LGBT people, we can do these small steps and hope that it will change some minds and that the change in these minds will provoke further change in this sphere." Sechina says that "We Accept" actually had impact beyond simply telling a story – it led to the creation of a support group of parents of LGBT people in Perm, which actively supports its members and their children. What else can a journalist ask for from their work?

"Being a journalist in Russia is difficult primarily because of our laws and I am talking about the fake news law, the so-called ban on the propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation, and the law about foreign media agents. When we talk with my colleagues about these topics, we all understand that, at any moment, one of us could be charged under an article of one of these laws and you don't know who it would be. This is our reality now and there aren't any methods to minimize these risks."

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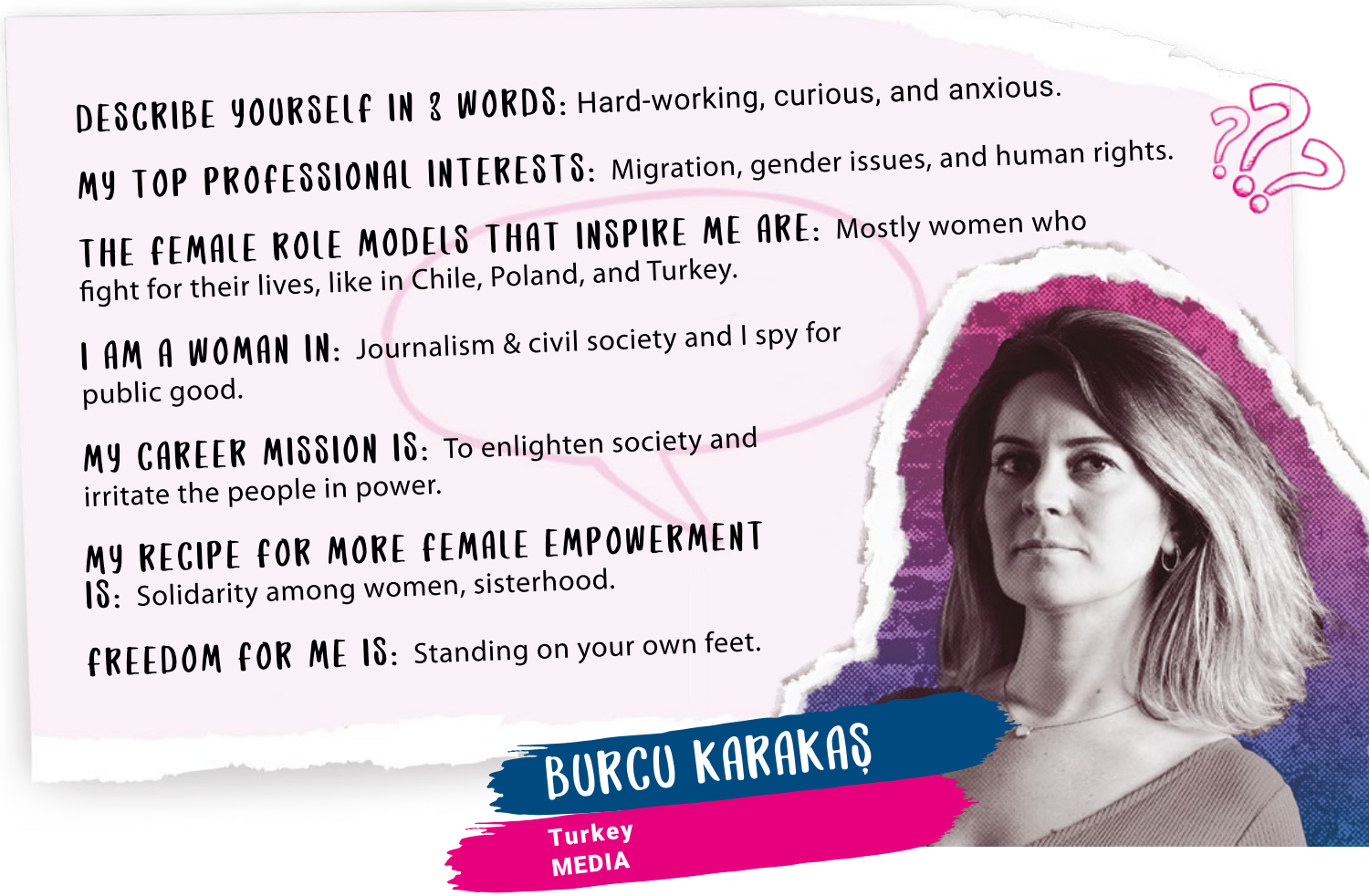
THE STORIES WORTH TELLING

A two-time winner of the European Union Investigative Journalist Prize, a fighter for equal rights, justice, and the truth, Burcu is outspoken, consistent, hard-working and remains one of the bravest voices in Turkish media.

Author: Mila Cherneva



"I cannot stand it when a human being is humiliated, so that's the reason I work in journalism — to remind people they have rights. It can be a child that is being abused, it can be a migrant who is tortured, or it can be a woman who is subject to violence by her partner." This is how Burcu Karakas, a Turkish journalist at Deutsche Welle, describes her motivation to work in the media. She has been covering a range of topics for over a decade, including female and minority rights, migration, and free speech.

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The stories worth telling

In 2016 Burcu Karakas noticed several articles in the media, all on a very grim topic. The pieces mentioned the deaths

of young women in the South-eastern Turkish town of Van. She would read a by-line one day, then another the next day, until it reached more than 10 such cases in a month. Burcu became both worried and interested in this story, so she asked her editors if they would send her to the city and they agreed. She talked to the women's families and tried to figure out what had provoked such awful tragedies.

"Some of them were around the age of 18, they were really young, and some of them were children'', she remembers. She describes the phenomenon as "contagious". "When [the women] learned that a friend of theirs committed suicide, they wanted to do the same because they felt so desperate", the journalist explains. These women lived in restrictive conditions, in communities that oppressed them in every way. "First of all, not all of them were able to finish their education. Second, there was this family pressure: they would ask them to get married early and then, in some cases, there was physical or verbal violence [at home]. Also, they did not have any economic independence. They depended on their families [for money]", Burcu says and adds that she believes economic independence is extremely important for women. "When you get your own money, it gives you a chance to build your own life", she says.

"I cannot stand what is unfair for people — it can be abuse, living conditions, or something else. I like to investigate the conditions that degrade people. I cannot stand when a human being is humiliated and that is why I write journalism."

While she was doing her research in Van, the journalist noticed the conditions that created a toxic environment for these women. "Basically, they didn't have a chance to build their own lives and they felt trapped. The only way out for some of them was killing themselves", she explains. However, Burcu points out that the deaths are called "suspicious" because there was no investigation that concluded definitively that these women took their own lives, as opposed to being murdered. Her article provoked institutions to begin an investigation. Unfortunately, there has been no result and it led nowhere.

Journalism and her personal story

Burcu Karakas is one of the strongest journalistic voices in Turkey. She studied political science, and in the United States, she earned a Masters in International Relations and International Communication. She began an internship at a Turkish newspaper, Milliyet Daily, and that is when her passion for journalism appeared. "I liked it very much, but when I finished my masters, I never thought that I would actually start a career there because they pay very little money and they don't give you insurance. However, I just loved it so much, I couldn't let it go, so I started my internship there". Even if the working conditions were not quite attractive, they did not discourage her from taking up the role of a journalist. "I basically fell in love with the profession and now it has been 11 years", says Burcu.

Like any other intern and newly hired staffer, in the beginning she covered a plethora of topics, but she adds that "it is the way you learn [how to do] journalism since you gain experience". Afterwards she began covering minority rights and female issues — and coincidentally, it was about the time where the female movement became more outspoken and present in the country. "The public in Turkey started to know my name due to my coverage of women's issues. That was also a period when the topic was on the rise. It is always [current], but now women were getting more and more power", she remembers.

But while women were becoming more courageous and candid, discrimination remains. Even Karakas herself has experienced it, though initially she says that she has not been a victim of it in her professional life. Later, she realises that this is not the case when she starts remembering stories from her early career, including a flashback of one of her first bosses.

"After I was fired from Milliyet, I worked for an online media platform. Of course, the boss was a man. He is a respected journalist in Turkey. I worked there for more than a year

"There are these male-dominated TV programmes where only the presenter is female. The rest are men who even have the nerve to discuss women's rights. Six men talking about that on TV — it is ridiculous."

and I never got paid. I knew they had no money going in, but at some point, the platform started to make money yet I still had no salary. After a while, I said I would quit and would get jobs from other platforms. I told my boss he had not paid me, and I had worked there for more and a year. He replied: Well, but you are married. You don't pay rent.", Burcu recalls.

She laughed and left. Yet she did not forget that case as it is quite symbolic of the way society treats women in the country and there is still a perception that they deserve less in a way. "No one would say this to a man", the journalist says.

As for the media as a work environment, she believes there is a glass ceiling. Even though she herself had the opportunity to work in the field, to cover earthquakes and to be in conflict zones, there is still male domination. "I see men networking and how men in the media have each other's backs and solidarity against women. I see that and I don't like it. When we say male dominated media, how is that possible? It is possible because of the male network that excludes females", Burcu elucidates. "There are these men-dominated TV programmes and only the presenters are female. They even talk about women's rights. Six men talking about women's rights on TV. It's just ridiculous!", she laughs bitterly.

Abortion: fighting for a right

One of the other most significant topics Karakas has worked on is abortion in Turkey. Even though it is officially legal and there should be no obstacles for women in the early stages of their pregnancies to have one performed, in practice it turns out it is quite difficult for that to happen. The journalist believes President Recep Erdogan's rhetoric played a big role in the change in the way abortion is perceived. "In 2012, he said that he does not appreciate abortion", she remembers.

After that, hospitals and doctors seemed to become less prone to perform abortions. Burcu Karakas decided to investigate whether that was true. "I called the hospitals and said: I am a woman and I want to get an abortion. Until the 10th week of pregnancy, it is legal [according to Turkish law]. So I called four or five hospitals, and they said they don't perform it and that it is illegal. I asked them whether they were sure, and they confirmed that it was. Afterwards, I asked the Ministry of Health if abortion is still practiced in state hospitals and they said "Of course", the journalist says. She revealed that was a serious discrepancy in what was a woman's right in law and what was her actual situation. "In theory, abortion in Turkey is there, but in practice, it does not exist. In Istanbul, for example, there are tens of state hospitals, but you can get an abortion only in two. And there are 20 million people living in Istanbul", Burcu says. She explains that the government wants to change the perception of abortion through an illusion and unfortunately, it is working.

"We must bring in more colour because it is only black and white when it is one-sided. We have to bring more voices, more perspectives."

Brave new atmosphere

Before, the government in Turkey was fragile and [cared] about press coverage. They would take it seriously. Now they just silence it. There is no debate. But it doesn't mean there is no reaction", the journalist observed. Even though the government, and the Ministry of Health in particular, denies there is an issue with abortion, the truth is there is one. Thus, a debate can happen due to the country's active female rights movement.

"Social media is the battlefield for such discussions, not just the streets. Younger generations are quite capable of using the power of social media in their field. They know how to raise their voices. In general, young women are much more outspoken. They are more powerful in articulating anything related to harassment. They are not afraid, and they use social media to say a man harassed them. We did not see that before", she explains.

Burcu says that younger men treat women better sometimes than older generations do. Yet part of the reason, she explains, is that they are afraid their names will appear in public associated with an accusation and they will be exposed.

Even though times are difficult and human rights and freedom of speech tend to be pushed into a corner, Burcu Karakas believes that the journalists' role is still important. "We still have the power to irritate people in power and, in a way, to mobilise people", she says.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

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"I think economic independence is very important. When you earn your own money, you get the chance to build your own life."

"There are these male-dominated TV programmes where only the presenter is female. The rest are men who even have the nerve to discuss women's rights. Six men talking about that on TV — it is ridiculous."

"When the media is one-sided, it is so dangerous, because the media's job is to give the audience perspective. Especially in Turkey and Eastern Europe, it is important to have female voices because we have to show the audience that female journalists are also here. We too are in the workforce and covering issues, and we are going to be here, so you have to be ready for that. We are here to smash the patriarchy."

"We must bring in more colour because it is only black and white when it is one-sided. We have to bring more voices, more perspectives."

JOURNALISM AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The investigative journalist who uses collaborative reporting and cross-border investigations in the fight against corruption

Author: Joanna Elmy

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Fair, brave, hardworking

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To print stories which someone does not want printed.

RECIPE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: Women first have to get aware of themselves, then believe in themselves and then act.

I AM A WOMAN IN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND I try my best to be a good example for young women.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Nellie Bly, the first female investigative journalist in the USA.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER INVESTIGATIVE MEDIA BECAUSE women are brave, have emotional intellect, intuition, and they are hard workers. All these qualities are needed to be a good investigative reporter.

IS YOUR FIELD A PLACE FOR WOMEN? Absolutely. Especially in Georgia, where journalism is perceived as a female profession.

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Working on open data, learning more about social campaigns and communications, getting better in writing and editing.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: To be independent and have a right to make mistakes which brings new experience and knowledge.

NINO BAKRADZE

Georgia
MEDIA & ACADEMIA

Nino Bakradze is the editor and co-founder of the Investigative Journalists' media project iFact, based in Tbilisi, Georgia. She works in an all-female team to uncover some of the most gruesome political scandals in Georgia and says that so far, there is not much competition when it comes to investigative reporting – the media is viewed as entertainment, standards are low, and journalistic ethics are rarely observed or respected.

Her supervisor noticed her investigative talents while she was pursuing a degree at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA)'s Media Management and Journalism Master's programme. Today, she is a part of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a global network of investigative journalists who engage in cross-border investigations. She is one of the few in her country to be doing this type of journalistic work and her media, iFact, publishes in-depth multimedia investigations. Their work is often quoted in Georgian media.

One investigation won a prize in 2015 in the category of Excellence in Investigative Journalism. Nino was praised for "her multi-media story on the botched investigation of the murder of a forest ranger." Of course, Nino does not

mention this during our interview: she prefers to talk about her country, her son, and the many problems she faces as a journalist. This is not false modesty – she just has more on her mind than her own accomplishments. Besides being a renowned investigative journalist, Nino spends a lot of time teaching undergraduates and graduates while also lecturing professional journalists in different preparatory classes.

"Journalism, especially investigative journalism, is a very important profession – it helps other people and democratic development. It has the power to change the life of society, the developmental pace of the country, and it can support democracy. These values are very important to me and I think I serve them best in this role", she says.

Nino points to three crucial journalistic projects she is proud of. The first is her work on the Panama papers, which was also her first experience in cross-border reporting. Recently she did a strong piece on a hydropower plant which is being built despite the protests of the local community. With her team, Nino acquired the official agreements and contracts between the investors and the state and discovered that the investment deal was unprofitable for the state, written with only the investors' interests in mind. In response to her article, protestors flooded the streets and the government is currently revising these documents. Finally, her media produced a 40-page investigation about the failed renovation of a 12th century UNESCO World Heritage site in Georgia. The government had begun restoring the old Orthodox Churches but journalists found out that old icons were being damaged by rain leakage. After iFact's investigation, the head of the cultural agency responsible for this project resigned.

The problem isn't being a journalist, it's about being a woman

Nino says she has not been pressured because of her work. What she finds problematic is the strong entrenchment of gender roles in society; in her line of work, she has never been discriminated against because of her sex. But that may be only because Georgians are used to journalism being a "feminine" – and not very prestigious – profession. There are very few male journalists, she says, and her university classes are predominantly composed of girls.

However, the picture changes when one looks at official government organizations, where they hire mostly men. Private companies also prefer to hire men, Nino explains. But the most notable problem in terms of gender equality is domestic violence. Georgia has many cases of femicide and women's rights are a problematic subject. "My journalistic role is not making anything more problematic. Gender issues are the problem, your profession doesn't matter. Being a woman in general is hard," she says. As a journalist, she has done several stories about these systemic issues and how victims of domestic violence are treated in general. "We have a responsibility to investigate the system and show society why this is happening."

Despite the country's conservative rhetoric and pretence of having "family values", similar to other Eastern European countries, family-oriented policies are non-existent. As a young mother you're not helped, Nino says. The only help you can get is from the family. The system and the state offer no support, and the maternity leave payments are so low that many women go back to work because they can't even afford diapers with that money. When she gave birth to her son, who is now four, she only waited for three weeks before returning to work. "There is no other choice", she shrugs.

Women bear the burden of raising a family. Employers prefer to hire men because they are unlikely to go on maternity leave. The narrative is the same old, same old, she says: "We are told women belong in the kitchen, they don't have the mental and physical capabilities to work on serious issues, etc. Since our high-ranking officials are men, they neither understand nor even care about the problems of women. That's why we need more women in politics," she says. That is the only solution.

The Church – the most powerful and reliable institution for people in Georgia – does not say a word about femicides or women's problems at all, continues Nino. It is a masculine institution hostile to women's rights. The society, on the other hand, is indifferent, nihilistic. If there are serious issues, protest is expressed online, but nothing is really done to change anything. And the government uses this well: they know people will be outraged online for a few days and then it will pass. "We protest on Facebook about a femicide but we don't fight for changes to legislation, policy, laws, or regulations, and then another femicide happens", she concludes.

But the wind of change is blowing in Georgia and Nino says social media also has a positive impact: women are getting more information about their rights online, finding support on social networks, and finding other women who share their burden. This can change women's future, Nino hopes.

"It is complicated to be a female in Georgia in general, being a journalist just adds to that."

> **“If you don’t love your country, if you don’t think about the well-being of your nation, you cannot be a good journalist.”**

> **“Women are gaining a sense of power. And traditions which are no longer useful are being rejected.”**

To love one’s country is to fight for its future

Georgia’s latest census data shows that the population is shrinking. “In my hometown, every family has someone living outside the country”, Nino says. She was born in Kutaisi, where her media outlet has a desk now. She remembers knowing she wanted to be a journalist when she was in 5th grade. Now she wants to teach back in Kutaisi, it is one of her long-term goals. But she says it is not easy: many young people leave the country because they don’t see their future there.

“I could never imagine my life in a different country. I love this country and I think it has a future. If all of us who can do something here leave, there won’t be any future. We must stay and fight for our rights, give good examples for others: have a job, a career even, raise your child here, fight for others’ rights. This is what I aim to do: through my work, I give a platform to others, so that their voices can be heard. This is my service to society. I see myself as an example for others so that they could change their minds and stay here. Most of my students think about leaving, but I tell them that if most of us go somewhere else – where, by the way, you also must fight for your rights, nothing is free abroad and you have to work even harder there because you’re an outsider – if all of us go, what is left? Why not use this time and energy to do something valuable for your country?”, Nino asks.

“I also believe that if you don’t love your country, if you don’t think about the well-being of your nation, you cannot be a good journalist.” Her generation cannot imagine life before the democratic transition, she says, and they have different aims, goals, agendas, and mental states. But she does believe that the Soviet past still lives in Georgia. She also believes that the reason for gender inequalities or even resentments towards women are rooted in the history of the country.

“In the 90s, when we had a civil war and an economic crisis, our women went to work abroad to save their families. It’s ironic, because the jobs offered in Italy and Greece were “female professions”, men wouldn’t work as cleaners or caregivers – it was beneath them. Women left the country and never returned, sending money every month to their husbands who lived on their wives’ earnings. Women took the role of providers and men became angry and still are. Men are more conformist than women are in Georgia. They are worried about “what society thinks”, their pride is injured because of economic hardships. This breeds aggression.”

Action is necessary for women, she believes, because the problems she describes are getting out of hand. Women are gaining a sense of power, she says, and traditions which are no longer useful are being rejected. Her personal role in all this? She hopes to continue to develop her (for now) all-female-led media. She wants to teach. And she would happily work on causes which further women’s rights.

“Georgians are clever people but we lack self-awareness and self-confidence. We don’t know our strengths, weaknesses, and capacities as a people. We see ourselves as a nation dependent on people from outside, as unfortunate, as poor. I think we have everything we need to be successful. Everyone can contribute in their own role if they see themselves with objectivity and honesty and turn their shortcomings into assets. As a nation, and as individuals, we can do everything.”

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"It is complicated to be a female in Georgia in general, being a journalist just adds to that."

"Through my work, I give a platform to others, so that their voices can be heard. This is my service to society."

"If you don't love your country, if you don't think about the well-being of your nation, you cannot be a good journalist."

"Investigative journalism has the power to change the life of society, the developmental pace of the country, and it can support democracy."

"We must stay in Georgia and fight for our rights and be good examples for others: have a job, a career even, raise your child here, fight for others' rights."

"I could never imagine my life in a different country. I love this country and I think it has a future. If all of us who can do something here leave, there won't be any future."

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"Women are getting more information about their rights online, finding support on social networks, and finding other women who share their burden. This can change women's future."

"Women are gaining a sense of power. And traditions which are no longer useful are being rejected."

"The Church – the most powerful and reliable institution for people in Georgia –is a masculine institution hostile to women's rights."

FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR CROATIA

Marijana Puljak, an IT engineer, entered politics in order to establish a school in her neighbourhood and now vows to create a liberal alternative in her country.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: A fighter, persistent, sensible

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS AND I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS BECAUSE I want you to join! there should be more of us there. They are not enough.

IS POLITICS A PLACE FOR WOMEN: Yes, definitely. There are no places in the world where women can't go.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: No, we don't have enough, there should be more.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: We joined politics to build a school in our neighbourhood and we built it... it took us nine years, but we made it. I can rest my case here. But that school effort made us the biggest opposition group in the Split city council, now we are a parliamentary party that is joining forces with all the other similar organizations to become one bigger center party that we want to grow and make a significant player in the world of Croatian politics.

MARIJANA PULJAK

Croatia
POLITICS & BUSINESS

During the last decade, the growth of the IT industry across the Balkans has spawned a small, but flourishing, social class of progressive, mostly liberal-oriented people who became successful from their skills (often technical) and entrepreneurial acumen rather than by exploiting political and family connections. For them, concepts such as meritocracy, the rule of law, and civic engagement are not empty phrases, but real values they believe in – and are ready to fight for. It was just a question of time before they began actively participating in politics.

In 2008, Marijana Puljak – an IT engineer and, at the time, head of the IT production support department in a large Croatian bank – initiated a plan, with several like-minded neighbours from her hometown of Split, that sought to pressure their local authorities to create a much-needed primary school in their part of town. This struggle, which lasted for years, led her to believe that simple civic pressure would not be enough to attain their goal – living in a modern, well-planned, orderly, and well-governed city. "You have smart phones, smart cars, and technology is all

around – so why not have a smart party to govern the cities and states that chooses smart solutions," she says.

Being smart is not easy

This started the civic initiative "For Smart People and a Smart City" that campaigned in the local elections in Split in 2013, sweeping up 10% of the vote and immediately gaining four seats in the local council. This sudden success

"I wake up every morning and I ask myself: "why am I doing this", because, really, what makes politics hard, is that people are fed up with it. But then I turn on the TV, see these corrupt criminals, and I say, "come on, we need to fight this."

came with its own demands. "People expected a lot from us, because we were supposed to always come up with solutions to problems," Puljak recollects. "We didn't only criticize; we also always sought to deliver solutions to how things could be done better."

The movement established itself as a leading opposition force in the local parliament – and ensured the establishment of the school that they had initially started fighting for, but Puljak was not done. "After that, we saw that we really needed an organization, a political party," she says. This is how the Pametno ("Be smart" in Croatian) party was established – a centrist, liberal party that sought to escape from the usual polemics about history that often plague the country's parliament and propose working solutions for the future. "We want to promote common sense," Puljak states.

Facing the real problems

For her, the dominant left-right, liberal-conservative paradigm that dominates Croatian politics distracts people from the real problems the country faces. "Ten percent of the population has left Croatia during the past three decades. I don't believe that was only because of lower paycheques, but because they are sick of fighting. Sick of the fact that, if you want to have a job, you need to be part of the ruling party, part of the corruption and clientelism. That is the situation, and people who really want to use corruption to stay in power are inventing problems that people get caught up in," the politician says. She points out one of these diversions – the constant rumbling about topics in the history of this Adriatic country that are still disputed. "There are still discussions in Croatia about who won the Second World War, but we don't want any more of that, we know who won. Our country's constitution is established on the grounds of Anti-fascism – so let's not talk about the war anymore," she says, accusing politicians

from the big parties of stirring up ideologically loaded topics to cause emotional reactions, while "in the back they steal our money."

Instead of sowing divisions, Puljak's "Pametno" – which won a seat in 2020's parliamentary elections – is trying to form stronger coalitions. In July 2020, the party joined a coalition with two other liberal parties to make it into the National Assembly and has now made a move to integrate two of them in a single entity. "During that campaign, we started to think that it doesn't make sense to have so many liberal parties promoting the same ideas, so we decided to join forces. After working together in parliament, we started to prepare a merger with Stranka s imenom i prezimenom, STRIP (Party with Name and Surname) ... and last Sunday we founded a third party to be successor of those two – we changed the name of "Pametno" to "Center" and the people from STRIP joined it. This is a first in Croatian history – usually parties are splitting, but no, now for the first time we joined two entities into one," Puljak explains.

What Puljak's faction stands for

As the name suggests, the new party will continue on its liberal course. "We are pro-women's rights, for the right to choose, the right to have an abortion, the rights of minorities and gay people, and for those other liberal democratic rights

"Despite having been in two fields that are often dominated by men – IT and politics – I have never felt pressured because of my gender. While I do not dismiss the negative experiences of many other women, I do believe that every fight for justice is individual."

that are already enshrined in our constitution – so they are not up for discussion anymore. We are not going back on any of them – there is no discussion about it, any person should have the right to choose the way they want to live their life. So that's why we said our ideology is settled and now we need to think about the future," Puljak says firmly.

The attacks her party receives from the left are about it being neo-liberal ("oh, they want to destroy workers' rights and trade unions, they are pro-capitalist," Puljak recites) and, from the right, that they are leftist because of their support for same-sex partners being able to become guardians of orphaned children. This does not worry Puljak, as she is clear about why she supports certain policies. On the same-sex guardianship, she says: "It is a common civil right – they call us a centre-left party, but for us it is common sense." And on her support for lower taxes, she is clear that "what we want is for Croatia to be a wealthier state and for Croatians to be a wealthier people. When entrepreneurs and owners of companies are able to create more jobs, we will have more satisfied workers."

The current priorities of Puljak and her party focus on promoting the rule of law in the country. "We are really concerned with fighting corruption, and, with our partner Dalija Oreskovic (the ex-leader of STRIP, who used to head the conflict of interests committee of the country), we work to establish anti- corruption laws and policies," she says. The other two core topics for her are making life easier for businesses to operate by decreasing the administrative burden on them and education. "We are focused on education, because education is also the cornerstone of any modern society, because if you don't have an educated society, you can't progress."

A hard transition to politics

For Puljak, who is a relative newcomer to the political world after two decades in the private sector, it is sometimes hard to swallow this change in career paths. "I wake up every morning and I ask myself: "why am I doing this", because, really, what makes politics hard, is that people are fed up with it. They think nothing can be changed," she says. To her, the public perception in Croatia is that all politicians are the same and voting won't change anything – this is why about half of them abstain from going to the polls. "This is why sometimes I think I'm crazy, I could be in business now, do what I like, and work with colleagues on IT solutions. But then I turn on the TV, see these corrupt criminals, and I say, "come on, we need to fight this."

Despite having been in two fields that are often dominated by men – IT and politics – she confides that she has never felt pressured because of her gender. "When I started to work in IT, I never had any problems being a woman, of feeling less valued, or of male colleagues getting promotions faster," Puljak says. While she does not dismiss the negative experiences of many other women, she says that every fight for justice is individual. "I always say to my two daughters... that if they encounter disrespect, they should stand up for themselves, that nobody will defend them. You will have to fight by yourself." To Puljak, the bigger problem of women feeling underappreciated in their jobs comes from the fatalistic legacy of State Socialism that your first job is also your last. "I don't think it's something good most of the time, especially if you are not happy and you are told to stay safe, to not take risks. Safety is somehow overrated in the ex-socialist countries," she says, asserting that this mindset needs to change.

Women's issues in Croatia

She singles out domestic violence as the number one issue Croatian women need to fight today. "There were high-profile cases, even some politicians were reported to have abused their wives, but sometimes even women don't report it, because they think that it's the way it is supposed to be. There are conservative beliefs in this country that say that women should stay at home and obey their husbands," she laments, saying that many people in the predominantly Catholic country do not see domestic violence as a problem. Abortion is the other big topic that stirs public emotions. "There are these conservative organizations and parties always trying to raise the abortion issue. So far, our laws and constitution have been clear about it, but they try to raise this issue again and again."

Puljak admits that there are not enough women in politics in Croatia. "It's an issue and we have to work on it, whether by quotas or through education. Women should get involved in all aspects and topics that concern good governance and express their views on topics concerning women, like domestic violence. I would promote more women in politics not only to fight for women's rights, but to discuss all the topics that a modern government and society face," she concludes. Personally, as a liberal she is not really keen on quotas and would prefer taking the educational path, getting girls engaged with social issues from a very young age ("tell them what politics is, tell them how to organize themselves, how to present the standpoints they stand for, how to change things and educate them from the ground level"). "I believe that you need to promote people to parliament who are good, who have experience, who want to do that job, and not just based on their gender," she concludes.

What is coming next for Puljak's Center party is an actual return to its roots of localism. In 2021, the country will have local elections and the party will focus on expanding in as many local institutions as possible. "We will first focus on the four biggest metropolitan areas – Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek, Split – and wherever else we can manage to accumulate enough momentum and human power. We will create teams to run for the elections and focus on local issues. In the end, people are interested in what is on their street, you know, is it clean, do they have jobs in their cities, the quality of life," the politician concludes.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

“I wake up every morning and I ask myself: “why am I doing this”, because, really, what makes politics hard, is that people are fed up with it. But then I turn on the TV, see these corrupt criminals, and I say, "come on, we need to fight this."

“We are pro-women's rights, for the right to choose, the right to have an abortion, the rights of minorities and gay people and for those other liberal democratic rights that are already enshrined in our constitution – so they are not up for discussion anymore.”

“In Croatia, when we say we are liberal, people think of taxes – oh, they are neo-liberal, they want to destroy the workers' rights and trade unions, and they are pro-capitalists. But we are fighting that view and what we want is for Croatia to be a wealthier state and [for Croatians to be a] wealthier people.”

“Ten percent of people left Croatia during the past three decades. I don't believe it is only because of the lower paycheques, but because they are sick of fighting.”

“We really started in my neighbourhood in 2008 to fight for the establishments of a school. We started at the local level, grew to a parliamentary party, and now from that national level we want to spread to other cities.”

“Nobody joined the party because they wanted to become a director of a government company. We wanted to change the clientelism that is in play, to show people that politics is really about working for the community, for making a better world for everybody.”

"Despite having been in two fields that are often dominated by men – IT and politics – I have never felt pressured because of my gender. While I do not dismiss the negative experiences of many other women, I do believe that every fight for justice is individual."

FROM PUBLIC POLICY TO POLITICS IN CROATIA: AN IMPOSSIBLE MISSION?

Diana Topcic-Rosenberg tells her story of adapting to the political and social realities of her home country after a 10-year career abroad.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Passionate and committed to make things better.

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS AND I do not accept the glass ceiling!

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS BECAUSE we do not want men ever again to make decisions for us!

IS POLITICS A PLACE FOR WOMEN: All spheres of life are places for women if we make them our own. The same applies to politics but we still have a long way to go to make it ours.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: Not enough and they are still at the margins of power and decision making.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: I strive to create change and remove obstacles for underprivileged or vulnerable groups to enjoy equality or to reach their potential. I did it during the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in South Sudan, after the earthquake in El Salvador, in Croatia, Lebanon and Georgia, in all my roles: as a professional, as an NGO activist and as a senior official in the government.

DIANA TOPCIC-ROSENBERG

Croatia
POLITICS & DEVELOPMENT

What do you do if you decide to come back home after a decade of circumventing the globe, designing and delivering public policies, only to find a society that is much more conservative and less inclined to follow meritocratic principles than the one that you left? If you are a public policy expert and a relentless civic activist like Diana Topcic-Rosenberg, you join a newly formed liberal party and start a quest to normalise Croatian politics.

This is, in brief, the story of Topcic-Rosenberg's entrance into politics that started four years ago, when she joined the Civic Liberal Alliance of Croatia, known better by its abbreviation, GLAS. She came back to her Adriatic homeland after earning a Public Administration Master's degree from Harvard University and a twenty-year long career in the field of international development, with organizations such as the International Rescue Committee

and Mercy Corps. But she was not satisfied with what she encountered. She became a Vice President of GLAS from its inception with the intention of creating a new dimension in female politics.

"We have to fight against the rise of a type of conservatism that promotes women primarily as wives and mothers. This will be one of the challenges in how some countries address the issue of an aging population and demographic challenges."

Disenchantment with female representation

"I remember looking at the different parties and their programmes when I returned to Croatia, as I was getting more interested and involved with what was happening in the country. I realized there are women's associations in the parties and when I got curious about what they were doing, I realized they were baking cakes for political events and were engaged in charity. This was commendable but I felt it needed to be much more," says Topcic-Rosenberg. She adds that this was one of the reasons she became passionate about changing how women are perceived in Croatian society and what their role could really be.

The country she found was a much different place from the one she left at the end of the ex-Yugoslav wars of the 90s. "Croatia was part of the former Yugoslavia which was a socialist country. As a young woman growing up there, I didn't perceive much of a gender gap in terms of opportunity," she recalls. "But since the war, Croatia has been undergoing a resurgence of traditionalism. As a country, we have been becoming much more conservative, more religious and less progressive."

To her, the reason for this turn to conservatism derives from the war, when a mass defence of the country was mobilized to a large degree by the Catholic Church. "To redefine us as Croatians, different from the other ex-Yugoslavs, the emphasis was put on defining our identity as Catholics. And the Catholic Church in Croatia is not one of the most progressive among Catholic churches," she says.

The trouble of making public policy with traditional values in mind

The implications of this conservative turn are far-reaching, especially for women. "I think that over a period of time, women were pushed to the margins of public and political life and there has been an attempt to redefine our role as solely mothers, as family caretakers," she says. The public policies were being designed to further confine women to the home in order to raise children instead of being a progressive part of the workforce. Topcic-Rosenberg gives an example of a policy introduced by the former capital city of Zagreb's municipal authorities. Millions were spent to pay salaries to parents with more than three children to stay at home and raise them. "Over 90% of the beneficiaries of this policy are women, which means that they stay at home to take care of their children until the youngest one turns 14. The result of this is that they will never enter the labour market, because after all these years they will have no skills to offer. The policy contributed not only to female poverty, but also to creating a model of a "stay-at-home mum," Topcic-Rosenberg claims.

This does not mean that she is against parental leave as a whole – on the contrary. "I proposed a draft law that had the opposite goal – making paternal leave equally mandatory for both parents. It was interesting that the main opponents of this proposition were women, not men," she exclaims. "There is this very strong message that has been promoted for years about how the connection that a child forms with its mother in the first three years of its life is crucial. But there is no public debate about the research that shows how, if a father spends an equal amount of time with the child as the mother does, the way that his perception of his role in the family changes for the better. The same applies to the quality of his relationship with the child" she adds.

The way that policies are designed tells a lot about the prevailing mindset in the country – and may be interpreted as a threat to women's rights in the future, Topcic-Rosenberg

"It is very important to talk to communities and find out what it is that they really need, what they want, and what their priorities are. The vital part for a politician is to understand how we can address those issues – and not focus only on what we think is the best for the country."

says. “One of the important issues of Europe is its ageing population. Some countries are trying to solve this problem using a patriarchal approach of promoting an image of women as bearers of the nation’s future and applying a subtle sense of guilt if they do not spend time at home to raise children. This is not a solution either to demographic problems or gender equality, but a road to discrimination and poverty. There are other solutions, focused on diversity, openness, and inclusion,” she says.

An antidote to conservatism

In a way, Topcic-Rosenberg sees her role in the world of politics to be one of the antidotes to these developments. “This is where politics in general should be going – creating space for women to be equal to men in all aspects of society.

To her, the main argument in favour of better female representation in politics is much less about different “leadership styles” or qualities that women-politicians bring

“When I came back to Croatia, there were a few things that struck me. One of them was how insulated we are as a country, how preoccupied we are with the past, and just focused on neighbouring countries and ourselves, as if we are not part of the world. We also tend to take things for granted, are too focused on our rights and entitlements and not on what we can contribute to society as a whole.”

and more about bringing up topics that could hardly be put on the table by men. “I think there are different examples of female leadership, for instance, Margaret Thatcher or Angela Merkel cannot be classified as models of a female leadership approach that is different from the male one. There is a perception that women are more participatory, that they are oriented towards cooperation, that they listen more... I think a lot of this is actually a stereotype,” she says. “What is very important is that [women] can put on the agenda issues that specifically address the needs of women the way men would not.”

Alienating men through juxtaposing maleness and femaleness will not help advance the cause of gender equality, Topcic-Rosenberg says: “If we, as female leaders, put issues on the table in a way that is not antagonistic toward men, we have a chance to succeed. Because it is not only about promoting women's issues, but also about taking men along. Moving society as a whole rather than creating more divisions is an important approach when designing policies, so that they are not perceived as an attack by The Other Side.”

She applies the same logic to the debate about quotas. “It is good to have a quota system because it does force parties to include an equal number of men and women and give them a chance to fight for a political position. However, just by itself, it is window dressing,” she says. In order for genuinely equal political representation to take place, Topcic-Rosenberg thinks that parties need to go an extra mile by integrating female inclusive issues at every level. “They have to create female-specific campaigns, women have to have equal influence over the campaign budget, they have to have influence over the party’s policies and political programmes, equal opportunities to speak to the public and not simply be decorations standing behind men,” she adds.

Toxic political culture

Unfortunately, very often women-politicians themselves are prepared to take the back seat and follow party lines instead of raising their voice on socially important issues. Topcic-Rosenberg gives an example from her own experience of proposing legal amendments related to protection of child privacy. “I called women from various political backgrounds to support the amendment. The law was about children, it had nothing to do with one being a liberal, or a conservative, or a socialist, it had to do with the particular rights of a child. But the women from the ruling party were against it simply because it was proposed by the opposition,” she says.

To her, this brings up a momentous topic – the problematic political culture of Eastern Europe as a whole. Sexism is only one of its expressions. “I think there is space for rethinking the role of women in politics. We need to consider what we

“There is the perception that women (as leaders) are more participatory, more cooperative, and that they listen more... I think a lot of this is actually a stereotype. It is very important that [women] can put on the agenda issues that specifically address other women in a way a man would not.”

want to achieve when we enter politics. Are we prepared to take tough challenges and make changes to a society or do we care only to make politics a career, to remain party soldiers, and bake cakes?," she says. She advises political parties to choose strong female candidates who have something to say, rather than simply follow party lines and comply with the quotas.

Topcic-Rosenberg's own primary cause since she returned to Croatia has been children's rights, in particular – adoption. She founded ADOPTA, the Organization for the Support of Adoption, that grew into a think-tank about adoption with a strong professional and advocacy influence, even outside the country. She created the organization after over 20 years of experience of project management in the humanitarian and public policy sector that brought her to disaster-stricken countries, from the former Yugoslavia to Central America and Africa. "Working in some of these countries has taught me humility, I realized how privileged my upbringing and life had been. It really filled me with awe of the people I met, who have done amazing things despite the horrors that they have lived through," she says.

The joys and troubles of running for office

In contrast to these humbling experiences, her life back in Croatia made Topcic-Rosenberg indignant about the prevailing attitudes of her compatriots regarding her country's place in the world. "When I came back to Croatia, there were a few things that struck me. One of them was how insulated we are as a country and how preoccupied we are with the past. I realized how much we take things for granted and how focused we are on our rights and entitlements rather than what we can contribute to society. Having worked abroad, where meritocracy gives competent people opportunities, authority, salary, and advancement in their career, I was shocked by how irrelevant the concept of meritocracy is in Croatia." In fact, despite her professional track record, her political career actually diminished her job opportunities at home. "It does not affect my professional life, because I do a lot of international work, but this is one of the obstacles for women who desire to get engaged with politics outside the ruling parties. Work opportunities and professional advancement is linked to party membership," she says.

Despite all that, she does not seem to regret her decision to step out from the public policy sphere with one foot and step into the political realm – on the contrary, she says she greatly enjoyed her first campaign, running for Member of the European Parliament in 2019, talking to people – and debating with her political opponents. "I love campaigning – one of these things that I didn't think I'd enjoy. There is this shyness in me, and I used to find it hard to go out and perform before unknown groups of people. Surprisingly, it proved to be a wonderful and a very learning experience," she says.

The only part she did not enjoy were the increased personal insults that she had to endure, including misogynist comments on social media and racist attacks because of the Jewish surname she took from her husband. "They don't attack your policies, it is actually irrelevant what they attack, as long as they can attack you in some way. This is a challenge for women much more than it is for men, to leave the privacy of anonymity and to enter the public sphere, where one is very open to various kinds of criticism and attacks that don't necessarily have to do with the truth." While Topcic-Rosenberg says she has learned how to cope with these problems, she believes it explains the reluctance of many women to enter politics.

"A way to fight (stereotypes and discrimination) is to have more women in public life who pave the way for other women to follow them. Achieving change is not a battle for one woman or one term, it is a vision to be shared and supported by many voices."

But she has a recipe to fight these attitudes and it is simple – more women in politics and greater support among them. "We need more women in public life who pave the way for other women to follow them. When we, as women, have (political) opportunity, we need to achieve visible change, so that other women don't get discouraged. When addressing discrimination, we should be more open about the challenges we face and, as women in politics and public life, be more supportive of other women who are coming along. Achieving change is not a battle for one woman or one term, it is a vision to be shared and supported by many voices," Topcic-Rosenberg concludes.

Diana Topcic-Rosenberg has been campaigning for social and political change in various roles. She was a high ranking official in the Government of Croatia in charge of the Department for Strategy and Social Policy at the Ministry for Social Policy and Youth, a civil activist for the rights of children in social welfare system and a member of policy making committees. She served as a Vice President of GLAS (07/2017-05/2020), a liberal party of Croatia. Currently, she is a member of ALDE Alliance of Her Advisory Committee and a social policy and public administration consultant.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"We have to fight against the rise of a type of conservatism that promotes women primarily as wives and mothers. This will be one of the challenges in how some countries address the issue of an aging population and demographic challenges."

"Some public policies, even in recent years, have directly tried to keep women at home to raise children, to prevent them from having control over their bodies, and to exclude them from equal participation in the workforce. This is one of the reasons that made me enter politics – I didn't want to allow the silencing of women who think differently."

"It is very important to talk to communities and find out what it is that they really need, what they want, and what their priorities are. The vital part for a politician is to understand how we can address those issues – and not focus only on what we think is the best for the country."

"When I came back to Croatia, there were a few things that struck me. One of them was how insulated we are as a country, how preoccupied we are with the past, and just focused on neighbouring countries and ourselves, as if we are not part of the world. We also tend to take things for granted, are too focused on our rights and entitlements and not on what we can contribute to society as a whole."

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REMAKING A FRACTURED SOCIETY

Architect and politician Nasiha Pozder talks about her goal to mend the fragmented political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS AND I don't give up.

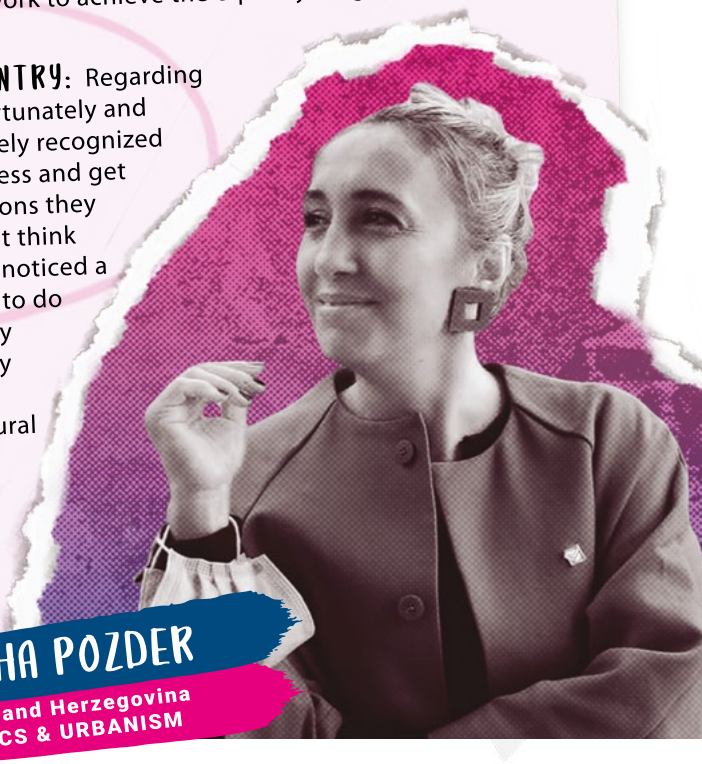
DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Persistent, creative, caring

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS BECAUSE together we can do better.

IS POLITICS A PLACE FOR WOMEN: I believe every place can and should be a place for everyone, so let's make politics that place too. I'm aware we still have a lot of work to achieve the equality I urge for. I look forward to working on it.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: Regarding politics, I would say I'm still surrounded by male colleagues.Unfortunately and completely unfairly, woman in architecture and urbanism are barely recognized worldwide and not just today. They were and still are often paid less and get less opportunity to be promoted. This is probably one of the reasons they rarely succeed in this clearly masculine scene, even though I don't think there are fewer of us than male colleagues. In recent years I have noticed a trend that more and more young female colleagues are deciding to do their own independent projects, starting their own practices, they educate themselves more and don't wait for opportunity but they create it for themselves. This trend makes us more visible and recognized so I would say there is a new raising female architectural and urbanism scene in my country.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: For almost two decades, I have educated and encouraged young people to protect the common good. I transfer this mantra to both my projects and into politics by translating it into laws and decisions.



NASIHA POZDER
Bosnia and Herzegovina
POLITICS & URBANISM

How do you survive in the world of politics as a trained architect? What do you do as a woman if male parliamentarians comment on your looks more than on your speeches and the bills you propose? Is it possible to change the narrative in a fractured political system still preoccupied with the traumas of war and the past glories of 70 years ago? Nasiha Pozder, member of the Federal parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Nasa Stranka (meaning “Our party” in Bosnian and Serbo-Croatian), can say a lot about each of these questions.

Holding a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism and having a successful academic career were not enough for Pozder, who realized that without changing her country fundamentally, both she and her daughter would not have places in it in the future. So, in 2011 she accepted an invitation to join a movement that started in 2008 as an attempt by foreign-educated, liberal, and left-leaning Bosnians to take down the status quo that they considered corrupt. By that time, she was a known name in the civic movement circles of her native Sarajevo for her criticism of controversial urban development ideas and her involvement with sustainability initiatives.

An urbanist in the world of politics

"They wanted someone with my profile, because I was pretty active in the urban scene of Sarajevo, talking about corruption in urban life, trying to raise my voice on urban issues and to say that it's not just investors who are to blame, but also politicians and urban planners," she shares. The timing of this invitation could not have been worse though – at the time, Pozder was completing her doctorate, raising a child, and taking care of her sick father. "It was a really terrible time for me, but on the other hand it was a question of whether I should stay here or go – at the time I was invited to work at the Technical University of Delft in Holland. But I decided to join Nasa Stranka in 2011 and try to change something here."

"Everything happened to me in the matter of four years – from a totally anonymous person in the political scene, just known in the civic movements, I became a politician."

From then onwards, it was a rollercoaster ride for the architect. First, it all started with a backbencher position, organizing the local party structure in Sarajevo. After she brought the party success in the municipal elections, Pozder got drafted onto the regional board of the party, and in a year, she became the vice-president of the branch. It all seemed like a surprise to Pozder herself. "I was like "how did this happen, what am I doing here? I am not a politician; I don't want to be a politician." But I stayed, and for two years I worked on the internal politics of the party, making the political platform for the 2014 general elections. I was also a candidate, but not for an electable position, because I still wasn't sure if I wanted to be that kind of professional politician. I was satisfied being the kind of person who writes about what they know best."

Changing dominant paradigms

Yet, after she climbed even further up the party ladder – and while what was still predominantly a civic movement was gradually turning into a "real" party - the cornerstone 2018 general election took place and Nasiha Pozder became one of the 6-person strong representation of Nasa Stranka in the House of Representatives of the federation. Nasa Stranka set a new precedent when, in a country where women were less than 20% of the representatives, their group was dominated by women 5 to 1. Overall, the

percentage of female candidates elected was above 60%. And that is not all that puts them apart from the other parties. "We are all pretty young, we are also mixed in terms of nationality – Serbs, Bosniaks, others... and that was not the idea – it just happened through our work and the ideology that we represent."

In a country still divided by the scars of the 1990s war and ethnic cleansing, that is a big deal. But it is also the least one could expect from a movement launched by award-winning director Danis Tanovic, who captivated audiences at home and abroad with his 2001 anti-war epic "No Man's Land." To Pozder herself, it was extremely attractive that intellectuals and members of the cultural sphere decided to join and take responsibility for the future of the country into their own hands – a very rare move for people who prefer to criticize. "Intellectuals don't want to join parties on the operational level, they want to support it, or to write you on Facebook and tell you are doing everything wrong and ask you how you can even dare think you can negotiate with the old socialists... But when you invite them to join, they usually say they don't have time, or they don't want to get their hands dirty."

The haunting spirit of inefficiency

Once she made it into high-level politics, however, Nasiha Pozder saw a lot not to envy her for. "I just had a coffee with my colleagues from the faculty and they were saying how discouraged they are to live here and see all the problems we have. And I said – yes, it is even more discouraging when you are inside parliament and there is not much you can

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"The campaigns of other parties always revolve around 1945, how we won... We don't talk about that question. We cherish the idea of anti-fascism, but we are talking about looking to the future and closing the gaps that divide our society, seeking how to change the constitution so that all people have the right to be elected."

actually change, but there is no way to quit," she says. What motivates her to keep going – at least until the next elections – is the possibility of Nasa Stranka growing and serving as an example for the rest of the country about how synergy on the local, cantonal, and federal levels can actually make things work.

At the same time, she does not hide her worries about the future direction of the party as it grows. "We are no longer sure that most of our members are devoted to our ideas. Maybe they are approaching us because they see us as a spark of hope, and are not even thinking about our agenda, about our political and ideological background, which is really hard for us to handle. Because we really want to stay a progressive, liberal, green party," she says. This brings her to the personal ideological conundrum she faces being part of a liberal party (and a member of ALDE for five years now) and having green convictions. Yet, she understands that it is counterproductive to split hairs – and parties – in the Balkans in order to achieve ideological purity. "I stick to our party's green wing, but I find myself aligned with some ALDE parties like D66 or the Centre party from Sweden that are liberal, but are also green enough," she says.

Tired of history, eager for the future

For Pozder, at this point getting too particular about one's own political beliefs is secondary to her greater mission in politics – making sensible arguments that focus on the problems which are really important for the country. "We here don't have a party that is similar to ours – we have socialists, who are actually a product of the ex-communist party of Yugoslavia, and we have the nationalists as a right-wing party, which is not even right-wing in the general sense. They can be very centrist, but often invoke emotion and bring up the war and you know how that goes."

She says she is tired of the political debate in the country revolving only around conflict – either the recent one or the Second World War – instead of resolving big issues, like the one about ethnic representation. "We cherish the idea of anti-fascism, but we are talking about looking to the future and closing the gaps that divide our society, how to change the constitution so that all people have the right to be elected for example, but more important, to be equal. For example, our President is an ethnic Serb – he can't be elected president of the country because he is a Serb from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and not the Republika Srpska." Pozder says that her party already had tried pushing through a constitutional amendment that would change this discriminatory law in the Federal Parliament and will continue doing so in the future if they are in position of power. Actually, they have already passed a similar amendment that allowed people who do not identify with any of the large ethnic groups in Sarajevo to become president of the canton.

Another important issue that Nasa Stranka wants to push forward is cutting down the unnecessary and overlapping parts of the administration of the country, which consume its already scarce public resources. "Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a really good "factory" where you can find a job. Every fourth resident works in the administration. It is a large system where you can make money without working a lot – or at all. Our main goal is to try to dismantle this huge apparatus that we have."

This has proven a controversial idea because of the relative success of the Dayton Agreement – the 1995 deal that sealed the peace in the war-torn country. It has practically been the basic law that ensured a balance of representation and power of the warring ethnic fractions in the Federation. To Pozder, however, it is time that the agreement is revised. "Everything has changed in these 25 years in the country except the constitution."

To her, the current way the system operates produces huge and useless inefficiencies, feeding a corrupt and largely ineffective bureaucratic class. "In Dayton we agreed that we have two state entities, in one of them ten cantons, and each canton has their own different ministries, at least ten of them. For example, one of the cantons has only 23,000 citizens, but it has 10 ministries, an assembly with 30 members, and a Prime Minister – it is a huge operation. And this canton practically overlaps with a city, which has nearly the same inhabitants, but they have their own administration – mayor, councillors... This is what we want to change," she says. Her dream is to have a "normal" Bosnia and Herzegovina divided into regions for geographic and economic reasons instead of along ethno-nationalist lines.

The additional complication of being a woman

On top of all that, Pozder also must endure what it is like being a woman in politics in the Balkans. Like all of the Female Forward ambassadors, she is thick-skinned and confident enough to snub most of the sexist and misogynist remarks that come her way. Yet she can

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well understand that what women have to endure by entering public life may be the primary reason for their underrepresentation. “I was fighting for this important piece of land in the city of Sarajevo back when I was an activist, and I was called “toothy” by my opponents. It was not important what I was talking about, it was about mocking how I look,” she shares.

In addition, during her first days in Parliament some of her male colleagues from other parties commented more about what she wore rather than what she said from the tribune. “But this lasted only during the beginning – very quickly we were listened to.” Another expression of casual sexism she remembers is how the speaker of parliament turned to male MPs and addressed them as “Mr” and their surname, but to Pozder and her female colleagues by their first names – by saying “Ms Nasiha.” “Excuse me, I am not Nasiha for you, I am also your colleague, Member of Parliament Pozder,” she told him.

According to Pozder, these attitudes come from the traditional, patriarchal culture that dominates Bosnian society. “I was lucky that my father wasn't that kind of person and he supported me even during the war, because he knew what I was working towards. That is actually why I started to raise my voice for the position of women in society, because I understood that my luck is not something that everyone has. My position in the academy and in politics is something that gives me not only opportunity, but also an obligation to repeat that message – that women in society have to raise their voice.”

She is, however, well aware of how daunting this task is. On the one hand, there is the patriarchal culture that dominates most parties in the country and prevents the implementation of the equal representation quota system which is in place. On the other, there is the backlash from conservative female representatives from the traditional parties that makes Pozder doubt the notion that there is anything specifically feminine about female leadership. “I think that women can be more sensitive, often more reasonable, looking for compromise... but it is also not something that we can generalize – I have a hard time talking to female colleagues from the right-wing parties, but that is their position in the party talking. When they get a task from the party, you don't hear their female voice, but hear the party voice.”

What keeps Nasiha Pozder going, despite all inefficiencies and deficiencies of the political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the hope that her work would contribute to a better future for all, including her own daughter. “I have my daughter and my mother with me, we decided to stay here, I really don't want to lose my time not being with them if I am staying in Parliament and not seeing results. We are showing in my canton that there is reason for optimism, and to hold on a bit longer.”

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“For almost past two decades,I have educated and encouraged young people to protect the common good. I transfer this mantra to both my projects and into politics by translating it into laws and decisions. "

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"There are six of us out of 98 in Federal Parliament, five female and one male, which is very important for us, as we are trying to push our voices as women there."

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"Politics is a really good "factory" where you can find a job. Every fourth resident of Bosnia and Herzegovina works in the public sector and in administration... Our main goal is to try to dismantle this huge apparatus that we have in the country."

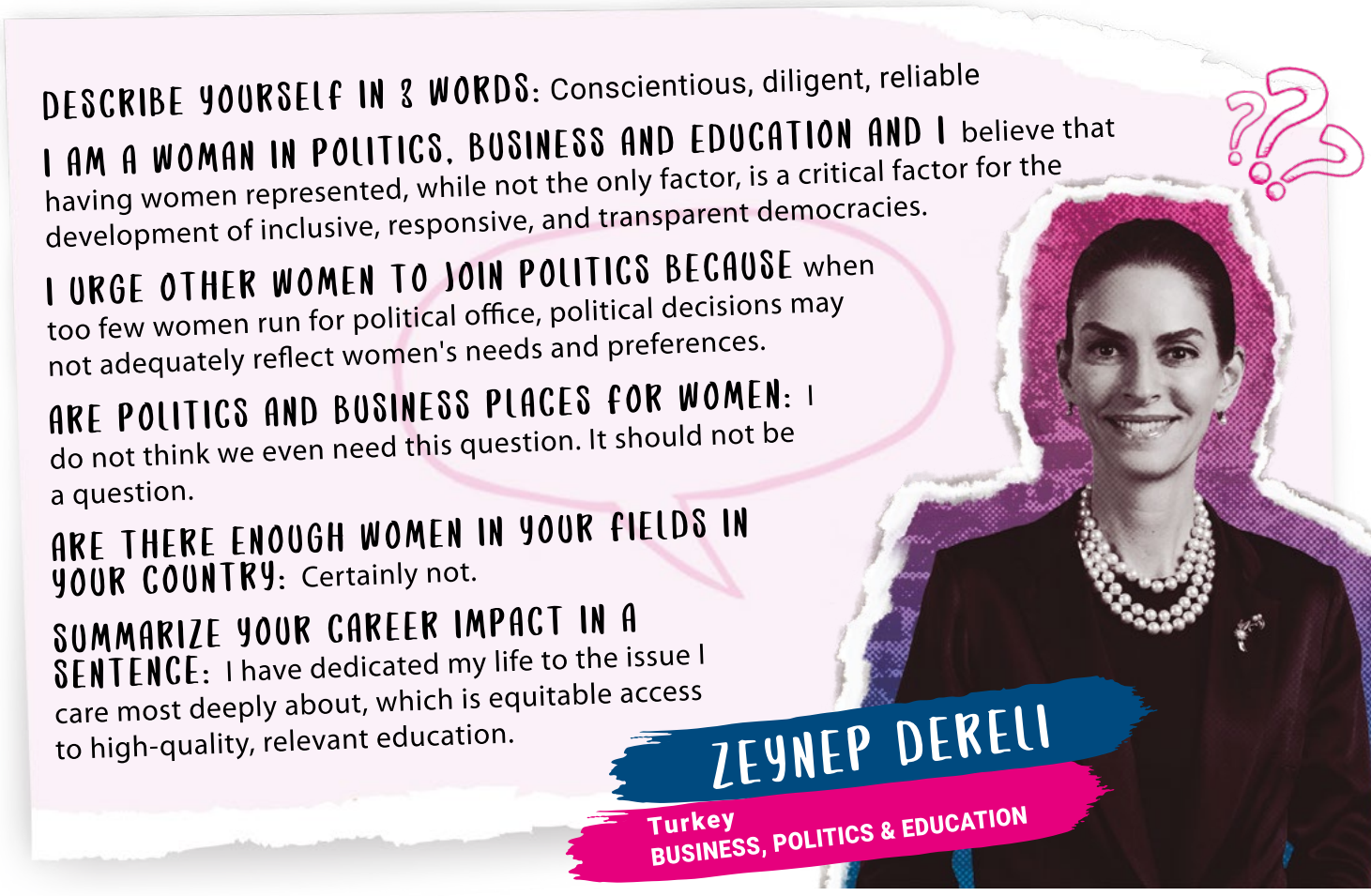
"In the beginning of our parliamentary involvement, very often our male colleagues from other parties commented and laughed at how we dressed. But this lasted only during the beginning – very quickly we became listened to."

" I had luck that my father supported me, even during the war, because he knew what I was working towards. That is actually why I started to raise my voice for the position of women in society, because I understood that my luck is not something that everyone has."

BRINGING EDUCATION TO THE TABLE

The up-and-coming Turkish politician Zeynep Dereli believes more female representation will change the political agenda for the better.

Author: Martin Dimitrov



"The form of leadership in Turkey is going to change and it is going to change a lot sooner than people think. Because we need it to change, we need the country to adapt, and adapt quickly," says Zeynep Dereli, vice-president of the Democracy and Progress party (DEVA) and founder of Turkey's first tech K-12 school, TINK. Who will be the main catalysers of this change? Women, she claims. Because "women are adaptable, we have this intrinsic ability." In the digital age, the politician and education leader adds, this quality of women to adapt had made them more competitive, able to change and re-skill.

There are many reasons to trust the judgement of this aspiring politician, education leader, businessperson with two decades of experience in several industries, and mother of two. But if need to single one out, it would be her firm belief in the great future of her country and its women. "The first word that comes to my mind when you ask me how I feel about being back in my country is hopeful. Why? Because I feel, there is an increasing demand for female representation in politics in Turkey as well as for equity in all aspects of life."

A legacy of female empowerment waiting to come back

According to Dereli, despite the bad publicity that Turkey

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gets these days on gender rights topics, there are firm historic grounds to believe the country can do much better. "When the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, it enacted important legal reforms to ensure equality between women and men in political and civil rights. During the 1980s, a strong women's movement raised public awareness of violations of women's rights, especially violence against women," she says, reminding us that the country has already had a female Prime Minister – Tansu Ciller – in the 1990s.

The country has worked especially hard to bridge the gender gap in the current field Dereli focuses on, education, in the past decade. Yet, there is much more that could be done in terms of parity. "While significant progress has been made on increasing the overall number of girls and boys attending primary school, girls are still not starting or finishing primary school at the same rate as boys." Additionally, she singles out violence against women and so-called "honour" killings as deeply rooted, prevalent issues in the country.

To Dereli, these problems stem from the absence of equal representation of women in her country's politics. After Turkey's June 2018 national elections, only 17.32 percent of deputies in the Turkish Grand National Assembly were women – well below the global average of 25 percent. Women are even more under-represented in local politics – in the 2019 local elections, women made up 2.95 percent of mayors, 11 percent of municipal council members and 2.16 percent of muhktars (village heads), she points out.

"Research indicates that whether a legislator is male or female has a distinct impact on their policy priorities, making it critical that women be present in politics to represent the concerns of women and

other marginalized voters and help improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance," Dereli says. She adds that there is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policymaking that emphasizes the quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Her conclusion: "Women's political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen's lives, and helps democracy deliver."

Yet, Dereli is weary of the idea that all women ought to be bundled together. "They are not a homogeneous group, even within one country, say, mine." According to her, different groups of women may ask for different things and there is no problem with that. "That's why you need better representation not only of women, but of different groups of women, so that they get to raise their various issues. Women living in urban and rural environment have different desires; women with children have different priorities from those without. Women who want to work have one set of priorities – those who do not want to work have others. Younger women are much more similar in their needs to younger men than to older women. I think it is more about equal representation of people across the board."

"I don't want to be enclosed in one group; I want to be able to address the different needs of society, in different locations across different age groups. I think that is the correct way in a properly functioning democracy," the politician concludes.

Misogyny did not start at home

Even before moving back to Turkey and joining politics, Dereli has faced her fair share of sexism. It is a public secret that unequal treatment is rampant in the fields where she launched her career: finance, investment banking and trade. "I faced it, psychologically and, sometimes, emotionally. It did not start in Turkey, it started in the UK. It was something that, back in the day, was assumed natural – people believed that men would behave like this. Even the use of profane language at work can be a deterrent to women, because we do not want to listen to that sort of language. That can be psychologically abusive. Some men would claim that I was going up the career ladder because I was an attractive woman."

What helped her grow out of her frustration with the casual misogyny she faced during the first decade of her career was a story shared by one of her most significant role models and mentors, the late Lady Barbara Judge, an American-British lawyer who championed female advancement in male-dominated industries and regulatory agencies on both sides of the pond. "She talked about how when she started her career, she believed that she had to act like a man. She wanted to dress like a man and show the rest of the men in her organization that she was more of a man than they were. That creates a major glass ceiling for yourself, you are never going to be manly as a man so you lose doing it. One day, her boss asked her why was she so ashamed of her femininity, of the feminine values that

she brought – empathy, teamwork, emotional intelligence, adaptability... all of the things that men find hard to bring to the table. She said that it was from that moment on that she started to behave like a woman, started to dress like a woman, and she was not afraid of her emotions anymore," Dereli says.

Sometimes we create our own glass ceilings

That story helped her realize she was creating her own glass ceiling by trying to compete with men. "If you see it as a zero-sum game, you lose." In retrospect, it was this change of attitude that allowed her to embrace her emotions as an asset that complimented her analytical skills rather than as a liability, which boosted her career significantly. "It has been a beautiful journey since then. The reason I am telling you this is because a lot of women face these same issues and I've been telling a lot of girls that they should not be ashamed by their feminine qualities, they should use and embrace them. The same goes for men – they should be proud of their masculine qualities. We need to embrace who we are."

Zeynep Dereli is positive about the future of female empowerment not only in Turkey; for her, the best is yet to come for women all over the world. "The new situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that countries with female leadership have been much better at addressing this challenge. I am afraid this is not going to be the last big challenge we face and we are going to need leadership that will be able to address challenges with not only emotional empathy, but also diligence and transparency – the same way a mother would."

To Dereli, there is an inherent value to greater female participation in politics and she personally supports the greater inclusion of female decision-makers through quotas. "I believe we need positive discrimination. We need quotas until we reach the state where we do not need quotas. Especially for countries like Turkey, we need it," she says, adding that she believes the more women in politics, the greater the tangible gains for democracy, including a greater responsiveness to citizens' needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and a more sustainable peace.

"Sometimes you need to break that glass ceiling, sometimes there is no glass ceiling. Sometimes you lift that glass ceiling as you go up. And I'd like to advise all women out there — be aware of that."

Political representation is not enough

Equity in terms of political representation alone is not going to be enough, Dereli thinks. Adequate social support for mothers and redefining the role of the man in the family are also badly needed. "What we need especially is early childhood care, so that those women who wish to can go back into the workforce," she says. On the other hand, men ought to contribute their fair share at home. "Household chores are thought to be women's responsibility – men may help with the household chores but they don't share the responsibilities. And we can change this perspective because we share a home and build a family together. We share our homes and we need to share the responsibility of childcare, of everything that has to do with a home", Dereli concludes.

She says it because she has seen it work during her own upbringing. "I come from an interesting family – a very strong woman, a very-well educated lawyer, who was economically independent, raised my father. I think it was because my father was raised by a powerful woman, he was supportive of his daughters. We need stronger women to create stronger women, because they raise men, who understand the importance of stronger female figures in their lives." What about her own legacy and motivation? She confides that she takes it as her motherly responsibility to create better opportunities for the future of everyone in Turkey because of her two young daughters. "I think the biggest political achievement I've attained so far is that I've managed to put education as a priority agenda item in the eyes of the Turkish public. There is indeed a lot of room for improvement, but at least now it is seen as a priority", she concludes. It is safe to say that the more women like Zeynep Dereli enter politics, Turkey – and other countries alike – the more society at large would benefit.

Watch the FNF documentary film about Zeynep Dereli:

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“I felt I had to be manlier than men. I realized I am making my own glass ceiling by trying to compete with men like that. If you see it as a zero-sum game, you lose.”

“The character of leadership in Turkey is going to change and it is going to change a lot sooner than people think. Female-type leadership is critical to adaptability; we have this intrinsic ability to do that.”

“Women help secure lasting peace — something we are going to need because as our resources depreciate due to climate change, we are going to need female leaders around the world. They will have deeper connections to peacekeeping and conflict resolution.”

“Sometimes you need to break that glass ceiling, sometimes there is no glass ceiling. Sometimes you lift that glass ceiling as you go up. And I'd like to advise all women out there — be aware of that.”

“We need stronger women to create stronger women. Because they raise men, who understand the importance of stronger female figures in their lives.”

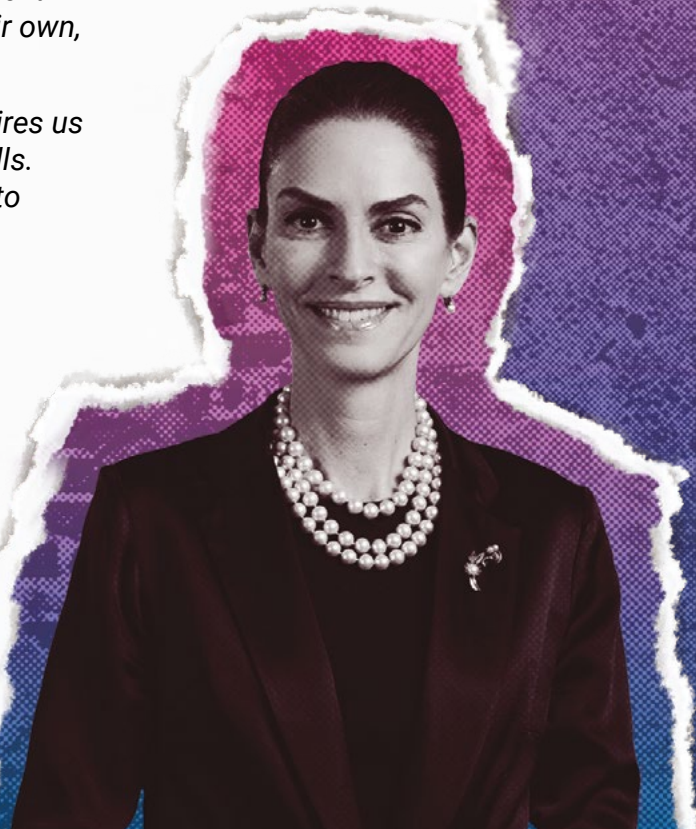
“Now is the time for women to shine and many men across the world are seeing this major shift.”

“I am the mother of two girls, and from a mother’s perspective, I feel responsibility for the rest of Turkish society to create better opportunity for everyone.”

“One should not group all women together — they are not a homogeneous group, even within one country. Different groups of women ask for different things and there is no problem with that. That is why you need better representation not only of women, but of different groups of women, so that they get to raise their own, distinct issues.”

“We are living in a digital age, an age that requires us to be constantly learning and renewing our skills. This is quite a critical issue. And women tend to be better at it than men.”

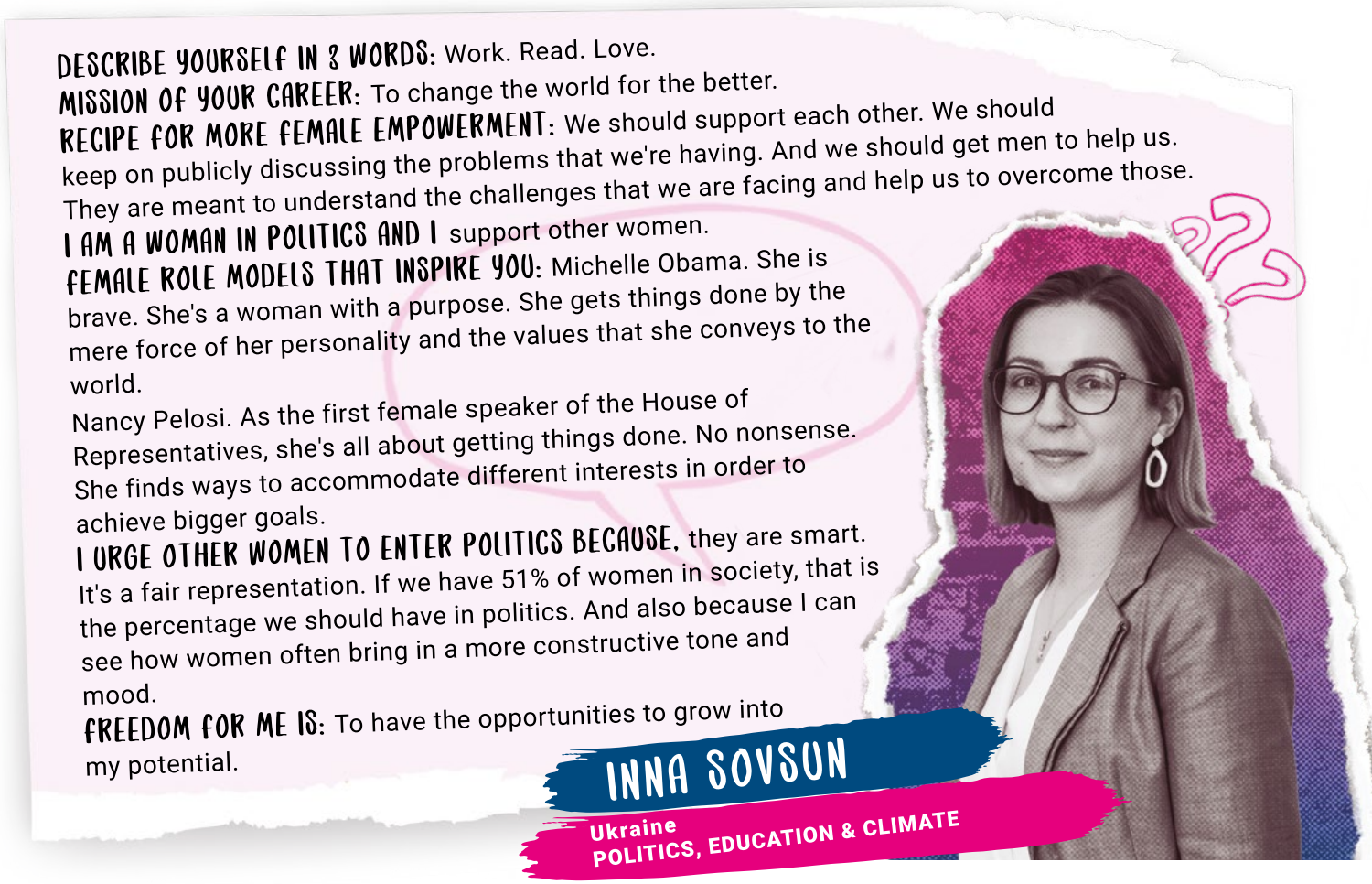
“I used to hear things like "oh, you can wear your skirt and the boss is going to listen to you" when I was looking at probability modelling and major mathematical equations, it had nothing to do with my physical appearance.”



SPEAKING UP FOR WHAT MATTERS

A political marathon runner, liberal lawmaker Inna Sovsun embraces challenges to fight gender inequality, climate change, and injustice.

Author: Zornitsa Stoilova



Inna Sovsun is not a person who can tolerate injustice.

She knew that from a very young age. Ever since she sensed her family was treated differently because they spoke Ukrainian in the Soviet city of Kharkov (Kharkiv in Ukrainian).

But it was in the fifth grade that she felt the urge to speak out for the first time. The 90s in Ukraine were a period of rampant corruption and the education system was no exception. Inna was at the top of her class together with three other girls. Three of them, herself included, worked hard to get there. Their high grades were a fair assessment of their efforts and potential. The fourth one was among the best because her mother used to bribe the teachers. Inna spoke up against that… and was scolded by a teacher for it.

It was a traumatic moment for this future politician, but a

formative one. Inna Sovsun decided to speak up because nobody else did and it turned into her guiding principle in life and politics. During her journey, she learned not only how to stand up for herself, but also found the courage to speak up for others who couldn't.

Outspoken and determined, the 37-year-old member of the Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, from the liberal political party "Golos" doesn't shy away from complicated topics. She tackles issues like gender equality, modernizing education, and climate change.

Values matter for Inna Sovsun, as both a politician and as a university professor who teaches political ethics at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Respecting individual autonomy, self-determination, and her own opponents are at the top of her list. "I can disagree with someone very emotionally, but I would never do anything to disrespect them", she explains, seeking to comment on ideas but not on the people expressing them.

In parliament, she would be the first to defend any female colleague degraded because of her gender, even if she disagrees with her politics.

Being a scholar, Inna Sovsun loves a good debate. She needs to prove her point and explain her reasoning. "We should learn to argue about principles", she says.

Inna Sovsun believes that a good politician should be a bit of a philosopher and a bit of an enthusiast, much like her role model in politics, Barack Obama, (though he messed up on Ukraine, she notes). Someone who can act but still provide explanations of why he is acting this way.

Even in the post-truth era of politics and media, this digital-savvy politician always makes her team fact-check her every statement, speech, or TV appearance, making sure that everything she says is backed up with research.

Politics is a long game

Inna Sovsun was elected as a member of Ukraine's parliament in 2019. A year into the job, people would ask her how she liked working there and she would reply that she is still figuring out what the job is.

As a representative of a small opposition party, with only 20 votes inside a house of 450, she knew that the chances of getting legislation passed were low.

But for Inna Sovsun, politics is a long game and in order to achieve long-lasting change, you have to be patient and persistent.

She realized that the matter of political representation is an important part of the job description. "I came to realize that there are lots of people whose positions are not being represented, and whose positions are often viewed as marginal, but they are not. It is just that no one ever had the strength or willingness to speak on their behalf. It's just part of the job, you're representing certain interests, and then there will be certain groups whose interests you do not represent that are they going to hate you, or just not understand what you're doing. When I came to realize this, it became easier", she points out.

One field where political representation managed to inspire positive change in society is gender equality.

"I can see huge progress in the level of public discussion in Ukraine on gender issues", Inna Sovsun admits. "But it took 10 to 15 years. One of the things I learned in this professional journey is that it takes quite a long time for people to get used to some new ideas and we just have to take that into account," she adds.

Women now make up 21% of the members of the Ukrainian parliament, double the number a decade ago. That is still a small proportion because women are 51% of the country's population.

But even if the numbers are not even, the culture is changing, as society is learning to challenge the norm of sexist politics in Ukraine and react to the unfair treatment of women. One of the reasons for that, according to Sovsun, is the growing consciousness among women that they can get into politics.

"I hear the word sexism so often in the parliament. It's mostly: is this sexist? Can I say that? They can fake it. I don't care. Even if they don't see the problem, but know that it's not acceptable, it is good enough for me", Sovsun says. "Because whenever someone makes a sexist comment, the active part of society reacts. And that wasn't the case 10 years ago", she explains.

Recently, Sovsun caught the attention of international media for confronting the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence because they had made women soldiers march with high heels on.

"What I've learned is that there are actually quite a lot of people whose ideas I can represent and who are supportive and who are actually grateful for me speaking up. That gives me strength. I know that there are people for whom it is important that I speak up."

Her speech in parliament against a male MP's sexist remark prompted an action by the Rada's Ethical committee. And even though their decision to suspend the man for several sessions was overruled in parliament, it sparked a huge societal debate. And then there's the Gender Equality Caucus in the Rada, where women stand up united against injustice and seek each other's support for legislative initiatives.

Sovsun's strong stance on gender issues is not only her position but part of her party's ideology. Half of the MPs from the "Golos" party are women, as is the current party leader, Kira Rudyk. "Golos" chose their representatives based on merit and it resulted in a diverse party list.

Inna Sovsun would, of course, like for this change to happen ten times faster, but it's still good progress for the country among the striking examples of its neighbours - patriarchal Russia and abortion-banning Poland.

Inna's feminist journey

"There was not a single event that made me a feminist. It was a very slow process in which I realized that things are not as shiny and bright for women as I thought," Sovsun reflects.

A traumatic experience in her teen years, when she got attacked by a man in an elevator, first opened her eyes to the extremely high levels of violence against women in Ukraine. But she was too young and too scared to realize what that meant.

Back in high school, she thought feminists were crazy. She could not see their points, because she was studying hard, achieving good results, and she thought that doing her best was enough to succeed as a grown-up.

It was not until Inna started her professional career that she saw how inequality plays out in real life. During Sovsun's internship in the presidential administration, she would be asked to get coffee despite being well educated, while her male counterparts would be assigned to write briefs.

"Even when I realized there was a problem with gender equality in Ukraine, it took me a long time to be able to openly speak about it. I didn't want to denigrate my achievements or show my vulnerability, but then I realized that nothing is going to change if everybody just sits quietly. If I don't speak up for other women, then who will?"

Studying political science in the university, she came across feminist texts, and her appetite to learn more about these issues grew. During her exchange year in Sweden, she got to experience living in a society where frank and open discussions about gender inequality are common.

And later when her son was born, she realized the complexity of issues that women face throughout their professional and personal lives. And how women can live in very different realities based on whether they have the luxury of flexible working hours and the support of their partners in raising their children or not.

"Even by the time I realized there was a problem with gender equality in Ukraine, it took me quite a long time to be able to openly speak about it", Sovsun explains. "I didn't want to denigrate my achievements or show my vulnerability, but then I realized that nothing is going to change if everybody just sits quietly. If I don't speak up for other women, then who will?"

As Sovsun grew more accustomed to talking about gender issues, women in parliament would come up to her and say: thank you for doing this. So, even if she gets a lot of hateful comments on social media, the value of her speaking out outweighs them.

The ultimate challenge: climate change

Having a strong academic background, Inna Sovsun entered parliament with education policies as her main agenda. In fact, in 2014 she became the youngest deputy minister of education and science in Ukraine, and during her two years in office, she initiated reforms to de-bureaucratize higher education.

But six months into the job as an opposition lawmaker, "a crazy idea" came to her mind. She transferred to the Energy committee and decided to tackle a very new topic for Ukraine – climate change.

This doesn't mean she has given up on education policies, as she's still submitting proposals and amendments to current education legislation, but she's also focused on tackling climate issues.

The major reason behind this, as she puts it, is because she likes challenges. But she also cares deeply about climate change and wants to see how this problem can be fixed.

"I knew that simply caring about climate change, without having the challenge to deal with it directly in my everyday work, wouldn't do the job. I decided to transfer to the Energy Committee and it's been a huge challenge for me. It's very complicated, very much influenced by major interest groups. It took me quite some time to figure out how to work with that and how to promote what I still believe in. But I'm really

> **“Politics is a long game and in order to achieve long-lasting change, you have to be patient and persistent.”**

happy that I did that”, she says.

Introducing such a new topic, while there’s still an ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and people are poor and suffering, is not an easy task. But Sovsun is trying to show people that dealing with climate change can also solve some of their most pressing problems.

Like the price for utilities for instance. One of the reasons for the high cost of utilities in the country is that housing is not modernized, therefore it consumes a lot of energy. Households end up paying much more for heating, water, and electricity.

“What I've learned for the past year, is that some of the energy efficiency measures would significantly decrease utility bills, and it's also good for the environment. It decreases carbon output. It's a win-win”, Inna Sovsun sums up.

“We have to recognize that dealing with climate change is going to cost money. And we have to educate the public about that”, she adds. “We also have to admit that it's going to take time for people to get used to this and realize that this is a pressing issue. And I think we just have to be patient.”

Read books to empower yourself

Being used to wearing many hats, Inna Sovsun has also been active in international relations, helping political refugees from Belarus start a new life in Kyiv.

She believes Ukraine has a moral duty to help others trying to walk the same path to democracy and rule of law.

“When we were protesting on the Maidan, we were very thankful for any help, any word of support we would get from abroad. And I believe it is our moral duty to do the same for others. It's about the values that we promote”, Sovsun explains.

She notes also that it’s important for Ukraine to stand up and change its image from a country asking for help to a major power in the region that promotes democracy and liberal values. “It’s the right policy for Ukraine if we want to keep Belarus away from Russia. If we want to show that we can add value to Europe, that we are not just constant troublemakers but also helping to solve some mutual problems”, she adds.

At only 37-years-old, Inna Sovsun already feels very experienced in the field of politics, because her generation took the baton from the previous one to change the course of the country. But what does she have to say to the leaders of tomorrow?

“First of all, read books. This is the way of empowering yourself. Read books about feminism. Even if you're not very much into that right now, it's going to help you become stronger”, is Inna’s message to young women. She stresses the importance of supporting other women to achieve their goals even if you disagree on some issues.

And to all the young people considering a career in politics, Inna says: come prepared. It’s important for them to educate themselves on the topics they want to tackle and to have specific ideas about what do they want to change for the better. But also to know their boundaries – what they can compromise on and what they can’t, the lawmaker advises.

“Many people get into politics for private interests or to get rich. But if you’re getting into politics for different reasons – to change society, to make it better, you should have very clear ideas about what exactly it is you want to do. It can’t be simply to fight climate change. You have to have a plan”, Inna urges.

Because she wants the new generation of politicians to show that ideas matter.

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"I can see huge progress in the level of public discussion in Ukraine on gender issues. But it took 10 to 15 years. It takes quite a long period for people to get used to some new ideas. We just have to be patient."

"What I've learned is that there are actually quite a lot of people whose ideas I can represent and who are supportive and who are actually grateful for me speaking up. That gives me strength. I know that there are people for whom it is important that I speak up."

"Even when I realized there was a problem with gender equality in Ukraine, it took me a long time to be able to openly speak about it. I didn't want to denigrate my achievements or show my vulnerability, but then I realized that nothing is going to change if everybody just sits quietly. If I don't speak up for other women, then who will?"

"Even if parliamentarians don't see the problem of sexism, but know that it is not acceptable, it is good enough for me. Because whenever someone makes a sexist comment, the active part of society reacts. That wasn't the case 10 years ago."

"We should learn to argue about principles. I feel the value of having a proper debate on an issue. It's crucially important for me to prove your point. Not just to state it as a matter of fact, but to actually explain where it comes from."

"Many people get into politics for private interests or to get rich. But if you're getting into politics for different reasons – to change society and make it better, you should have very clear ideas about what exactly you want to do. It can't be simply to fight climate change. You have to have a plan."

"When we were protesting on the Maidan, we were very thankful for any word of support we would get from abroad. I believe Ukraine has a moral duty to help others trying to walk the same path to democracy and the rule of law."

"A good politician should be a bit of a philosopher and a bit of an enthusiast. Someone who can act but still provide explanations of why he is acting this way."

"Politics is a long game and in order to achieve long-lasting change, you have to be patient and persistent."

THE IMPORTANCE OF STARTING FROM THE BOTTOM

Diana Mureşan on the joys and hardships of joining a brand-new party and the conscious choice of not skipping steps when climbing the political ladder

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Positive, ambitious and mysterious

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS AND I am a role model for many other women in my country.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS BECAUSE there are women and they can.

IS POLITICS A PLACE FOR WOMEN: It's a place for everyone who understands that they can make changes and are ready to make important decisions.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: No. Definitely not.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: My biggest achievement was passing a free school meal bill. I was not in parliament at the time, but I still succeeded in pushing through this law. Passing the anti-discrimination law was also important for me because it was part of my campaign.

DIANA MUREŞAN

Romania
POLITICS

In 2016, Diana Mureşan, a young woman who lives in Sibiu, Central Romania, watched as the "Save Bucharest" movement swept a third of the mayoral vote in the country's capital. While their candidate Nicuşor Dan failed (for a second time) to take the mayor's seat in Bucharest, the example he and his colleagues made served its purpose. The relentless decade-long work fighting for the preservation of the city's cultural heritage and against corruption inspired Mureşan, along with thousands of other Romanians who yearned to be politically active but did not want to get their hands dirty with the existing parties.

"I came to the conclusion that, if I only kept on hoping that someone else will take care of it, it was not going to help. So I followed the wise old words "be the change you want to see in the world," step out and do something yourself, and be part of the change," Mureşan says about that turning point of her life.

Four years down the road, USR, under the leadership of Dan Barna, a specialist in EU-funds and a former member of the technocratic government of 2016, has forged an alliance with their current partner PLUS and have become

one of the most influential political forces in the country. The coalition holds a strong delegation of eight MEPs, a bunch of mayors in major Romanian cities including the capital, and almost a fifth of the members of the Romanian Parliament. Diana Mureşan, on the other hand, heads the local branch of the party in Sibiu and is a representative on the city's municipal council, where the party now holds four out of 23 seats. While now she says she has found her passion in public affairs, four years ago this could not have been farther from the truth.

"And I came to the conclusion that just hoping that someone will take care of it was not going to help."

First steps and first hurdles

A young graduate of pharmacology who had just started her own small tourism business with her soon to-be-husband Catalin, the last thing she was thinking at the time was that she would become a politician. "None of the other parties appealed to me because they practiced nepotism. For them, having the right relations with the right people is more important than being competent. I never imagined I would enter politics or that I would have a career as politician but I entered because Romania needed a change," she says.

A few months after the 2016 local elections, the "Save Romania Union" (USR) was born, on the wave of popularity and support Nicusor Dan had gained. Catalin joined the newly formed Sibiu branch of the party and, after a brief hesitation, Diana followed suit. This move was not exactly welcomed by their closest ones. "In the beginning my family didn't really understand our involvement. Because politics in Romania is not considered something you want to do, good people don't get involved in politics – this is the perception here. Our parents and relatives always told us – ok, you are successful people, you have your own business, you've travelled a lot around the world – why do you want to do that?" Mureşan remembers.

This was not the only problem – for her parents it was even more perplexing that she, as a woman, is getting even more involved in the local branch of USR than Catalin. This sort of attitude is still a commonplace in many parts of Romania. "I think in Romania being a woman is subject to many clichés," she says. "It is expected of you to neglect your career and your dreams in order to maintain a household and raise children. It is expected for the husband to have a political career, to bring in the money to the household," she adds. Despite her active involvement with the party, very often Mureşan faces casual neglect by prospective voters. "The difference is mostly in rural areas, where women leaders are not taken seriously. When we do campaigns and go around villages to talk to people, if there are five men and two women, people tend to speak to the men rather than to the women. So you have to go up front and talk yourself," she laughs.

This did not dissuade the young politician from becoming more active – on the contrary, it motivated her to become more confident and assertive in public. With the support of her now-husband Catalin, who saw that the flame for public affairs burned even stronger in her than in him, she made progress both within USR and in the electoral campaigns the party has been carrying out locally.

A politician who does not want to pretend

Unlike many other politicians who might be flushed with such relatively quick success, Mureşan prefers to take it slow. "I decided to do it step by step. "I could have run internally to be a candidate for the EU elections or Parliament in 2016, but I wanted to start from the bottom and learn everything that I can on this step, and then take another one," she shares. Her passion for Sibiu – a city of historic landmarks that has long been a pride of Romania – made her decide that she wants to focus on making life better for her immediate community, just as her colleagues from the beginnings of the movement did in Bucharest. "Our party is a grassroots party and everything starts from the

"I identify myself with liberal values. Freedom is actually one of the values I cherish the most. Knowing the past of my country and knowing that my parents lived in an authoritarian regime with very few liberties has made me appreciate freedom even more."

bottom then goes to the top. And in the same way, I want to build my career in politics, from bottom to top," Mureşan states with conviction.

For her, the "fake it till you make it" approach that many politicians take would not work – she wants to understand the nuts and bolts of local administration so that one day, when she enters Parliament (yes, she does not shy away from her long-term ambitions) she knows better how to do good for her constituency. "People see the position of parliament as somewhat higher, but if you want, you can do nothing – just go to meetings, vote, and do nothing for four years. Finding solutions to problems in your community is harder," Mureşan concludes.

For now, her main objective is to see Sibiu reach its potential and not just rest on its laurels. "Sibiu was for a long time a model city for the rest of Romania – we were a European capital of culture and it is cleaner than other cities. We can do a lot better as a city, we can be on the same level as cities in Western Europe," she says, singling out the areas of digitalization and connection to nature as areas where she wants to see an improvement.

"Many see politics as something that is not nice to get involved in, that good people are not in politics — this is the perception in Romania."

Lessons from a troubled past

Her focus on local affairs does not mean that Diana Mureşan is not concerned with the wider context she and her party operate in. "I identify myself with the liberal values and freedom is actually one of the values I cherish the most," she says. "Knowing the past of my country and knowing that my parents lived in an authoritarian regime with very few liberties made me appreciate freedom even more," she adds.

For Mureşan, what drew her to the USR was precisely the fact that the party is actively fighting for the values she believes in. "I chose USR because it fights against corruption, it's the first party that wants democratization, the rule of law,

"I could have run internally to be a candidate for the EU elections or Parliament in 2016, but I wanted to start from the bottom and learn everything that I can on this step locally and then take another one. USR is a grassroots party and everything starts from the bottom then goes to the top. And in the same way, I want to build my career in politics."

the elimination of sinecures in all levels of the administration, and also for efficient spending of public money, so we have state hospitals, good infrastructure, and a better educational system. We can achieve all of this if there is no corruption."

She sees many of the problems Romania faces nowadays – including sexism – were planted by the totalitarian regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. "Socialism as an ideology wanted to make men and women equal, but that was not the fact in Romania. If we speak about birth control, after a decree in 1966 Romanians were supposed to give birth to many children, it was difficult to do something else outside of the family as a woman," she says.

While these detrimental policies are in the past and women in the country are free to make their own decisions in life, the 40 years of dictatorship left a long-lasting mark on the public perception of women in the country. "We didn't really have many women leaders during socialism, apart from Elena Ceausescu – the wife of the dictator, and Ana Pauker[1] , but these were the only two figures during a 40-year period. Women were also a part of the party, but they didn't hold high positions, they were nowhere near the front."

The lack of role models from the past translates into lack of assertiveness nowadays. "It is a question of mentality, and sometimes I see it in myself. It is the kind of bringing up we got in our families. We are not that confident like men because we weren't brought up the same way as men," she says, recalling a funny – but telling - example from her own family. "When I drive back home to see my parents and grandmother, she asks me who will drive the car: "I hope Catalin will drive the car." I tell her that I drive just as well as he does and I have had a driving license for as long, but she has more trust in men, because she has been brought up to think that men are better drivers."

Receiving support and changing attitudes

Luckily, she has been able to overcome these attitudes through the positive attitude of her husband and other male colleagues in her party. "A lot of people think that only women can be feminists, but there are many men who are feminist fighting for the rights of women and I hope that in the future, we will have the support of our male colleagues. I get a lot of support from my male colleagues in our branch, sometimes more than from the female colleagues", Mureşan says. "This is nice to see, as it comes from the new generation that is not that touched by the preconceptions of the older people, that reads a lot about this subject, and who travel a lot to other countries and see the way of life there," she concludes.

Yet, Mureşan's own experience growing up in a conservative society taught her that change does not always come easy – or is necessarily welcomed. "We live in a time of change now, in all countries, and people are not always reacting in a good way when change comes their way. And when change comes, they tend to look to the past – in the past everything was perfect, beautiful," she says. "I see it in Romania – when some people think of the Communist era, they don't think about the limited liberties but only about the good parts. Maybe it is a reaction by our brain to comfort ourselves. But I think it can't be stopped – it is like a snowball – yes, there will be some obstacles but you can't stop the change now," adds the politician.

She is convinced that the only thing progressive political forces need to do is to keep on pushing, giving an example of the conservative movements against gay rights in Romania and to abortion in Poland. "I am an optimist and I think we are going in a good direction – we had the same problem [as in Poland] with the referendum on the traditional family[2]. We were the only party that was against this change to the constitution and everyone told us that this is not politically feasible, that we will clash with the Church, which is very powerful in Romania. They told us that it is not good for us, that it will be our end," Mureşan says. After the referendum was, in practice, boycotted by the majority of Romanians, it turned out that, on the contrary – USR was the only party that gained support from its principled stance. "You have to have the courage to say what you think and we will move in the direction of a more open society," Mureşan says.

"I think that, in Romania, people want to see fresh politicians – young and with energy, not the same old ones with big bellies. We are the change that people actually expect in Romania. And I think that people in Romania are ready for more women in politics, and more young people. It is our time now," she concludes.

"A lot of people think that only women can be feminists, but there are many men who are feminist fighting for the rights of women. I hope that in the future, we will have the support of more male colleagues."

1 The first female Foreign Minister in Romania – and the world – in the 1940s.

2 A 2018 referendum in Romania asked voters if they want restrict the constitutional definition of family to only a union of a man and a woman.

"And I came to the conclusion that just hoping that someone will take care of it was not going to help."

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THE CHANGING FACE OF NORTH MACEDONIAN POLITICS

Monika Zajkova from the Liberal Democratic Party wants to serve as an example for other young female politicians in her country.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Positive, ambitious and mysterious

I AM A WOMAN IN POLITICS AND I am a role model for many other women in my country.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN POLITICS BECAUSE there are women and they can.

IS POLITICS A PLACE FOR WOMEN: It's a place for everyone who understands that they can make changes and are ready to make important decisions.

ARE THERE ENOUGH WOMEN IN YOUR FIELD IN YOUR COUNTRY: There are some, but still not enough.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: My biggest achievement was passing a free school meal bill. I was not in parliament at the time, but I still succeeded in pushing through this law. Passing the anti-discrimination law was also important for me because it was part of my campaign.

MONIKA ZAJKOVA
North Macedonia
POLITICS

During the past three years, North Macedonia has been waking up after the decade-long hiatus of the conservative rule by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (now exiled to Hungary, invited there by his fellow right-winger, Viktor Orban). The country has launched a painful process of modernization, is opening up to its neighbours, and has committed itself to joining the Euro-Atlantic family. The country had been through several cycles of protests, elections, and changes of government that energized its progressive forces. While there is still a lot of work to be done to clear up the clientelist networks that pervade public life in Skopje, there is now hope that things will change for the better very soon.

One of the young people riding this wave of change is Monika Zajkova. This 29-year-old is the second youngest MP in North Macedonia's Parliament and one of the two representatives of North Macedonia's liberal party – the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Despite her age, she has nearly a decade of political experience – she joined the LDP's youth wing in 2011 and became its president in 2017. Zajkova, who holds a degree in law, worked in four electoral campaigns before she made her own bid for MP in 2020. She was an advisor to the parliamentary group of the majority in the previous North Macedonian parliament and a cabinet chief to her party's Minister of Local Self-Government during the previous government.

"We need to raise a generation for which gender equality will happen normally, not because of quotas. After that, we can talk about equality for people in politics."

While Zajkova says she has had a fortunate career path so far, she does not think that being a woman in politics is easy in her country. Holding – and defending – liberal views does not make it much easier either. "It's very hard, especially trying to spread liberal ideology. Younger people, yes, they are more open-minded, but liberalism does not have the same standing here as in Europe and the Scandinavian countries," she says. However, she adds with a cheeky grin: "to be a liberal in a conservative society is very difficult, but it's sexy to be different from the others."

Liberalism misunderstood

One of the most difficult things to fight, both as a woman and as a liberal, are the prevailing stereotypes. "The general perception is that liberalism equals anarchism. Nobody cares about what a liberal economy means, the real liberal ideology, and human rights; they ignore the basics," Zajkova claims.

The same applies to being a young woman in politics. "It is very difficult to be a woman in politics, especially if you are young, because the perception is always that somebody is pushing you from behind," Zajkova says. She adds that, while she has a long political biography and has been actively engaged in civic activism since 2013, the general opinion is that women only grow professionally under male patronage.

"For example, I was chief of cabinet for the Minister of Self-Government and one of the media put a headline on their portal "Minister, does your wife know who this girl is?" There was nothing about my abilities, my education, and my work. It was not based on reality, just an attempt to degrade my personality," she laments.

Long-standing female underrepresentation

Perceptions about the role of women in the country's political life have been a problem in North Macedonia for a long time. In fact, in the first couple of democratic elections, just five women won seats in the legislature in 1990 and a mere four in 1994. This level of (under)representation, unprecedented even for this region, was tackled by a consistent and thorough push for the implementation and increase of quotas.

On the surface, the situation of women in politics has been getting better: of the 120 members of parliament, in 2018 there were 45 women and a year later, 49, as the country's parties started enforcing the 40% quota for the "less represented gender." Yet, when it comes to branches of government and administration, where quotas are not imposed, the participation of women remains low – only six out of the country's 81 mayoral positions and 5% of appointed executive positions are occupied by females.

"Theoretically, we have the quotas in parliament, but it is still a problem of perception – we have these women on the party lists just because of the quotas, not because society believes women can be good politicians like men. So we still have a lot of work to do," Zajkova notes.

The role of clichés

Stereotypes also play a significant role. A report by the Skopje-based Reactor civil society initiative on women in politics claimed that, according to interviews with male politicians, the main reason for the underrepresentation of women in the field comes from their lack of willingness and ambition to take responsibility.

"We live in a patriarchal society, with a stereotype that women need to be housewives and politics is none of their business; a lot of people say we are unable to make important decisions," the LDP politician adds.

At the same time, it is precisely the desire to oppose these attitudes that spurred Monika Zajkova's drive to join politics. "By entering politics, I wanted to be a role model for my generation of young women, to show them that even if it is not easy, we can do a lot for society," she says. For her, the answer is education – teaching children from school-age onwards that the place of women is not in the kitchen and that they can, just as men do, make decisions in the public sphere. "We need to raise a generation for which gender equality will happen normally, not because of quotas."

"Every time we have an issue in parliament, our "women's club" is the first one that sits down and resolves the problem. We are showing that women are more open to negotiations, more open to accepting different ideas, and more constructive in politics than men are."

Quotas may have a positive role

As a liberal, Zajkova is ambivalent towards quotas in general. "As a liberal I am against quotas, even though they are a kind of positive discrimination and they are necessary in a society like ours. But I think they can be useful because women can rise to their potential in institutions," she comments. So far, their track record in Parliament is positive, the young politician says. "Every time we have an issue in parliament, our "women's club" is the first one that sits down and resolves the problem. We are showing that women are more open to negotiations, more open to accepting different ideas, and more constructive in politics than men are," she claims.

One example she gives is that of discussing LGBT rights in Parliament. "Women feel more encouraged talking about topics such as LGBT rights, and they are the ones that fight the most for these rights. Last week we had an inter-parliamentary group for LGBT rights and in that group, only one person out of ten was a man. It shows that women are more open to such discussions."

"Currently, in our society, we divide each other into left, right, and central parties; views are polarized but women are the ones trying to get around these differences," the MP adds, concluding with the timeless quote of one of her role models, the late UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: "In politics, if you want something done, ask a woman."

During her time in active politics, she has been seeing attitudes towards women change for the better, but she thinks much more has to be done. One additional issue is the overall distrust of politics by people in general. But being young and relatively new to politics helps in this case.

"In general, they see every politician as corrupt, but maybe they do not perceive us younger people as such because we are new faces. Maybe they perceive me as their hope to make things better," the LDP politician says.

The joys and difficulties of campaigning for office

She felt it during the 2020 parliamentary election campaign. "I was very surprised when a woman on the street told me she recognized me as a person who promotes human rights, and said "oh, you are fighting for equality. You are doing very good things, but in this kind of society and with these sorts of politicians, I am not sure if you are going to succeed. But you have our support." So people perceive me as their advocate and they know what I fight for," Zajkova says with conviction.

Despite covid-19, she says that the experience of carrying out her first successful political campaign for parliament thrilled her. "It was a very positive experience, unfortunately it was during the pandemic. So most of the activities were online, through videos, Facebook Live, and so on. I was very excited during the campaign, running from one place to another, visiting more and more target groups. I said that I would work with young people, entrepreneurs, the LGBT centre, and the minorities in our country. I was very surprised that most of their reactions were very positive. Most people came to me and said that they see hope in me," she says.

Quelling conservative fallout

Maybe it would come as a surprise that, despite the conservative backlash in the region and the prevailing patriarchal values in North Macedonian society, the country has not seen the same push for misogynist policies and debates as have neighbouring Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, and Hungary.

"What is happening in Poland now, we had it here five years ago, when the conservative party (VMRO- DPMEN, the party of ex-Prime Minister Nikolay Gruevski) tried to pass an anti-abortion law but, fortunately, did not succeed. We changed the law during our first year in government. Abortion is a

"To be a liberal in a conservative society is very difficult, but it's sexy to be different from the others."

personal right of every woman," Zajkova says.

The Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known simply as the Istanbul Convention, was ratified in North Macedonia, despite conservative pushback. "Luckily, we had a woman as Minister for Labour, who finalized work on the Convention, so we ratified it in parliament. She pushed things forward. We still have more work to do, the ratification was only the first step; we have a lot of obligations that we have to fulfil, but once again we have a female Labour Minister, for whom its implementation is a priority," Zajkova concludes.

What makes a politician proud

One of her proudest personal achievements is in the issue of more equal treatment of women – an anti- discrimination bill that recently passed through the country's parliament. Even though the conservative minority in the previous parliament

"It is very difficult to be a woman in politics, especially if you are young, because the perception is always that somebody is pushing you from behind."

tried to twist the debates surrounding the law and "accuse" the government of paving the way towards legalizing gay marriage, Zajkova did not give in. "These are basic human rights, not something we are now "giving" to someone," she is convinced.

Her theory of why conservative reactionism is taking hold all over Eastern Europe is that it's a question of traditional values clashing with modern realities. "Maybe it is attractive to people that are still living with the image of a past when we had huge families, but now individualism is much more important than collectivism. Maybe this narrative still works in mostly non-urban areas. The attitudes of some religious leaders help the conservative narrative, so now with the new law on violence against women, there are also sanctions provided for religious leaders who advocate violence," she says.

Monika Zajkova is full of optimism and wants to serve as an example of the change that is coming for North Macedonia – not only in politics, but in society as a whole, with younger people entering more and more senior roles. She concludes with a message to fellow women: they need to be brave, they need to raise their voice, and every woman should lend a hand to other women to show them that they can succeed. "We need to stand for each other and I am sure we will do great things."

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"We need to raise a generation for which gender equality will happen normally, not because of quotas. After that, we can talk about equality for people in politics."

"By entering politics, I wanted to be a role model for my generation of young women, to show them that even if it is not easy, we can do a lot for society."

"Every time we have an issue in parliament, our "women's club" is the first one that sits down and resolves the problem. We are showing that women are more open to negotiations, more open to accepting different ideas, and more constructive in politics than men are."

"Currently, in our society, we divide each other into left, right, and central parties; views are polarized, but women are the ones trying to get around these differences and work for the good of the citizens, not simply following the ideologies of their parties."

"To be a liberal in a conservative society is very difficult, but it's sexy to be different from the others."

"It is very difficult to be a woman in politics, especially if you are young, because the perception is always that somebody is pushing you from behind."

FROM BAKU WITH HOPE

Activist and politician Narmin Shamilova on the need to fight not just for more visibility of women but also for their presence as voters and elected figures

Author: Svetoslav Todorov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: A woman in action :)

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Politics, Society, Culture, Peace-building, Global issues.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To strengthen women's role in high-level missions, to contribute to the democratization of society and the world, to be a good example in this field, and to involve other young people in this process.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: Be active in learning, participation, integration, mentorship, monitoring, and contributing.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Angela Merkel, Margaret Thatcher, Dalia Grybauskaite, Malala Yousafzai, Gertrude Bell.

RECIPE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:
- Start from yourself. Improve yourself, then involve others.
- Inspire one another by sharing stories.
- Encourage one another through mentoring.
- Create learning-action communities.

"My grandmother used to say: "Just go where you see the light and take it with you", Narmin Shamilova reminisces and it seems like this has been her modus operandi for quite some time.

Shamilova is one of the most active South Caucasus politicians on the topics of feminism, equal rights, and the need for a resilient and healthy media landscape. At the beginning of our Zoom call, we had some audio issues. Half tongue in cheek, half seriously, Narmin says we might be wiretapped. "Not that I'm a very important person", she adds with a shy smile, though in fact she is.

Born in 1987 in Sumgait, a town near the Caspian Sea, Narmin Shamilova graduated in Russian studies and literature from Baku Slavic University in 2011. Since then, she has gradually been building her profile, first as a journalist and TV presenter, then as an activist, leadership trainer, and politician. "University definitely strengthened my skills", says Shamilova, who is from a culture where women are

perceived mainly as mothers. By using her education and through tireless activity, she has constantly challenged the limitations of her home environment and now – according to her – her family is happy with her breakthroughs. "I managed to convince them that an active life is not something experienced only by the wealthy."

Azerbaijan and Baku are places with important benchmarks in women's history. Universal suffrage was introduced in 1919 by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), thus making Azerbaijan the first Muslim-majority country to enfranchise women. Azerbaijan thereby became part

"We need elected women, not just appointed. We have to show that it's not just men who can decide on who can be elected, we can also be in a position to elect and be elected."

of the global movement to recognize women as full-time members of the society. However, the country today still faces numerous issues regarding gender and societal discrimination.

Building on this legacy, Narmin has been active in the complex local political scene since 2011. She was a member of the pro-EU Democratic Reforms Party, established in 2005 by Asim Mollazade.

Through the party, she helped organize the "Azerbaijani Women in the 21st Century" conference in 2014 and, in the same year, she headed a women's branch of the party and initiated an Intellectual Women's Club in the capital. In 2018, she led a programme promoting women's participation in her hometown. In 2019, she was an expert in the "Women Against

Radicalization" project and also led a campaign on reproductive health and rights in Baku. Her activity is not limited to Azerbaijan – she organised several events in Tbilisi, Georgia, including workshops on fact-checking, combating propaganda, and women's participation in the decision-making processes. During the pandemic's first wave, she collaborated with the West Ukrainian National University on the discussion platform "International Cooperation in the post-pandemic world".

Now she's a member of the Movement for Democracy and Prosperity of Azerbaijan, led by Gubad İbadoglu, which will be established as a party later in 2021.

Apart from being a political activist and an independent journalist, she is also the founder of the "Woman in Action" platform which started in 2020 and highlights women's rights through art, educational events, and mentorship programmes. With this organisation (or network or movement, if you prefer), she wants to emphasize on how a successful woman can be a model for a successful society, and how important it is for women in the countryside to be more interested in politics and positive self-development. "You know how every girl has a dream? We want to make every girl dream and then act. We want young girls to believe they can do everything."

The goal is for Azeri women to not only be more self-aware and outspoken, but also to be active in the decision-making process, interested in important political processes and global issues, and to increase their diplomatic, political, media, and cultural skills. "Every woman comprises capital for the future", she says enthusiastically and thinks there's also room for more mutual support among women. "We need to collaborate and support other women, to show solidarity."

Narmin notes that although the participation of women in politics is not restricted by law, in practice it's still easy for their voices to be pushed aside. And the increased presence of women in parliament is not enough, "We need elected women, not just appointed ones."

For her, the empowerment of women will contribute to both their own development and be a huge benefit for the society. "They will pass on different opportunities and ideas in both their political and public lives", Narmin says. "Women can

"Women can be real architects of the future."

“Every woman comprises capital for the future. We need to collaborate and support other women, to show solidarity.”

be real architects of the future. We have to show that it’s not just men who decide who can be elected – we can also be elected.”

Shamilova is happy that although the word “feminist” is still controversial in Azerbaijan, she still sees a lot of support from men. “Men in Azerbaijan are different already – they are ready to support us if we’re more vocal.”

Is there a generational shift in the way Azeri women think? Narmin takes a few seconds as she sees that topic in a wider context. “Our government is still not doing enough to improve the media landscape”, she says and notes that a person with her beliefs can be subject to slander campaigns. Another important factor is that the local family culture is still marked by a strong patriarchal system and this tradition still has some controversial facets – some women are still marrying at a young age, especially in smaller towns. According to the data hub “Women

Count”, in Azerbaijan, 11% of the women aged 20–24 years old had been married or engaged before age 18.

“There’s still this notion that a girl or a woman can do well only by being supported by a man”. Shamilova would like for more girls to prioritize their education instead of creating a family while still in their teenage years.

She finds that there is an enthusiasm and a desire for a different future but young people are still unsure how to blaze their own paths. She has also participated in forums and conferences for the development of young people and mentoring those interested in entering politics. “Young people want to be active but they don’t know how to fight for their rights, they have limited opportunities to express their voices – this is something I found out through these trainings”, Narmin says. “I think a person must first fight for his or her own rights and then for others’, in that way we can all be part of public life. And in that way, you do more for your society and the country. And that is needed because we still have issues with establishing a real democracy. I believe we can change society.”

Narmin thinks she herself is an example and is trying to promote her ideas through her own experience. “What I wanted to do, I did.”

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"Young people want to be active but they don't know how to fight for their rights."

"We need elected women, not just appointed. We have to show that it's not just men who can decide on who can be elected, we can also be in a position to elect and be elected."

"Men in Azerbaijan are different already - they are ready to support women if we're more vocal".

"Just go where you see the light and take it with you."

"There's still this notion that a girl or a woman can do well only by being supported by a man. More girls should prioritize their education instead of creating a family while still in their teenage years."

"Every woman comprises capital for the future. We need to collaborate and support other women, to show solidarity."

THE UNSTOPPABLE POWER OF SISTERHOOD

Feminist activist and music artist Maryna Rusia Shukiurava helps Belarusians use their traumas for transformation.

Author: Zornitsa Stoilova

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Smart, supportive, inspiring

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To inspire people to be happy, self-confident, and open to their needs.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: It is important to keep a healthy focus on oneself, to spread enlightenment and to show by your own example what it means to be a modern woman

I AM A WOMAN IN ARTS AND EDUCATION AND I am trying to show what it means to be a feminist.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Madonna (the singer)

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER THEIR AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE BECAUSE life in freedom brings so much joy and many benefits to society: a relaxed woman sows happiness all around.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: The rejection of the idea that in adulthood someone should serve someone. I believe that it is independence that is capable of giving manifestation to the entire potential of an individual.

MARYNA RUSIA SHUKIURAVA
Belarus
ART, EDUCATION & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

For singer Maryna Rusia Shukiurava, her power is her voice. Deep, honest, and reassuring, it's her source of inner strength, resilience, and vulnerability.

As a vocal therapist, she uses her voice to heal others. She can release the traumas trapped in people's bodies and set them free.

Rusia's voice is also her tool to express ideas and communicate to the world. It's her platform to speak up for free Belarus.

When the 41-years old Belarusian activist and artist took part in the first flower protests in her home country, she knew they represented a bigger change for Belarusian society.

It was not only about the people against the dictator who held their future hostage. It was about the clash of two mentalities – the old Soviet one versus the new generation, who values freedom more than anything else. It was also

about women realizing their power and taking to the streets to exert it.

"In Russian, there is a saying: the man is the head, the woman is the neck – in our society, women have always been influential but hidden. But that summer everything changed and everyone saw how strong, how powerful, how full of life women were. They realized their power. They took to the streets; as sisters, mothers, wives; all fighting against the regime", Shukiurava remembers.

Rusia embodies this spirit and serves as its talented narrator. A conversation with her is like a walk through the secret garden of Belarus' collective traumas. But in these traumas, there is strength and stamina, she believes.

Her feminism has deep roots in the traditional women's culture of Belarus. But through her work as a culture agent, she also tries to convey a new female identity.

She has many identities herself – a singer, a political activist, an entrepreneur, and a single mother. Drawing inspiration and knowledge from many fields – music, psychology, sociology, and history – she combines them all to cause change on both personal and societal levels.

Women realizing their power

Rusia Shukiurava has been a part of the opposition movement in Belarus since she was eighteen. But it was during the 2020 political demonstrations and protests that she realized that people like her are the real representatives of power in the country, not president Alexander Lukashenko and his accomplices.

"We are the power here." When I heard this slogan, it changed my attitude towards everything", Shukiurava says. "I realized that for 26 years this man had tried to persuade me that I was nothing. That I have no right to feel at home here. That I have to serve his needs with my taxes and loyalty. But now I, not this man, am a representative of the real power here."

The protests spontaneously turned into a platform for Belarusian women to claim their power and role in society. They not only contributed to the peace movement but made the demonstrations an inspiring experience. Shukiurava compares the role of women in the Belarusian demonstrations to the supportive role of the mother in the life of her children. "When things took a bad turn and people were scared and desperate, it was the women, sometimes just with small actions, who lifted the spirits of others", Rusia says. "For me, the role of Belarusian women in the revolution can be compared to the calm, soft hands of a mother. When her baby runs and falls down, she picks him up and says – it's ok, you will do it", she adds.

The role of women during the demonstrations was widely recognized in Belarusian society and it caused a shift in the attitude towards women. It was first triggered by Lukashenko's main opposition rival, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Her fight against the regime to seek justice for her husband initiated a wave of respect for women that was non-existent before, according to Shukiurava. Tsikhanouskaya inspired even men to go onto the streets to fight.

"Before the protests, men were not taking women seriously. They were like –Cook your borsch and take care of your children." Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya

showed that the woman who's cooking soup and taking care of children can do a lot more, and now she's a number one figure", Shukuirava points out.

Rusia believes that the example of Belarusian women is an inspiring one for women all over the world – motivating them to be brave, shifting attitudes, promoting and supporting women leaders.

But once the protests were met with brutal violence from Lukashenko's regime and many activists were arrested and imprisoned, Rusia Shukuirava had to flee the country to protect her family. She took her mother and her 2-year-old daughter and joined the hundreds of thousands of Belarusians living in exile.

However, when she moved to Kyiv, she knew that she would continue to work for the revolution, using this safe space to her advantage.

Can traumas turn into a source of strength?

In the words of her mother, Rusia Shukiurava sprouted like a wildflower. Growing up in a dysfunctional home with an abusive alcoholic father and a weary mother who had to raise four children alone, Rusia learned to take care of herself from a very young age.

"Before the revolution, men didn't take women seriously. They were like "Cook your borsch. Take care of your children." Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya showed that the woman who's cooking soup and taking care of children can do a lot more. Now she's a number one figure."

"When things took a bad turn and people were scared and desperate, it was the women who lifted the spirits of others. For me, the role of Belarusian women in the revolution can be compared to the calm, soft hands of a mother. When her baby runs and falls down, she picks him up and says it's ok, you will do it."

"We, Belarusians, have to pay a steep price for this process of transformation. But it is like when a woman is leaving a relationship with her abuser. It is painful. It takes time, but there's a new life ahead – happier, peaceful, and healthier."

On many occasions, she had to sleep over in a neighbour's house to stay safe from the violence in her home. During those visits, she got to observe people and learned how to appeal to them to be accepted. "As a child of five years old, I had to be a psychologist. I had to learn how to understand other people's expectations because if I wanted a family to shelter me again, I had to be nice to them", Rusia remembers.

Understanding others is a coping mechanism. At school, she was often bullied for being poor and coming from a troubled family. But she found a way to not let that hurt her. "One day my mother told me if someone is saying bad things to you, try to look at this person's face and feel that this is the way they're crying for love", Shukiurava reflects and this deeply moved her.

She believes it was those early experiences that sparked her interest in psychology, a field she later pursued in her career as a vocal therapist.

Although they did have a complicated relationship while growing up, Rusia says that both her feminism and her power originated from her mother.

"My mother is a very strong woman. She gave me two important messages – to not be afraid of anything and to use your traumas for transformation. So, trust other women and never hurt them. We are a sisterhood. That's what gave me the seeds of future feminism", Rusia says.

When her mother was just 16 years old, she escaped her home country of Azerbaijan, refusing to have her life dictated by her patriarchal family. She had Rusia when she was just twenty and raised four children on her own. Through all these hardships, she managed to love and empower her children.

But it was not only Shukiurava's family who had a difficult life back then. It was the usual story in the post-Soviet countries, she says. "My mother had friends and those women came to our house and they would discuss what was going on in their families and I saw how strong they were. All those difficulties didn't affect their love for their children, for their partners, or their female circles and friendships, and that impressed me a lot. Only now do I realize how important it was in those times", says Shukiurava, reflecting on her past.

Of course, as a teenager, she was very angry with her mother, but as she grew up, she realized that her living situation made her who she is – strong, independent, well educated. "My childhood was difficult, but we came through it with my mother, and even on days when we were starving, I always felt that she really loved us. And this gave me power", Rusia says.

Carrier of a cultural code

Shukiurava knows the power of a community and she turned it into a major source of energy and symbolism in her musical career. Traditional Belarusian women's folklore was imprinted into her brain as a child and it prompted her to switch from rock music to ethno-electronic music.

Rusia found freedom, resilience, courage, humour, and eventually, feminism in the pagan songs and rituals of her female ancestors, passed on from mothers to daughters. They were not all that happy to be married, she says. They preferred to stay free and live the life they wanted to.

For Shukiurava, embracing your root culture is the key to understanding all other world cultures. It also keeps you connected to your base and your core. That is why she takes traditional songs and turns them into modern music that appeals to the younger generation. The idea, she says, is when they wake up after a party and make themselves coffee, they start to sing these songs, and become carriers of this cultural code.

The painful, but necessary transformation

As a public figure and a role model for younger women, it is important for Rusia to convey the message that you should take care of yourself. At parties, she usually says: "Let's make a toast for love – to yourself", she explains smiling.

"When you love yourself, you may spread love to another. When you understand yourself, you may clearly see others. When you enjoy life, when you're happy, you may share it with others. But when you're empty, when you don't believe in yourself, all you can give to the outer world is something neurotic", she adds.

It was motherhood that made her realize that. Shukiurava goes on to explain that having a child killed the tiny bits of misogyny left inside of her.

Before motherhood, she was nervous about everything. For example, whether she's beautiful enough. But motherhood showed her that our bodies change all the time and we should embrace that. "Motherhood showed me both my shadows and my bright sides and how to integrate that inside of me", Rusia shares.

Now she believes mothers are superheroes, combining the most difficult and the most inspiring job of all. She often imagines that her daughter will live in a free Belarus when she grows up. "Where everybody's free, where everybody has access to education, to security and is able to work and earn money. Where there's respect to equality, human rights, LGBTQ rights, and ecology", Rusia adds.

But now in exile, she's swinging from hope to despair, watching how the regime goes to extremes dealing with the opposition. Kidnapping planes, hanging activists in parks, and trying to convince Belarusian society that all this is normal.

Shukiurava admits that before the revolution, she thought that a national consciousness was just a mental construct, a social trick. But now, when something bad is going on in Belarus, she turns off for a couple of days. No showers. No brushing teeth. She's just grieving.

"Unfortunately, we have to pay a steep price for this process of transformation. But I realize that it is like when a woman is leaving a relationship with her abuser. It is painful. It takes time, but there's a new life ahead – happier, peaceful, and healthier", Shukiurava concludes.

"In Russian, there is a saying: the man is the head, the woman is the neck – in our society women have always been influential but hidden. But last summer everything changed and everyone saw how strong, how powerful, how full of life women were. They realized their power. They took to the streets; as sisters, mothers, wives, all fighting against theregime."

Maryna Rusia Shukiurava is featured in the documentary "Women Leading Protests – Fighting for Democracy" by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, which tells the stories of four women who were actively involved in the protests in Belarus, Hong Kong, Venezuela and Lebanon in different ways. Their stories represent women all around the world, who are fighting for democratic change in their countries. Several of the protagonists describe how those in power systematically underestimated them, because „they were women", which the women in turn sometimes used to their advantage. But as their influence grew, so did the violence that many of the governments were willing to use against them.

Watch the documentary here:

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“My mother is a very strong woman. She gave me two important messages – to not be afraid of anything and to use your traumas for transformation. Trust other women, never hurt them. We are a sisterhood. That’s what seeded my future feminism.”

“Before the revolution, men didn’t take women seriously. They were like “Cook your borsch. Take care of your children.” Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya showed that the woman who's cooking soup and taking care of children can do a lot more. Now she's a number one figure.”

“When things took a bad turn and people were scared and desperate, it was the women who lifted the spirits of others. For me, the role of Belarusian women in the revolution can be compared to the calm, soft hands of a mother. When her baby runs and falls down, she picks him up and says it’s ok, you will do it.”

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HOW TO NORMALIZE BEING GAY IN RUSSIA?

Screenwriter Liza Simbirskaya talks about her approach of gently challenging homophobic narratives through art.

Author: Martin Dimitrov

How can someone tell the coming-of-age story of a young man who finds out he is gay in modern-day Russia, where intolerance is codified in a "gay propaganda law" and traditional values reign supreme in mass media? And more importantly – how can they do it in a way that does not employ the "flamboyant gay life" stereotypes or fall into the trap of typical Eastern European filmmaking that focus primarily on life's miseries?

Russian screenwriter Liza Simbirskaya may have found the answer in her 2019 YouTube miniseries "я иду искать" (meaning "Here I come" in Russian), which tells the story of 20-something law student Roma (played by up-and-coming actor Arsen Khandzhyan) falling for his newfound acquaintance Lesha in present day Moscow. As a side story, a female friend of Roma reveals to him that she is HIV positive... but to his disbelief does not make much fuss about it and certainly does not despair. Its nine short episodes focus only a little on dramatic twists and turns or the usual portrayal of the excesses of gay parties, and much more on the fears and joys of a young man finding out who he really is which may be a simple, yet effective, way to normalize homosexuality in these troubled days of homophobia.

Breaking stereotypes without shocking the audience

"Breaking the stereotypes was one of the main purposes of this project. First of all, because I have a lot of queer friends who are all very different from each another, but all of them would like to watch something about themselves. I also think it's my professional method to show people in their everyday life, to find interest in very simple dialogs and situations. I think it helps viewers and myself accept life like it is," says Simbirskaya.

According to her, choosing to show the gay community – alongside HIV-positive people – in their everyday life was a strategic choice. "Most of [the stories about gay people in Russia] are about different kinds of struggling. So when the director and I were planning our web series, we decided to do it not about the difficulties of queer life in Russia but about the happy life of a young person. We decided to show very ordinary people, very casual outfits, and very ordinary situations. No makeup, no crazy parties, and no extraordinary behaviour, which is often associated here in Russia with the gay community. We wanted to show no difference between queer and not queer people," Simbirskaya notes. The result is that, unlike many other cases of content that promotes LGBTQ+ narratives, the YouTube comment section of "Here I come" does not anger trolls and puritans.

The hard birth of an internet series

It was far from easy to make "Here I come" happen. The screenwriter remembers how she spent an entire year looking for funding, getting rejections from Russian and foreign art funds alike, until finally she managed to convince a foreign investor to back her project. Then came the problem of popularizing her work. "The old-fashioned media – big newspapers, big movie magazines – doesn't consider a web series a serious movie project, that's why it is difficult to convince them to write a review or even a news report about it. Also, even if they want to write something about "Here I come," they must remember the law which protects children against non-traditional values and must put an age rating of 18+ on such information. So, as you see, it is not very easy," Simbirskaya shares.

Luckily for her production, in the internet era everyone can be a media channel and the primarily young audience of "Here I come" helped its publicizing by sharing the episodes on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Additionally, bloggers who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in Russia or back it lent their hand to the

makers of the show. "Many more people support us, not in the real media but in personal blogs, and that's more important for me. I am very thankful to them," Simbirskaya shares.

Inspiring debates, inspiring others

Actually, most of the criticism that the series gets is about the approach of its authors, rather than the theme itself. The general audience finds it hard to digest the unedited one shot-one episode style in which the movie is shot and its 'mumblecore' genre that focuses much more on the dialogue and natural on-screen relationships between actors rather than on the camera angles or the story itself. "Not all people understand why actors look like they don't act at all, why dialogs are so primitive, why the plot is so simple. Where is the drama?, they ask," Simbirskaya exclaims. To her, part of the misunderstanding of the movie comes from the fact that it is the first of its kind in Russia, where issues such as the role of sex in the gay community, or how to talk correctly about another's identity, or about the HIV epidemic are practically non-existent. "We are one of the first people in the narrative arts trying to start a conversation about these issues. It is unusual and maybe that is why for some people, especially for movie critics, it looks like not art but a proclamation, activism. But I think they will change their minds in a few years when there will be a lot of movies like ours."

Changing the attitudes and opening a window for conversation to other socially engaged artists is one of the missions of Liza Simbirskaya and an engine behind "Here I come." "I did it to show young directors, producers, and screenwriters that they have not to be afraid to talk about queer people, people of different nations, young people. To show them a viewer's reaction," she shares. According to her, it is understandable that in the Russian cultural landscape, dominated by state funding which comes with its caveats of not engaging in provocative projects, limits the creative freedom of many talented directors and screenwriters. "This pushes self-censorship, which is one of the most serious problems in Russia, I think. But

"Freedom and liberty are something I was born with. I would like to be a conformist or less of a fighter for justice because it is safer and easier, but I can't."

I hope that as more indie projects are getting shot by young indie filmmakers, many people in the industry will understand that there is no reason to be afraid and there are a lot of opportunities to make a movie without governmental money in the modern world."

If you ask for acceptance, be ready to accept as well

As to the question why she is fighting such an uphill battle, Simbirskaya says that she just can't imagine not doing it. "I grew up in a family where it was important to have your opinion, your voice, to take responsibility, and to be aware. My father was in front of the White House when tanks fired upon it in the 1990s. I went to the opposition rally at Pushkinskaya square with him for the first time when I was 14- or 15- years old and then I went to other meetings by myself or with my parents for a long, long time," the young screenwriter says. Voicing her discontent with the treatment of political prisoners, Pussy Riot, Alexey Navalny, and many other key figures of the Russian opposition has practically become second nature for her and now she is finding new ways to express her social positions through her art. "Freedom and liberty are something I was born with. I would like to be a conformist and less of a fighter for justice, because it's safer and easier, but I can't," she concludes.

Yet, she does not harbour resentment towards the majority

"I made this project to show young directors, producers, and screenwriters that they don't have to be afraid to talk about queer people, people of different nations, and young people."

of socially conservative Russians and finds the explanation for their animosity to the "different" in the painful totalitarian history of their country. "When the Iron Curtain fell and Soviet people started to receive information from abroad, they weren't ready for it. They were against many things that were normal abroad but not acceptable in the USSR. The new generation is the first generation of post-Soviet people who live without any borders thanks to the Internet,

"We don't try to shock people or to be provocative. We are talking about basic things in a very ordinary way."

free knowledge, and communication between people from different countries. The Russian people have started traveling and looking at the world, getting to know it only in the last 10-15 years. The first time after 70 years of the Iron Curtain! Just imagine this! That is why it is so difficult for Russians to accept new things, to be open-minded, to be tolerant (is it so easy for people all over the world? I don't think so). And that's why it's so important to protect our freedom from new laws which build a wall between Russia and the other world again."

In addition, Simbirskaya realizes that there is also a huge generational gap that pushes back against progress. "People who are 50-60-70-years old now can't understand their children and grandchildren, can't share their interests, thoughts. But they are still the most powerful people in the world," she says. To add oil to the fire, the quick but uneven technical progress between rich and poor countries makes it difficult for those who spend their lives in stable, affluent countries to see why people in less fortunate places fear change much more than they do. "We need time to understand how to live together in a new world where you can speak about everything on the Internet and everyone can answer you, or where your private life exists in social media and you depend on other peoples' reactions to it, and how to be a new generation man when you grew up in a different time with different rules."

So, how can artists help in this difficult process? Liza Simbirskaya has some advice for the future artists: "Keep going! Shoot the movies about or with queer people, be brave to come out, fight for your rights as activists, or as a filmmaker, or an editor of any kind of magazine. And don't think that people who don't accept queer-community are stupid, close-minded. Try to understand them and to explain to them our truth and accept their truth as well. The most important thing for Russia now is a dialog inside the country. Only together can we take down the homophobic laws and change the situation."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"Freedom and liberty are something I was born with. I would like to be a conformist or less of a fighter for justice because it is safer and easier, but I can't."

"No one talks in Russian movies about things such as the role of sex in the gay community or how to talk correctly about each other's identity, or how to talk about the HIV epidemic in Russia."

"Don't think that people who don't accept the queer community are stupid or close-minded. Try to understand them and to explain to them our truth."

"I made this project to show young directors, producers, and screenwriters that they don't have to be afraid to talk about queer people, people of different nations, and young people."

"I hope that, as young filmmakers shoot more indie projects, people in the industry willunderstand that there is no reason to be afraid and that in the modern world, there are a lot of opportunities to make a movie without governmental money."

"We don't try to shock people or to be provocative. We are talking about basic things in a very ordinary way."

"Just imagine that the new generation is the first generation of post-Soviet people who live without any borders thanks to the Internet, for the first time after 70 years behind the Iron Curtain! That is why it is so difficult for Russians to accept new things, to be open-minded, to be tolerant."

THE ART OF BEING A WOMAN

Nadia Makova is an entrepreneur who defies stereotypes of women as simply housewives and mothers.

Author: Mila Cherneva

Nadia Makova used the word "energy" to describe herself and she was absolutely right to do that - it is indeed an honest definition of her personality. She is a successful Russian entrepreneur, founder and CEO of several businesses, related to the EdTech, event and communication industry, and of Moscow Advanced Communications School and LXP-platform K-AMPUS (Learning Experience Platform). She has changed her field on Russian territory and has gained experience of both huge corporations and her own endeavours.

Nadia also has a down to earth, positive, but realistic attitude and even an hour long conversation can convince you of that. She makes jokes and is not afraid to say things exactly the way they are. However, she has faced judgement because she is a woman and wants not only to be a mother, but also a career woman. What is remarkable about her is that she tries to defy traditional patriarchal understanding of what a woman should and should not do and whether she could enjoy both a family and a business.

Changing the industry

What better way to shift society's views than setting a personal example? Nadia knows what she is talking about because her career has been quite dynamic. She always had a strong interest in communications, events and entertainment, ever since she was in school. Later, she joined Unilever and was responsible for internal

"My advice to businesswomen is not to be afraid to set ambitious goals and to improve themselves every day to achieve these goals. The glass ceiling very often is just the one we set only for ourselves."

communications. She cherishes the experience there, as she learned a lot. She met her husband while working for the company and had a baby. However, as she explains, she still had a plethora of ideas and a great amount of energy, so she channeled them into her favourite field. About 10 years ago the event marketing industry in Russia was still in its early stages.

'I decided to improve it and give a platform for people working in this area to get together, to exchange knowledge and experience. I wanted to become a translator between all parties in the industry, so launched [professional] conferences", Nadia remembers. She also started a professional, business-to-business publication in both Russian and English, distributed across Europe.

However, that was not enough to satisfy her ambitions. "I decided to move to the next level and to make the profession legitimate. There are no institutions for higher education in event management in Russia, while you can get such a degree in lots of universities in Europe and the US. Thus, I found great people who supported the idea and became my partners and we founded the Moscow Advanced Communication School and its Faculty of Event marketing",

Nadia says. The businesswoman shares that already 100 people have graduated with a diploma for event producers from the institution.

Furthermore, she was invited by "one of the leading social impact investors" in Russia to become CEO & managing partner of Theory and Practice - a media focused on lifelong learning and to conduct the launch of LXP platform K-AMPUS (Learning Experience Platform). "We aim to help companies not only to talk about the importance of team development, but to act accordingly. Our mission is that every employee in every company gets all the opportunities they deserve. Now it is not only media, but it is an IT platform for spreading the idea for lifelong learning not only for people, but for corporations as well", she explains.

Overall, her career is intertwined with media, communications and EdTech. It is devoted to be "doing something useful for people". Nadia has embarked on growing communities and it seems she is doing it well.

Her drive to move constantly and to bring progress to the communications industry and EdTech in Russia is accompanied by striving for a work-life balance. Yet being a woman in a leadership position has its own specific traits.

The curse of the social role

"There is a super heavy challenge for all women entrepreneurs - the perception of what their social role is, the role of mother and housewife", Nadia says. In the last years she has been working in Moscow, but her family - her husband and her child, lived in St. Petersburg. "I was forced to spend three days of the week in Moscow and four days - in Petersburg. I saw a big question from many people, even close ones - "How can she do it?", she says. The entrepreneur explains how she could feel judgement because she was splitting her time between her career and her family and not devoting herself completely to the latter. However, she explains that her confidence in her own abilities helped her ignore these ill-intentioned reactions.

"It is not about how much time you spend with your kid, but also how you feel about yourself. If you are not happy, if you are not doing what you like, if you are not helping people, earning money, whatever you choose...Then you cannot be full of the right energy and pass it on to your kids", Nadia explains. However, she adds that her philosophy is not popular in Russia. On the other hand, it is accepted for men to spend 20 hours a day working and to spend time with their children on the weekends only.

Another example she gives is how people there judge a woman with a thriving career if she hires a housekeeper. "In more mature cultures this is normal, while here it is a developing trend. People are just starting to realise it is okay because the housekeeper is a professional who can [clean] better for less time and you can invest your time in your own project", she says.

Her belief is that the biggest challenge is to change the perception of a woman - not just a mother and housewife, but most importantly, a person with their own passions, desires and path. "It is important to have the strength to say: "I don't care what you say or think. First I am a person and then I am my gender. I know my priorities and I know I am doing the right thing for me and my family, so please do not push", Nadia claims.

Let's talk about gender

"Yes, [it is hard to be a female boss], especially when you have kids'', Nadia claims. She believes women become softer after giving birth, and it is completely natural. Teams

also treat female project managers differently. “When they speak to a woman, they can tell her: “I don't feel well now, I have issues with my boyfriend, etc.” They would never say it to a male manager or at least rarely”, she explains. Thus, women in leadership positions should remind themselves that their team is not their children because if they become too soft, results will be worse. “It is better to be strict and drive your team to do their best '', Nadia says. She adds it is quite different for men than for women, as the former do not even think about these challenges.

Yet in general her field of work - communications, seems to be rather gender-blind. She believes she is lucky that she has not witnessed a glass ceiling in her industry personally, and she also adds that her impression is a field where sexism is not as prominent as in others. “There are certain industries and spheres that are percepted as male. Thankfully, communications and events are not among them”. There are several reasons for this according to her. “First of all,

the industry is new and under construction and was developed in a time when people started speaking loudly about gender gaps and how wrong it is”, she lists. Also, the skills required to achieve success in the communication industry have been historically associated with females. “I know it is wrong to say there are male or female characteristics. Still, women are more prone to seek a compromise and be generally empathic”, she explains.

“Overall, I think men and women are generally equal and there are plenty of great marketing agencies headed by both women and men”, the entrepreneur explains.

However, this is not the case across other businesses. “There was a survey conducted by the Moscow School of Business Management [regarding] the gender gap among management in companies in Russia. It is really interesting because 33% of women said that they cannot afford to be on boards of directors because they need to combine taking care of families and kids. This is a huge problem and it is

“The biggest challenge is to change the perception of a woman - as not just a mother and housewife, but most importantly, a person with their own passions, desires, and path.”

“Women in leadership positions should remind themselves that their team members are not their kids because if they become too soft, results will suffer. It is better to be strict and drive your team to do their best.”

about working with our minds”, Nadia explains.

Meanwhile, she does quite a lot to inspire other women with her own example that women can have a career and family at the same time. “My advice to businesswomen is not to be afraid to set ambitious goals and to improve themselves every day to gain these goals. The glass ceiling very often is the one we set to ourselves. Of course, there are problems in society, but the first ceiling you should overcome is the one you put yourself”, Nadia says with a smile.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

“My advice to businesswomen is not to be afraid to set ambitious goals and to improve themselves every day to achieve these goals. The glass ceiling very often is just the one we set only for ourselves.”

“It is important to have the strength to say: “I don't care what you say or think. First I am a person and then I am my gender. I know my priorities and I know I am doing the right thing for me and my family, so please do not push me.”

“My belief is that the biggest challenge is to change the perception of a woman - as not just a mother and housewife, but most importantly, a person with their own passions, desires, and path.”

“It is not about how much time you spend with your kid, but also how you feel about yourself. If you are not happy, if you are not doing what you enjoy, not growing, not helping others, not earning money, or whatever you choose. Then you cannot be full of the kind of energy worth passing on to your kids.”

“According to Google's research on gender stereotypes in the country, 72% of Russians (including women) still believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen, that she should be a good wife and mother.”

“In general, communications seems to be rather gender-blind. I am lucky that I have not witnessed a glass ceiling in my industry personally. My impression is that in this field, sexism is not as prominent as in others.”

“Women in leadership positions should remind themselves that their team members are not their kids because if they become too soft, results will suffer. It is better to be strict and drive your team to do their best.”

THE AGILITY TO CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO

Professor Zeynep Alemdar, a Turkish academic, on why political representation matters and women should be put at the forefront of global decision making

Author: Zornitsa Stoilova

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Curious. Passionate. Versatile.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: My goal is to inspire. I always try to be a better version of myself, and I hope to inspire people to do the same.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: Solidarity.

I AM A WOMAN IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND I strive to get more women there.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: My PhD advisor, Karen Mingst. She was the only female professor at the Patterson School of Diplomacy at the University of Kentucky. Her discipline, constructive criticism, and her way of working hard guided me.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BECAUSE, it's vast, it's exciting. Trying to find solutions to big problems is always more fun than getting stuck in the small ones.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: Indispensable, essential.

ZEYNEP ALEMDAR

Turkey
ACADEMIA, FOREIGN POLICY & CIVIL SOCIETY

Growing up in cosmopolitan Istanbul, Zeynep Alemdar has always been fascinated with how big the world is, how infinite the possibilities of the future are, and, at the same time, how small people can be.

Being good at connecting the dots from a young age, she quickly learned there are no distinct lines between the domestic and the international. That our lives are affected by global events as much as they are affected by local incidents.

This realization guided Alemdar, a natural problem-solver, to her calling in international relations. Now a professor and a

dean at Okan University in Istanbul, she says: "The world is vast and exciting and we are usually bottled up in our own localities. I've always had this bird's eye picture of events, looking at things within a bigger perspective."

No wonder her research interests revolve around issues of democratization and civil society, critical security studies, and international organizations.

In her career as an academic, but also as a force in civil society, she is focused on bringing the female perspective forward in both local and global decision- making processes. As she puts it herself, the strive for equality has been like a combustion engine in both her personal and professional journey.

Together with Dr Christina Bache and Rana Birden, two ladies from different fields but both with backgrounds in international relations, Alemdar founded Women in Foreign Policy in Turkey. This initiative's goal is to showcase the critical importance of women in solving international conflicts and to give women a safe space to talk about these issues.

"The three of us come from different sectors – from academia, a think-tank, and business. We saw men talk about the issues that we know a lot about and we were never invited to join those talks. Why was our expertise not valued as much as that of old white males?", prof Alemdar asks rhetorically.

Women's role in peacekeeping

She also noticed that none of her female students in her international relations classes were confident enough to dream of being the president someday, or to even aim for a top leadership position in public policy.

Professor Alemdar explains the goal of the Women in Foreign Policy Initiative as: "We want to encourage women who are interested in foreign policy and provide them a space in which they can talk comfortably about solving international problems, to learn from each other, to learn from their role models, and to bring different generations together".

One example is their work to get Turkey to implement a national action plan based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which aims to empower women's participation in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding.

"We are raising awareness and writing about how Turkish foreign policy can be geared towards a peace and security agenda. How the priorities of Turkish foreign policy can be made more sensitive to the feminist agenda. It's such a low-hanging fruit that it could be done without anyone else being aware of it", Alemdar says.

"Feminist foreign policy is about making women count in all foreign policy decisions. It's about making use of women's knowledge, of women's experience, of women's intelligence in an area which has traditionally neglected women."

According to UN Security Council research, when women are involved in peace talks, the likelihood that a peace agreement will last longer than 15 years increases by 35%. There are real-life examples from such places as Liberia, the Philippines, and Burundi, where women's civil society organizations stopped peace talks from being suspended and managed to get the men to agree with each other.

Professor Alemdar explains that: "At the peace table, men usually talk about borders and when to stop the arms race, while women talk about torture, harassment, sexual violence, and child soldiers".

She cites American research, which shows that women in the US Senate voted according to their party lines when deciding upon military intervention. However, once that was resolved, they raised issues like: "What's going to happen to the soldiers coming back from the war? What is going to happen to the women and children the soldiers left behind?" As Alemdar puts it: "They were bringing up issues that were not considered before".

Professor Alemdar explains why women are so effective in foreign policy missions this way: "All the research that I have done or read points out that women think longer-term. While men try to solve problems right away, women always think about the longer-term effects".

She also adds that women are more detail-oriented when it comes to problem-solving. They look into the nuts and bolts of the issues they are trying to solve. "Once you put women at the peace table, they look into the structural reasons for a war and try to find solutions", she says.

Feminist foreign policy

The term feminist foreign policy was first coined by Margot Wallström, a former minister of foreign affairs of Sweden. In 2014, Wallström made Sweden the first country in the world

to formally adopt a "feminist foreign policy."

What does this mean exactly?

"Feminist foreign policy is about making women count in all foreign policy decisions. To make use of women's knowledge, of women's experience, and of women's intelligence in an area which has traditionally neglected women", Alemdar explains.

She points out that all the terms coined in international relations are usually laden with male values – hierarchy, frontiers, borders, and power.

"All these concepts that we use to describe international relations are very male-oriented. Feminist theorists started to question these back in the 70s and the 80s. What is powerful? Shall we talk about borders, as if they are these immutable lines in the sand, or shall we talk about borders differently? What is sovereignty? How do we define sovereignty", she explains.

But only in the early 2000s were these ideas converted into political actions and impacted how resources are distributed. For example, countries like Sweden and Canada have started to prioritize women's organizations and women in their development aid programmes while France and Mexico have begun to include more women in their diplomatic corps.

"It's such a vast, fruitful, and productive field that you can make any type of policy feminist. You can gender mainstream the budget, you can create gender mainstreaming aid policy, you can gender mainstream the refugee policy. You can change the diplomatic corps. There's a lot of room if countries would like to maintain a feminist foreign policy", Alemdar adds.

In terms of female world leaders who embrace these values in politics, Alemdar points to New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden.

"She was a good role model for a lot of feminists around the world, not only during the COVID crisis but also when there was an attack on a mosque in New Zealand. At a time when Trump was going around and yelling, she handled radical terrorism in a way that was so compassionate. In a world where polarisation was the game, she changed the game by being strong, but soft-spoken, compassionate, and kind", Alemdar explains and adds: "She showed us that you don't need to yell to be strong. To project power, you don't need to beat people up. Being strong and being kind are not exclusive things."

"You hit the glass ceiling every day. It's never really directly pronounced, it's very subtle. If you call someone out on it, it will be rejected right away."

"Equality has always been my internal combustion engine."

The subtle glass ceiling

Zeynep Alemdar's feminism was cultivated in her family. She grew up in what she describes as a typical middle-class family and a close-knit family environment. Her parents had a very strong sense of justice and equality. They believed a person should be humble and always share with the less fortunate.

"Even if sometimes my mom wanted to go along with the traditional female roles within the family, my brother would object. If she said: "Go bring your big brother a glass of water, he would be like: "Oh no, I will go get my own water. Why did you ask her to do that?" He was influential, helping me to become the feminist that I am", Alemdar reflects.

Today, she values agility as her way to face challenges and become a better version of herself. She admits that even in the free and progressive world of academia, she hits the glass ceiling every day.

"Every day you're dealing with the big white males. It's never really directly pronounced, it's very subtle. If you call someone out about it, it will be rejected right away. It will be

“While men try to solve problems right away, women always think about the longer-term effects. Women are more detail-oriented when it comes to problem-solving. They look into the nuts and bolts of the issues they are trying to solve.”

rejected in a way that makes you look like a crazy person”, Alemdar says bluntly.

She recalls that she was once called a sleeping beauty by a male colleague during a conference because she dared to bring forward the feminist agenda to hard security issues. “It’s not because of the things I was saying, it was because I was challenging them from an angle that they never thought about before”, Alemdar says.

This academic is certain that to change the status quo, governments should take all the necessary measures to get men and women on equal grounds in terms of care work, economy, and political participation. The numbers are still striking, even in developed countries. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, at the current pace, it would take 145.5 years to close the gender gap in political empowerment, and 267.6 years in economic participation and opportunity.

Other research comparing female and male academics’ productivity during the COVID period, shows that male academics were publishing more, while women academics were taking care of their kids, houses, families and worrying about health issues.

According to Alemdar, to encourage more female participation in politics, women need good gatekeepers, namely male allies who would open the doors for women. Another key is female solidarity – women in power supporting and lifting each other up. And the third is quotas. “With these numbers so low, especially in terms of political participation, women need legal amendments to push them to the front”, Alemdar states.

But it is slowly happening. As she concludes: “If you look at the protests all over the world – Black Lives Matter, Indian women fighting for their rights to property, climate change activists, etc. – It's very obvious that women are driving the change. And they are the ones who are challenging the traditional policies.”

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

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"There's a lot of room if countries would like to maintain a feminist foreign policy. You can gender mainstream the budget, aid policy, and refugee policy. You can change the diplomatic corps."

"Being strong and being kind are not exclusive things. You don't need to yell to be strong. To project power, you don't need to beat people up."

"None of my female students in international relations classes were confident enough to dream of being the president someday, or to even aim for a top leadership position in public policy. "

THE FIRST FEMINIST TEACHER IN ROMANIA

Mihaela Miroiu is one of the “mothers” of Romanian feminism.

Author: Mila Cherneva

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Thirsty to search for the meaning of life all the time.

I AM A WOMAN IN ACADEMICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY who loves the freedom to do whatever I can with my own capacities and who wishes the same for all other women.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO JOIN CIVIL SOCIETY BECAUSE liberal democracy and women’s rights cannot be taken for granted.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: The school on gender issues and politics because that school became a school of common sense in time.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: My grandmother, from a moral point of view. From creative point of view - the radical philosopher Mary Daly. From a professional point of view - Maria Bucur.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To teach people how to understand, to build and to defend liberal democracy.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: Practicing dignity in every context.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: The main ground for living a meaningful life.

MIHAELA MIROIU

Romania
ACADEMIA & CIVIL SOCIETY

She has taught students for 42 years. She has marched in protests, helped with female rights legislation, and inspired the new generation of feminists.

Mihaela Miroiu is Romanian, a professor at the National School for Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest. However, that is far from a full description of all her achievements and efforts.

She is outspoken and strong, with a great sense of humour and a long history of introducing the topic of female rights into Romanian society. Prof Miroiu pioneered gender studies in Romanian academia and paved the way for feminism in this Eastern European country.

A new dawn

The mindset of a large portion of society has changed and that is probably the main achievement of people like Prof Mihaela Miroiu. She remembers how in the 1990s people called here and other feminists “radical”, “crazy”, or “a social danger”. Yet everyone has come a long way and she feels public intellectuals now accept her, and they explain that they like her feminism. But that is after her first ten years of activism — the same things said in a different time sounded differently. “It is not about me. It is the way they are seeing women’s minds, they are respecting women’s ideas, their approach to politics”, she adds. She laughs at how younger feminists now criticise her, as they see her as older and different from their own understanding.

"I am not their sister. I am the generation of their mothers. But I am very proud that we have reached a moment when diversity of opinion is very high and I am criticized by feminist themselves", she smiles.

In the last few years, the professor has been active in protests and active on Facebook as well and she mentions that people wait for her reaction to any events on a political level.

"People need models, even to contest them, to criticize them. But they need people who are standing up for their opinions and arguments and who are able to have a dialogue with", Prof Miroiu concludes.

The roots of Romanian feminism

Prof Miroiu graduated with a degree in philosophy in 1978, during the Communist regime in Romania. "At that time, we were not allowed to have an academic career or do research. There were just compulsory jobs in high schools", she says. Women were discouraged to enrol in PhD programs. Thus, she became a high school teacher of philosophy and social science. She worked at a school for over a decade. Then, the authoritarian regime collapsed, and a new page was turned for her career and even — her life.

"1990 was the beginning of another life in fact. My child was not so little, my private life was settled, I had finished an important project for me — I had done a reform of how to study philosophy in high schools. This was the end of the story, the relationship between me and the former profession", the professor remembers. She discovered a book on feminist philosophy in 1991 and this was the start of her quest for knowledge in this area — she describes it as a "revelation". As the democratic transition was happening, she had the chance to enrol in a PhD programme in the philosophy faculty, doing feminist philosophy. "It was a shock to the academic environment, but they were impressed. That's how my inclination towards research started", the academic explains.

However, she transferred from the Philosophy department to Political Science in 1994. That was an important move because she had felt a hostility from the philosophy faculty regarding the feminist topics she was exploring. "It was a very and still is a very male-based establishment, even if 80% of the students are women. It is a paradox", she says.

Before liberal democracy came in, during the communist regime, there were no degrees in political science, public administration, international relations, or communications. These fields were introduced after 1990. "When I was invited to teach classes in the Political Science department, I discovered that the people there were very open to the idea of teaching as done in Western Europe and the USA. There was no conservative establishment to look at me in a strange way because I am teaching from a feminist point of view. In a way I felt welcome", she recalls.

This was the moment when her opportunity to change the way academia thinks, teaches, and explains females in Romania begins. Prof Miroiu created the first class in Feminist Philosophy, taught from 1994 until 1998 at the University of Bucharest. Afterwards, in 1996 she introduced a class called Gender and Politics to the undergraduates at the National School for Political Studies and Public Administration. That decade culminated with the Master of Arts in Gender Studies in Romania, started in 1998.

Prof Miroiu's legacy also includes the first PhD program in political science, and through her breakthroughs in academia she paved the way for two decades of students who would think about female rights and gender impact, and are now be on the frontline of these movements. Prof Miroiu basically set the basis for the next generation of feminists.

"In fact, I was more of a protective mother and inspiring figure, but not at all as active as they were. Of course, I participated in the marches that they organised. For sure in the last five years, my former students have played a far more important role than I have".

Some power, some limits

The big question is: how did this change happen so suddenly? It probably would not have happened without a woman in power, especially when that woman was Mihaela. "In order to do that, I used the power I had as dean of the faculty. It was easier to introduce a programme from a power position. It is very difficult to be approved or accepted unless you have power to negotiate", she explains.

"My rector and some other important people from the board of the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration were very busy with many other things. It was a time of 'Jack of all trades' and 'Jane' of all trades. Usually, they were so busy. I had the chance to shape the most important university decisions because I had the time to

"It is not enough to be a good private person, to be a good professional, unless you are a very good citizen. Being a good citizen means being active."

"People need models, even to contest them, to criticize them. But they need people who are standing up for their opinions and arguments and are able to have a dialogue with."

think in an academic way."

"When the course was created, there were also boys. We also had three male professors. We never segregated them and some of the classes in this MA were offered in other kinds of MAs. They were not addressed just to a tiny group of people."

However, this progressive path was not always so flexible. When she was first trying to build a career in academia, she received an offer from the Sociology faculty. However, the invitation was accompanied by the following condition, made by the dean: "I'd like very much for you to come here, but you have to get rid of your feminist approach." This is not gender discrimination literally, she comments, but it is discrimination against her own approach, her theoretical preferences. "I have never heard about a man who was told: Ok, you can come, but you have to get rid of your Communitarian perspective or ecological perspective", Prof Miroiu says.

She also emphasises that there is a glass ceiling in the academic sphere. "In philosophy or social science, the most important award for an academic is to become a member of the Romanian Academy of Science. This is a recognition of your professional contribution. You become a member for life, and there are a lot of advantages, including financial ones. In the section of social science in their academy, as well as in philosophy, there are no women at all. Doesn't matter if they contributed a lot or not — if they are far better than the members there or not. There is not even a proposal for such kind of a position, as you have to be proposed to become a member."

"For the last 10 to 15 years, women have excelled at getting credentials, they are the majority of students, they are the majority of PhD candidates and it is now very hard to question their capabilities. But for sure, there is still a passive preference for male candidates for academy positions."

A lack of freedom before democracy

Female rights in Romania have also greatly evolved since the authoritarian regime and the period after its collapse in 1989.

"I think that in the former political regime, in the Communist one, we could not talk about minority, human, or women's rights in a proper sense. From this point of view, it is hard to speak about professional discrimination", Prof Miroiu comments when asked about the differences between the two environments.

Economically, women were at a disadvantage. She explains that salaries and prices were determined by the state which placed more women in the so-called 'light industry' — food, glass, textiles, etc., as opposed to heavy industry — metallurgy, chemistry. Women worked in the former, and men got jobs in the latter. However, there was a significant pay gap because salaries in light industry were about three to four times lower than in the heavy one. "It was politics. Once the state says the importance of work of women in light industry is a few times less than of men working in heavy industry, this is a huge discrimination", she adds. Additionally, besides working at a factory as part of the workforce, women had to be in charge of all domestic duties, as there was no change in traditional roles — they had to clean, cook and take care of the household.

Moreover, the really morbid authoritarian phenomenon was that women were in physical danger and were not in charge of their bodies. "We were rather in a worse position because in Romania there was a so-called 'pronatalist' policy which obliged women to have forced pregnancies, to have no access to contraceptives, and to have the right to an abortion, you had to have at least five children and be at least 45 years old. The police were always in hospitals searching for "guilty women '' who did something wrong from this point of view. Many women were in prison. 10,000 women died in Romania because of illegal abortions — this was the official number, the real one is more", the academic confides.

"In my opinion we cannot talk about feminism in communism. Feminism is a road to women's autonomy and communism is a road to no one's autonomy. It was impossible to have a different, dissident point of view", she states. As Prof Miroiu points out, the second decree which was issued after the Romanian revolution was the one which eliminated the law against abortion. "It was a sign of freedom", the professor says.

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"In my opinion, we cannot talk about feminism in communism. Feminism is a road to women's autonomy and communism is a road to no one's autonomy. It was impossible to have a different, dissident point of view."

"The whole civil society in Romania that was involved in human rights, minorities, and civil rights in the beginning of 1990s would have been able to occupy a minibus with nobody left outside. Now, we are talking about a train."

"It is not enough to be a good private person, to be a good professional, unless you are a very good citizen. Being a good citizen means being active."

"People need models, even to contest them, to criticize them. But they need people who are standing up for their opinions and arguments and are able to have a dialogue with."

"I notice a change between before 1989 and now because now we can talk about discrimination. You can speak about discrimination in our liberal society."

THE DECISION TO STAY, THE POWER TO ACT

Moldovan entrepreneurship expert and university professor Rodica Crudu on the challenges of staying in your home country and making your way in a male-dominated environment

Author: Svetoslav Todorov

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Responsible, diligent, and positive

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: The mission of my career is to inspire and instil the belief in my students that they can achieve anything.

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: Education is the most important weapon we can use to change the world, a transformational experience that can change your life and the lives of those around you.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Ursula von der Leyen, Kristalina Georgieva, Maia Sandu

RECIPE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: Always go above and beyond your comfort zone.

RODICA CRUDU

Moldova
ECONOMICS, ACADEMIA & CIVIL SOCIETY

Talk about multitasking! Rodica Crudu is an associate professor, a European economic policies expert at a non-profit, the Laboratory for Initiatives for Development-Moldova, and editor-in-chief of the Eastern European Journal of Regional Studies. "We're focused on fostering economic development, attempting different strategies on how the country can recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and on implementing green politics, including by introducing EU policies."

Up until recently, she was the dean of the Faculty of International Economic Relations of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. She has also been recognized as a Jean Monnet professor, a network of

teaching posts for university professors and senior lecturers with a specialisation in European Union studies. She has also coordinated several EU-funded projects in the field of European integration studies.

It's rare for someone to mention the word "ambitious" in a positive manner nowadays, yet Rodica Crudu decides to use it in exactly this way, signalling a clear vision of her ideas. "I'm an ambitious person. I've always wanted to climb all the peaks available', says Chișinău-based Rodica Crudu.

Running up that hill

She teaches courses on "European Integration and Economy" for undergraduate students and "EU Institutions and Policies" for those in master programmes. "I like to initiate debates, challenge certain behaviours and ways of thinking, and analyse the different perceptions found in society. But in this process, you can't stay neutral or impartial to European values – we stand behind them", says Rodica and, in her experience, this sentiment clicks with the crowd.

"Young people in Moldova are more pro-European; I feel this is the case even among the Russian-speaking students. Even if they were taught otherwise by their family circle, they know what advantages the West brings." She likes to see how students are starting to see more than

the obvious and are having healthy discussions. "Their minds are starting to open up to new ideas, they're embracing European values."

"It's the way I was brought up – with the belief that we can have a better life at home and that everyone should contribute to that."

In 2018 she was given the National Crystal Quality Award for promoting quality in higher education in Moldova. "The feedback from students about my achievements – there is an undeniable pleasure from this that's more important than the financial rewards."

"It's not the position or the title, it's about the human element you bring."

Bringing the good examples back home

Her experiences through the fellowships she won through the years, including a Fulbright one, have led her to rethink her teaching strategies and to put aside the old models she was subjected to as a student. "Going to the US was not an easy decision since I was taking care of two kids but I was encouraged to make the move."

Her determination to change the environment and the atmosphere around her did not stay in the classroom. She pushed the faculty to have more presence on social media and established exchange programs with foreign universities for students and teachers. Rodica also helped create a well-equipped space for students to work and meet, modelled on what she saw in Western universities and libraries.

She has been teaching entrepreneurship in both Romania and Moldova, which provokes comparisons between the students of these two countries, who are as close as they can be in terms of language and tradition. "It feels different." She says the intuition and the decisiveness in the two groups are different. "Imagine there's a cake. Moldovan students can admire and smell it, but they only watch how others taste it. Romanian students already know the taste and the flavour very well. When some young Romanians are searching for an idea, they quickly focus on how EU funds might work for them. For Moldovans, these options are not available in the same way."

"Moldovan students are still shy, lack the words to express their ideas, and are afraid of failing." That's why she rarely gives written exams and prefers to speak with her students. "One of the qualities that they need to work on more is communication. It's not just about the knowledge in one's brain – it's also about the ability to send a message. Some bright minds actually stay closed. They need to open their wings and fly, to become personalities."

She can also recognize her younger self in these issues.

> **“There were a few times in my life when I have asked myself why I was born a woman – I have always thought that boys have easier lives.”**

Coming from a village, she actually took some time after moving to the capital of Moldova to fully realize that she wants more from life than what has been given to her. “It took me a few years to open up.”

Earlier in 2021, she stepped down from being a dean because this position took up a lot of her time and it is still a struggle to get a fair wage in academia. “But I think it’s not the position or the title, it’s about the human element you bring.”

Fighting for a better Moldova

Since the turbulent events in Eastern Europe in 1989 and dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Moldova, independent since then, has been a territory constantly deserted by its citizens. The long-term economic instability has led to the immigration of almost 45% of its 3,6 million population. In 2019, official data by the National Statistical Bureau found that around 246,000 Moldovans are migrants, working between their country and abroad, ready to live elsewhere on a temporary basis. This represents about 27 percent of Moldova's labour force.

Despite the opportunities to live abroad permanently, Rodica has always decided to come back. During her professional activity, Rodica Crudu participated in numerous study visits and professional internships in various European countries (the UK, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, etc.) and also did a Fulbright Fellowship in Washington, DC.

“I was always missing Moldova”, Rodica says but understandably, there’s a deeper reason. “I guess it’s my family background, the way I was brought up – with the belief that we can have a better life at home and everyone should contribute to that. I don’t remember how many times I have been asked why I’m still in Moldova: “You’re wasting your time!”, she recounts with a bittersweet smile. Her older daughter is studying in the UK and her younger one wants to do the same so she’s not sure if she’s passing this philosophy on to her children.

Mrs Crudu has been unceasingly optimistic about the future of her country since late 2020, when Maia Sandu from the pro-European Dignity and Truth Platform Party became the first female President of Moldova.

Regarding her own experience as a woman in academia, she has faced a few struggles, mainly in finding it hard to exist in a space where you can see the ceiling which limits where you can go. “There were a few times in my life when I have asked myself why I was born a woman – I have always thought that boys have easier lives”, she says with a more sombre tone. “I have always had the feeling that in academia, men are more easily promoted while women are supposed to work harder.’

She tries to frame her story as an example to her two daughters. “I tell them that if you’re consistent in your efforts, if you work hard, the results will always come but work shouldn’t overshadow happiness. Because at the end of the day it’s all about happiness and empowerment. If you find the right balance, it becomes easier later on.”

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

“It’s the way I was brought up – with the belief that we can have a better life at home and that everyone should contribute to that.”

“I don’t remember how many times I have been asked why I’m still in Moldova.”

“In academia, men are promoted more easily while women are supposed to stay in the shadows.”

“It’s not the position or the title, it’s about the human element you bring.”

“Work shouldn’t overshadow happiness. Because at the end of the day it’s all about happiness and empowerment. If you find the right balance, it becomes easier later on.”

“There were a few times in my life when I have asked myself why I was born a woman – I have always thought that boys have easier lives.”

“Young people in Moldova are more pro-European. I feel this is the case even among the Russian-speaking students.”

"One of the qualities that students in Moldova need to work more on is communication. It’s not just about the knowledge in one’s brain – it’s also about the ability to send a message. Some bright minds actually stay closed. They need to open their wings and fly, to become personalities."

THE VOICE OF ECONOMICS

Svetla Kostadinova has been the executive director of one of the most influential economic think tanks in Bulgaria for more than 13 years.

Author: Mila Cherneva

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Active, curious, optimist

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Free Market Advocacy, Governance Effectiveness

SUMMARIZE YOUR CAREER IMPACT IN A SENTENCE: The school on gender issues and politics because that school became a school of common sense in time.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: In Bulgaria, we are in the process of forming role models that go beyond their specific areas of work or expertise, but that will take time.

I AM A WOMAN IN an advocacy organization and I believe that a systematic approach can prompt a policy change by informing the public and by educating the media and policy makers; this will inevitably create the most logical policy.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To expand the understanding of free market ideas.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: In moments of crisis, the initiative passes to those who are best prepared, whether woman or man.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: Closer than we think.

SVETLA KOSTADINOVA

Bulgaria
ECONOMICS & CIVIL SOCIETY

Svetla Kostadinova has the exceptional quality of a calm, serious demeanour, which makes you respect her even before she impresses you with her mind. She is the executive director of the Institute for Market Economics (IME), an important, influential economic think tank in Bulgaria for nearly 30 years. Svetla enjoys significant respect and influence in Bulgaria without talking about it. She made a considerable impact on the country's policy discourse over the years.

The unexplainable job

"The first challenge I ever faced is one I still have — how to explain what I do to my mother", Svetla laughs when replying to a question about the hardest part about her job. She joined the IME in 2001 and became its executive director in 2007. By now her mother has "a feeling" about what the job is but still has a hard time explaining it to her friends. Svetla adds that it is not easy to explain to people that organisations like the institute create change and influence public opinion. "We try to form public opinion or create a feeling that something must be done, that there is only one specific course for a particular policy", she says. "Many companies or people consider NGOs to be just lobbyists or organisations with social functions who should help disadvantaged groups", she adds. Meanwhile, Svetla and

her team advocate for free market reforms and provide both journalists and politicians with expert opinions and thorough analysis.

"Some of the companies run by entrepreneurs who have returned to Bulgaria from abroad understand the mechanics of civil society. They know you must invest in watchdog campaigns, media campaigns, and educational campaigns on the effects of economic policies."

An economic leader

Svetla was born in Varna, Bulgaria's third largest city, located on the Black Sea. She began studying economics there, but two weeks into her first semester, she decided she needed to move away. She moved to Sofia, the capital, and graduated with a degree from the Economics University. She was studying economics during an economic crisis which she describes as "a bit of a mess". At that time, Bulgaria endured protests, hyperinflation, and an unstable political situation. "My mother was calling me to go home and leave the city as it had become very dangerous", Svetla remembers. Yet whether it was youthful stubbornness, ambition, or just her instinct, Svetla remained in Sofia and graduated in 2001. "Right after graduation, I thought it would be wonderful to work in a bank", she says. But before she applied for a bank job, a friend told her about the IME. She interviewed there and so her career began, as a research assistant for Krassen Stanchev, the think tank's founder and first director. Two years later, she became a full-time economist.

"That was my first and only job since graduation, which can be good and bad. Good, because [I] understand the dynamics and [I] know the challenges, as I participated in decision-making not only in my organisation, but in the country too. It can be bad because the lack of other experience can deprive me of knowledge useful to my work.", she explains.

In 2007 she was chosen as the executive director from a group of candidates, from both within the organisation and from outside it, with the institute's Board having the final word. "It was not my goal from the very beginning to become a director, it just happened", Svetla says. The previous director, Krassen Stanchev, needed to distance himself from the job, so Svetla replaced him.

She remembers how in the beginning, being a leader was quite difficult. "It was January 2007, Krassen was outside the country, in Tajikistan or somewhere, and I was just here. Besides doing my usual job, I had to pay the salaries at the end of the month", she smiles. On one hand, she tried to do her research work and advocate for free market economic policy; on the other hand, she tried fundraising and management. After a year of multitasking, though, she realised she needed to focus on the latter.

"It was a conscious choice, not something that hit me. I tried to gain more skills at fundraising, conflict resolution, and managing people. My first and only task since then is to make a comfortable environment for the team, to choose the best people and keep them if possible, and to let them do what they do best — advocacy and fighting for their ideas", Svetla explains.

Wind of change

Because the IME has a strong, prominent role in public discourse, we can assume that Svetla Kostadinova is doing a great job as a leader. One of the think tank's most memorable achievements, one she is exceptionally proud of, was over a decade ago in 2009. "We were advocating for the abolishment of the minimal capital required to register a company. Up to this point, the law said you had to have 3,000 leva to do that... It was not a high hurdle for starting a business, it was more of an administrative thing you had to overcome", Svetla says.

"Imagine a student borrowing 3,000 leva somehow, depositing that in a bank, then registering a new company using the bank statement showing 3,000 leva, then just giving back the borrowed 3,000. It was just an impediment.

"I don't think there is an intentional pay gap between men and women in Bulgaria. It may exist because women lose some time nurturing and giving birth, which affects their length of service or experience, but that is natural. I don't believe we have a pay gap based on gender."

We were advocating against this requirement for several years and everybody, including all the opposition parties, said it was a good idea", she says. Then there were elections in 2009 and the Bulgarian socialist party, who had been part of the government up to that point, lost the elections. Svetla recalls that the first three legislative proposals submitted in the new parliament were all concerned with the minimum capital requirement and making it 1 euro, which is practically abolishing it. "After five years of advocacy, we had educated the public and created the feeling that this was the most logical thing to do. The very fact that this was the first thing for three very different political parties to submit in parliament just shows that if you are consistent, do not give up, provide different arguments, and are always around, things can happen. Not always, but anyway — they can happen", she says with a smile.

Of course, it is very hard to make a strong impact on politicians, particularly with big issues. Yet an example like the minimum capital issue motivates Svetla and her team. "This was just a moment when you realise you have done something right and have managed to do it at a time where there was an opportunity for this to happen. Because sometimes we do the right things and they just do not happen, the results do not show up... [In this case], there was a window of opportunity, but we had done our homework", she concludes.

"If you compare the corporate world and the non-profit [sector], they both always require commitment, knowledge, progress, learning from experience, being open and up to date."

The female footprint

As a female leader who succeeded a man, Svetla does not really distinguish between genders when it comes to professional development or taking leadership positions. "I don't think there is any special encouragement, but I haven't seen discouragement either. I have talked to other women about this topic of whether there is a glass ceiling. In my experience, I have not witnessed it", she says. "If you look at the statistics, as far as I remember, the difference in

"I do not really distinguish between genders when it comes to professional development or taking leadership positions. I don't think there is any special encouragement, but I haven't seen discouragement either. In my experience, I have not witnessed a glass ceiling."

Bulgaria between men and women in managerial positions was one of the lowest in the European Union. Maybe not the lowest, but we are on the positive side", the economist says.

As for female economists, they mainly remain in academia and are not very active in public policy discussions, Svetla has observed. "When you look at politicians and members of parliament and their university specialisation, most of the women are lawyers by background", she says. Also, a large proportion of the women trained in economics are in the corporate world, as opposed to the NGO one.

"This is a pity because the economics perspective helps with fundraising, advocating, communicating, and organising people '', Svetla says. She agrees that there are more women than men in the non-profit world, and her explanation is that "they care more as the nature of the women is to be affected easily by problems".

"If you compare the corporate world and the non-profit [sector], it always requires commitment, knowledge, progress, learning from experience, being open and up to date", she believes and she adds: "In that sense, just find the thing that makes you happy and you'll do your best."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

"Some of the companies run by entrepreneurs who have returned to Bulgaria from abroad understand the mechanics of civil society. They know you must invest in watchdog campaigns, media campaigns, and educational campaigns on the effects of economic policies."

"I don't think there is an intentional pay gap between men and women in Bulgaria. It may exist because women lose some time nurturing and giving birth, which affects their length of service or experience, but that is natural. I don't believe we have a pay gap based on gender."

"If you compare the corporate world and the non-profit [sector], they both always require commitment, knowledge, progress, learning from experience, being open and up to date."

"The first challenge I ever faced is one I still have — how to explain what I do to my mother. It is not easy to explain to people that organisations like IME create change and influence public opinion."

"I do not really distinguish between genders when it comes to professional development or taking leadership positions. I don't think there is any special encouragement, but I haven't seen discouragement either. In my experience, I have not witnessed a glass ceiling."

EVA TOVMASYAN: A DREAMER AND A DOER

This human rights activist turned Supreme Court spokeswoman shares why she believes a personal example is the best mechanism for change.

Author: Joanna Elmy

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Dreamer, doer, and lover of life

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Communication management, capacity building and empowerment of politicians, civic education

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: Try to make a change, even a small one, to make people's lives better.

I AM A WOMAN in this world and I enjoy it.

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Margaret Thatcher, Meryl Streep, and my friend Christina who always inspires me to dream and act.

I URGE OTHER WOMEN TO ENTER ANY FIELD THAT MAKES THEM FEEL ENTHUSIASTIC BECAUSE women are capable of doing everything they choose to do.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: Know yourself, appreciate the way you are and allow yourself to pursue what makes you happy.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: To be able to act and to realize what I dream about in my most audacious dreams.

EVA TOVMASYAN
Armenia
CIVIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

The Press secretary of the Constitutional Court of Armenia, Eva Tovmasyan, is a master communicator. With extensive experience in the civic sector and well-versed in politics, she reveals how she was inspired to become a civic activist and why she believes it is her duty to inspire others.

The voice of the court

Today, Eva speaks on behalf of Armenia's highest judicial institution, managing communications with journalists and establishing the strategy of the Court's communication. She also somehow finds time to participate in trainings and

is active in many initiatives concerning civic education.

But when she was young, Eva wanted to be a surgeon. However, her mother decided on a different path for her because she believed being a doctor was not a suitable profession for a woman: doctors have to work nights and Eva would not be able to have a family, since she would always be busy. Eva does not ascribe this opinion to conservative beliefs, but rather to her own mother's experience of her own mother – Eva's grandmother – being a busy medical professional. So, Eva decided to pursue foreign languages.

Then in 2008, Armenia was rattled by a series of anti-government protests after the presidential elections. Eva, who was a young adult at the time, was deeply influenced by the violations of human rights which happened in the country during that time – 10 protesters were killed after a clash between the army and civilians. A state of emergency was declared in the country, effectively barring demonstrations and instituting heavy media censorship. Eva joined the pro-democratic movement and gradually became interested in the protection of human rights, with politics occupying a central place in her life. Her mother was dissatisfied with this development and asked her if she planned to become the next Margaret Thatcher. "This comment really stopped me in my tracks and I had a lot of doubts, but eventually my mother also changed her mind, we have had plenty of conversations since", Eva says. Her calling proved stronger than anything else and this, Eva believes, is how it often happens in life: no matter how hard you try to be something – or someone – else, sooner or later you end up on the right path.

Women behind the scenes

"In bookshops in Armenia, there are blue and pink books with professions for young boys and for young girls. When you open one, it's a nightmare inside. Women are supposed to become hairdressers, nurses, and teachers. I find it equally unacceptable putting specific professions for boys", Eva shares. She believes we must question these attitudes daily and try to push one another to move beyond these stereotypes.

These attitudes are to some extent reflected in the composition of the Constitutional Court: it has nine judges, eight of whom are men. But, Eva says, the staff of the Court itself, the heads of the departments and divisions, are majority female. As a woman, she says, you always need to push and make your presence known.

Eva shares an example: an upcoming public hearing needed more security inside the building. To arrange the logistics, a group of police officers arrived to speak with the heads of staff and Eva was the only woman in the group. No one would shake her hand. "Men shake each other's hands and say their names, this is how they get to know one another, this is the corporate culture. And when in a meeting there is a female in a male-dominated environment, no one knows how to greet her. So, none of the police officers knew the right protocol, and chose to ignore me altogether. I was obliged to let them know that they could shake my hand and acknowledge me."

Eva refuses to remain behind the scenes or to be ignored. She says she is always very vocal in situations like this one. "I find it funny when at a table, for example, men start to talk politics and only initiate contact with other men. So if you want to chime in, you have to fight for your place in the discussion and debate. I always try to take it lightly and not to be aggressive about it, because changing attitudes is much easier this way."

Armenia does rely on certain quota criteria for female representation, but Eva believes in an even better approach: encouraging grassroots female participation. If society does this, women will no longer be behind the scenes or just instruments for filling nominal quotas. If people are engaged, Eva says, society will be proportionally represented in all its variety. Once the necessary steps are done at a party level, the "big fight" for equality will no longer exist, because a natural transition from civic engagement to party structures will end with different people entering the parliament.

> **"My dream is to ensure that everyone has a choice, whatever the choice may be."**

Refusing to see the world in dichotomies

"I refuse to see the world as male and female", Eva says. When it comes to her own role as a representative, she alludes that someday she may consider representing her society, trying to find better solutions and decisions on its behalf. But for now, she is focused on her current position and also shares information about several projects she is proud of.

> **"It is unacceptable to impose stereotypes regardless of gender."**

One such initiative is the Ed-Camp, or Education Camp. One day, as she was taking a break from work, she ran into an acquaintance of hers who had a major project in mind and was looking for partners. His idea was to gather 500 Armenian school teachers from across the country and engage them in a conversation about the modernization of the educational system, a liberalization of the curriculum, and to help teachers and children use modern technologies and methodologies. Eva saw this as a sign and joined the initiative. Then the pandemic broke out, but they still managed to pull it off, attracting over 45,000 participants. The feedback they received was extremely positive: teachers said that it had helped them to meet other professionals and to learn from colleagues, thus improving school education as a whole.

Eva is also proud of the trainings she provides in rural areas, where she helps people organize and improve life in their own communities. She gives the example of the "Europe in a Suitcase" project, in which young Armenian experts living abroad return to Armenia to share their knowledge and experience, tour the regions, and meet young, local Armenians to discuss specific topics like grassroots activism and education. Many people have participated and now have initiatives of their own, actively making change in their own surroundings.

She is also grateful for the learning opportunities in her new position, which can be challenging. She has to know what and what not to say, and how and when to say it. Balancing all this is a sensitive issue when representing a state institution. It is sometimes tricky and a lot of knowledge is required of her. She is not a lawyer, but she represents a legal institution, so there is an immense amount of learning, discussions, and translation from the legal perspective to the common language of citizens and journalists.

When asked if the media uses any of the infamous clichés which women in prominent positions have to face, Eva denies it with a smile and says that, despite seeing many brilliant young Armenian females being labelled in a sexist way, it has never happened to her. But she underlines how important it is to speak up when it happens. "The person before you is not always trying to offend you. Sometimes they are sincerely trying to compliment you, so maybe you can kindly hint that if they want to say something nice, they should comment from a professional point of view."

Armenia is changing

There is already some understanding in Armenian society about these issues. But changes are both positive and negative. Due to the development of social media and international travel, more and more young female professionals are visible in leading positions. But not every woman should take a leading position, Eva says. "Every woman needs to decide what is best for her and what opportunities she has. Maybe someone wants to become a housewife and a mother, and they should be free to do so. There's nothing shameful in being a young wife and mother if this is your dream. But there is also nothing shameful in a woman being happy in her thirties, without dreaming about finding a husband or having children. My dream is to ensure that everyone has a choice, whatever that choice may be. Women should be equipped with all the tools and opportunities to dream and to fight to make their dream come true."

But there are also challenges. Eva brings up a little-known phenomenon: gender-selective abortions. Having at least one boy is a "must" for many Armenians, and what Eva describes as a "horrible phenomenon" is a reflection of these beliefs. If Armenian families do not want to have a female child, they ask that the pregnancy is terminated. Thanks to the efforts of multiple NGOs, as well as dedicated individuals and politicians, awareness has been raised enough to ensure that the necessary legal amendments are already in place to prevent not only inhuman acts, but also a looming demographic crisis.

> **"You must live your life as an example – not because you are special and should be a role model, but because you can be a precedent for others."**

“Women should be equipped with all the tools and opportunities to dream and to fight for their dream to come true.”

Eva says there is no easy answer to why this phenomenon is widespread in Armenia. “In my opinion, it is a cultural stereotype of patriarchal societies. Men inherit in the family and continue the “family line”. A family which does not have male children can be frustrated and end up choosing to remove a female foetus. It is a bitter topic in Armenia.”

During the past year, she was mostly involved in trainings during which she explained the principles of feminism and the anti-discrimination movement, with a focus on political activism. “I help people around me learn what other activists helped me learn. It is an obligation to transmit this knowledge. I also believe in living your life the way you should as an example; this is activism in and of itself. Always be present in a conversation, speak up when facing injustice, offer an alternative point of view, come to help when you see someone is intimidating a young woman. And stand next to her and help her understand that she has enough power to speak up for herself and that there are always people who will support her.”

“I do not enjoy some of the ways the feminist debate is led in some societies, groups, and communities. If one takes a step back and looks around, all we can see are some justifiably angry women who are trying to raise their voices against injustice yet end up just screaming in a void. And sometimes our inability to convince people of what is right comes from this negative language. My position on this has always been to live your life as an example – not because you’re special and should be a role model, but because you can be a precedent for others. Being a woman is not a secondary role, it does not mean that someone has to solve anything for you, as humans we also just reach out for support. Emancipation does not equal isolation. Life has nuances: sometimes we are happy, sometimes – angry. But there should be no hesitation when we are dreaming and fighting for our goals.”

And what are her goals for the future? She laughs and says: “Becoming the Prime Minister of Armenia. I always say this as a joke when someone asks me this question. And then I stop for a second and ask myself, why not? But for now, I believe in spreading ideas because once upon a time I was influenced by those who decided to talk about their idea of civic education and responsibility. I was brought to this stage of my life by people who came to my school and decided to have a conversation about our responsibilities as citizens. Today, I want to be a person who inspires others, who motivates, and who delivers enthusiasm. I love my country and I am convinced that if we could gather together and work towards making our lives better, we would be able to ascend to a higher level as a society.”

The first future project which comes to Eva’s mind is establishing a career centre for politicians. “This is the first thought that came to mind. Maybe I should listen to my intuition and put this on my to-do list?” she says.

Maybe. And I was happy to be of help.

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"My dream is to ensure that everyone has a choice, whatever the choice may be."

"I refuse to see the world as male and female."

"It is unacceptable to impose stereotypes regardless of gender."

"When in a meeting there is a female in a male-dominated environment, no one knows how to greet you. I was obliged to let them know that they could shake my hand and acknowledge me."

"You must live your life as an example – not because you are special and should be a role model, but because you can be a precedent for others."

"In most cases, people are not trying to offend you. So maybe you can gently remind them to comment on your professional qualities if they want to compliment you."

"There's nothing shameful in wanting to become a housewife and a mother. But there is also nothing shameful in a woman being happy in her thirties, without dreaming about finding a husband or having children."

"Women should be equipped with all the tools and opportunities to dream and to fight for their dream to come true."

"I was brought to this stage of my life by people who came to my school and decided to have a conversation about our responsibilities as citizens. Today, I want to be a person who inspires others."

ON A QUEST FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Katerina Papanikolau on creating a more tolerant, healthier environment for people via female empowerment, human rights, and upskilling

Author: Mila Cherneva

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 3 WORDS: Passionate, liberal, enthusiastic

TOP PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS: Upskilling and change

FEMALE ROLE MODELS THAT INSPIRE YOU: Michelle Obama

I AM A WOMAN IN consulting and I am a mother engaged in politics.

MISSION OF YOUR CAREER: To enable people to upskill, so that they have equal opportunities in the labour market and a life full of possibilities.

RECIPE FOR MORE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: We need to be bold, we should be united, work together, share more authentic stories, and be realistic in our goals.

FREEDOM FOR ME IS: The pursuit of happiness.

KATERINA PAPANIKOLAOU

Greece
CONSULTING & CIVIL SOCIETY

Ancient Greece is the birthplace of democracy – it gave the world the foundation of a system where individuals can express their opinions and craft politics which reflect their society's needs and rights as much as possible.

Despite this rich legacy, contemporary Greece, like other countries across Southeastern Europe, still has issues to resolve. Katerina Papanikolau is a senior consultant who has examined the topics of female empowerment, human rights, and upskilling for years. She has studied biology, specialised in psychotherapy, and has devoted most of her energy to creating a more tolerant, healthier environment for people. In her perception of Greek society, she identifies areas for improvement: in both politics and within communities, she sees that human rights, particularly female rights, do not receive the respect they require. However, younger generations, with their open minds, are improving this landscape and Katerina plans to start a new project to tap their potential.

Where women belong

Papanikolau cites the fact that Greece ranks last in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index. The country's rank is 52.2 points out of 100 – more than 15 points below the EU average and, according to the Index's website, "Its ranking has remained the same since 2010".

> **"In Greece there are not many people speaking openly about human rights. Only in the last two years we have begun a more genuine conversation about human rights."**

When asked about her own personal experience, she says "I do not think that there is a particular moment in a woman's life when you actually feel pure discrimination, if you exclude instances of sexual harassment or hate speech".

However, she explains, there is a traditional perception in Greek society that women should remain at home and that men should go to work. "There is research that shows that more than 50% of Greeks believe that women should stay at home. For me, that is embarrassing. The perception is that if a woman can be supported financially by the husband, it is better to stay at home and take care of the children and her family. There is no need to work", Katerina explains. Conversations with women in other countries show that this same perception is widespread in the region, within both EU and non-EU member nations.

One professional field undeniably dominated by females is civil society and non-governmental organisations – Katerina calls them "mainly a female game". Yet that simply contributes to the stereotype that women are usually more empathetic than men and therefore more likely to belong in this sphere.

She adds that female empowerment should not limit itself to giving examples of extraordinary women who have created spectacular things. "I would like to see more cases of how practical actions [in civil society] are connected with the real needs of women. I would like to see more stories of women that did not make it, not just those of successful women. When a woman feels like she has no means, is not equal, or has no support, and then always sees just these best- case scenarios about the most successful women, I am not sure how she is empowered.

In many cases some women feel like: "Okay, I am not like these women so why should I follow this NGO or be part of this movement". They are always cases of brilliant women, successful women, women with a legacy. I feel [normal women] do not feel a connection, they think that there is a mismatch", Katerina explains.

Younger people, progress, and solutions

Fortunately, the younger generation seems to be more progressive when it comes to human rights or female empowerment. "I think people who are now 20 to 30 years old are more aware of these topics. They don't care about sex, race, or skin colour", the senior consultant explains.

However, Katerina points out that younger people might be more liberal or tolerant, but they can still be victims of years of prejudice and stereotypes. "I am really careful when it comes to unconscious bias. We can find ourselves being biased without even knowing it. I think as a community we should work more on unconscious bias", she says.

Thus, her opinion is that the focus should not be on those who strongly believe that women belong at home or in the kitchen, but on those who have unconscious bias. She explains that sometimes even progressive people in business may choose men over women, even if the latter are just as skilled or educated. "The bias is in believing that a man is more capable and free, since, even if he has kids, he won't bring problems to the office because of them. I think you can see this in the way we describe the same behaviour in the professional lives of men and women totally differently", she adds.

Katerina is now working on a new project aimed at young girls in order to "promote their development, their openness, their confidence in themselves, and their trust in other women or men." She believes that it is vital to nurture their self-confidence and self- awareness, and to enhance their opportunities to pursue anything that they truly desire "without obstacles, barriers, and stereotypes." This initiative is being kept secret until it begins. However, she explains that its core will be to help young girls study, participate in social life, and pursue their interests in fashion, art, or science.

> **"I would like to see more stories of women that did not make it, not just those of successful women. When a woman feels like she has no means, is not equal, or has no support, and then always sees just these best-case scenarios about the most successful women, I am not sure how she is empowered. I feel [normal women] do not feel a connection, they think that there is a mismatch."**

Greek politics' relationship with human rights

Katerina explains that her home country has a long way to go before the conversation about human rights goes through an evolution. "In Greece there are not so many people speaking openly about human rights. Mainly in the last two years we are entering a more genuine conversation about human rights. I am not sure whether there are results, but now we are talking more authentically and genuinely", she explains.

During our interview, she mentioned that a female Olympic gold medallist had talked publicly about sexual harassment in sports for the first time that very day. "She described the story in full detail and the prime minister said something about how we should safeguard children, girls, and women in sports. I think this is typical for Greece – every time something like this happens, we speak about it very openly and we all share opinions, but I don't think human rights actually becomes a part of the agenda", Katerina claims.

She is not quite sure whether women have conquered politics in Greece and have started feeling "at home" there. "I am not sure it is a place for women. We see more women [in politics], and I would say the obstacles for them there have decreased. The perception is that the obstacles are going completely away, that there are no barriers and that [women] can easily enter politics", she explains. Yet the reality is a bit different. Katerina believes that support is required in order for women to enter political life successfully. "When I say support for women in politics, I mean practical support – so that even if you have children and have to work, you are able to participate. For example, if all the municipal council meetings are held at 10pm at night, then that is a barrier for women who want to be part of that council", she explains.

From human science to humans

Katerina comes from a scientific background – she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Biology from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. "When I studied biology, I realised that the main advantage I gained from my studies was the capability to focus on specific issues and, at the same time, to broaden my views and have different perspectives on certain issues. All of that made me more adaptable so I could change more easily", she explains.

For the first few years of her professional career, she worked in the pharmaceutical industry and then she decided to go in a completely new direction. "I was focused on organisational development so I studied it and psychotherapy. I decided I should focus more on training and consulting, so after years of developing my own skills, interests, and career, I am now working as a consultant specialised in upskilling and reskilling people", she explains. She has been part of academies organised by FNF which further broadened her horizon on human rights.

This is where her true passion lies. She believes everyone should have equal opportunities and not simply be a witness to injustice. "Since childhood, I have been really engaged in politics. I really like to listen to the news, read newspapers, and understand what is happening around me. Seeing so much inequality around, violations of human rights, and hate speech, inequality regarding sex, race, or religion, I decided I should do something", Katerina says.

"We can find ourselves being biased without even knowing it. I think as a community we should work more on unconscious bias."

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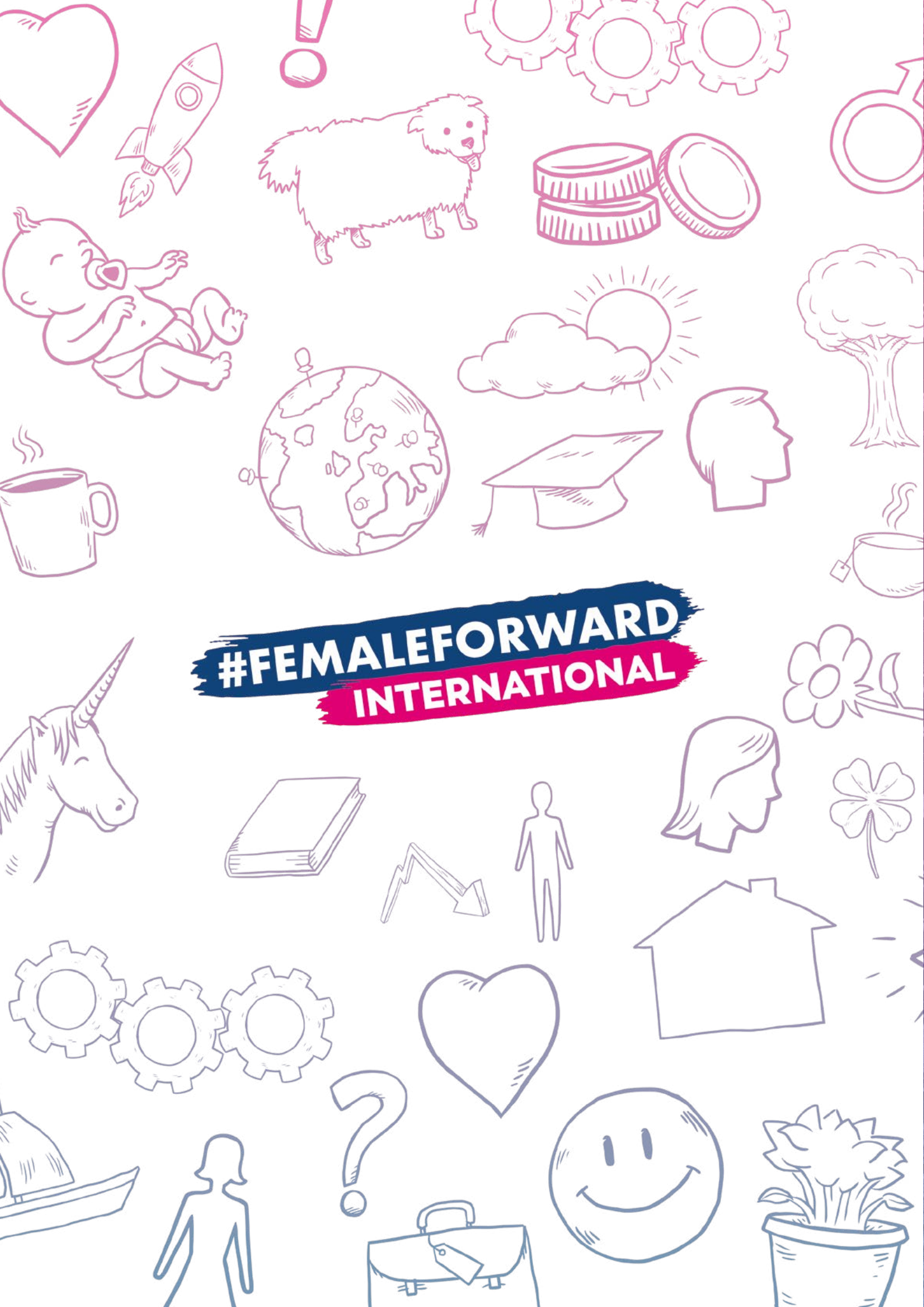
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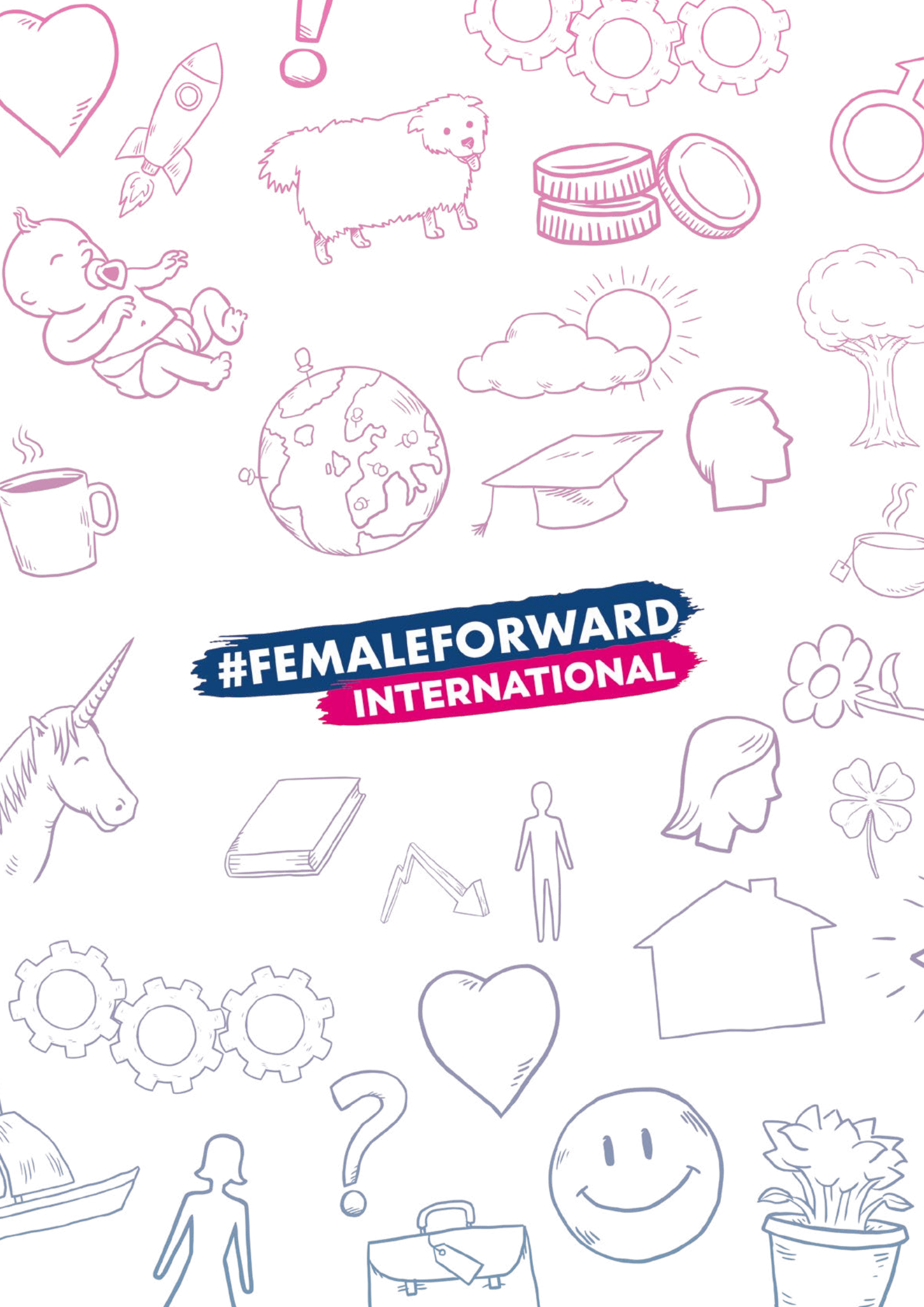
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PIONEERING CHANGE: THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

Author: Burcu Karakaş

I am first a woman and then a journalist. In a country where political oppression pervades our daily lives, so much so that it becomes, every day, harder to breathe, I am a "feminist journalist"—I see life and journalism from a feminist perspective. I can't think of any other way in Turkey, where women's rights are constantly under attack and not a day passes without a woman being murdered. Yet, despite this reality, we should be hopeful, as the women's movement in Turkey is shedding light on the oppression of women in this country that we call home.

Women and the LGBTİ+ community are among the groups of people who have been labeled as enemies by the authoritarian regime of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This is, of course, no coincidence. Just like it wasn't a coincidence when then Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said, "we are a conservative democratic party. Family matters to us," right after the AKP had replaced the Ministry of Women Affairs with the Ministry of Family and Social Politics in 2011.

Authoritarian regimes share many common features, chief among which is attacking the gains in human rights that have been won after long years of struggle and prioritizing the concept of family. This tendency is clearly at play in Turkey. Yet one should always remember that when there is an attack, there is a defense and, over the last decade, Turkey has witnessed an inspiring organized women's movement to fight against these systematic attacks on women's rights.

As Erdoğan believes, the ruling AKP delivers. Government policies only define women within the sphere of the family, never once considering them as individuals. It is telling that an issue as vital as violence against women has only recently begun to be discussed publicly by those in power, but this is simply to prevent the issue from disrupting families. They don't consider sacrificing women as harmful, so long as the integrity of the family remains intact.

Moreover, the longer that "the family" maintains its continuity and stability as the core social unit within the system, the more this social tenet is entrenched. We are continuously being subjected to discourse that argues that disrupting families would upend society and that the LGBTI+ community threatens the social order. "Those who don't start a family are not with US", or "those who are getting a divorce are traitors" are common examples of such discourse.

It is obvious that gender roles are fixed for the conservative religious community, who puts family first: the father heads the house and dominates the public sphere, while the mother remains the private, domestic sphere. These family-focused beliefs essentially imprison women at home, expecting them to assume traditional roles and keep silent when subjected to violence. Women are even sent home after visiting women's shelters (or 'guesthouses', as

the AKP calls them) and encouraged not to file complaints about their abusive husbands. The recommendations given by the Offices of Familial and Religious Guidance, which is under the supervision of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, makes clear such expectations. I was once preparing a story, and called one of these offices, pretending to be a woman subjected to violence and seeking guidance. Religious officials told me, "don't blame your husband if he hits you", "violent attitudes will disappear if you put your Islamic life right", and "try settling the violence without consulting the police"—all of which suggest that women should not leave home despite being subjected to violence.

"Young women are strong and on fire. The women's movement in Turkey remains determined to pioneer political and social change, despite the enormous challenges ahead."

There are currently 407 active offices of familial and religious guidance affiliated with the Directorate of Religious Affairs that are dedicated to solving women's problems. The Directorate plans to increase their number. During AKP rule, the Directorate's authority has grown, and it is no longer limited to taking necessary steps to prevent divorces. It now organizes marriage seminars aiming to influence young people, the goal of which is to encourage them to get married.

The oppression of women is not solely due to the activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Law enforcement officers also ignore violence against women. Despite Law No. 6284: Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Woman, women who go to police stations for protection may be forced to return to the home from which they fled. According to a lawyer I interviewed, "think of a woman, who is afraid of being killed, seeking shelter in the government. Although the legislation is clear, her quest for justice and protection at the police station ends with the words: "go back to your husband.'"

These words reveal the gravity of the situation. Most law enforcement officers avoid their legal obligations and simply send women away with statements like "we can't allocate a police officer for each of you", or "go home; you'll make up with your husband." Sometimes women seeking protection from the police are even forced to make peace with their husbands at the police station itself. In short, women who are worrying for their lives are abandoned, despite the law.

Women in Turkey face a struggle just to stay alive, whether it is due to the negligence of police officers, the marriage propaganda from the Directorate of Religious Affairs, President Erdoğan's insistence on "having least three children," or anti-abortion discourse. This struggle, which has been pursued within the scope of the discussions concerning the Istanbul Convention, is the most concrete strategy to protect women's lives.

Turkey was the first country to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known more commonly as the Istanbul Convention, in 2011. The convention, which aims to eliminate gender-based violence with the responsibility falling on states to implement it, came into force in August 2014. Yet since that time, Turkey has not enforced it. Tellingly, media organizations close to the government and members of the conservative religious community have repeatedly argued that the convention "has been disrupting the institution of the family" and demanded its annulment, claiming that it has increased the number of divorce cases. These groundless allegations are based mainly on the rising number of women seeking divorce and the growing intolerance towards women taking decisions about their own lives into their hands.

Women subjected to violence are now taking social and economic risks to leave their husbands rather than suffer violence. They are getting stronger in socioeconomic terms, while those such as the AKP who want the male-dominated order to endure, oppose this empowerment. Attacks against the Istanbul Convention, a legal text that ensures

"In Turkey, the women's movement did not abandon its street protests to defend women's legal gains and announce that women have a right to live."

“Due to President Erdogan's statement against abortion, there are hardly any public hospitals that currently perform the procedure in Turkey, even though abortion is a legal right.”

legal guarantees of women's rights and protections against violence and prioritizes gender equality, are in fact reflections of an anti-equality mind-set. This mind-set also favors child marriages, opposes the termination of pregnancies after rape and women's alcohol consumption, and favors mixed-sex education, all while defending the idea that women should be humiliated and even punished on the grounds of "honor". This is the atmosphere in which women are fighting to hold on to the rights that they have won.

We should not be talking about the annulment of the Istanbul Convention; instead, we should be discussing what if the convention is not implemented. We already see that the government is intentionally shifting the focus of these discussions. But what should we be talking about? First and foremost, men are killing women every day in Turkey, but we don't have enough women’s shelters. Existing shelters do not work to empower women, let alone carry out studies about how to address the problem. Gender-focused training is not offered to judges and prosecutors, as required by the convention.

The failure to implement Law No. 6284, in other words, leaves women alone to face violence from men and is a direct violation of the convention. But this we do not talk about this as much as we should. According to Article 25 of the convention, rape crisis centers should be established to provide a platform to fight against sexual violence. In Turkey, physical violence is unfortunately as common as sexual violence, but there has not been a single step towards establishing these centers since 2014.

The convention’s motto is "the Istanbul Convention saves lives." In fact, most laws in Turkey seek to save women's lives. The problem, however, lies in the failure to implement them. Instead we hear comments such as, "if the convention saves lives, then why does male violence persist?" Exactly! Since the laws and legal regulations are not implemented, violence persists. This incompetence does not appear to be a mistake. It is, instead, willful incompetence driven by politics.

It is, after all, political will that drives the implementation of the law in countries such as Turkey. Although everything seems perfect on paper, the government fails to execute it. The same applies to abortion. Due to President Erdogan's statement against abortion, there are hardly any public hospitals that currently perform the procedure in Turkey, even though abortion is a legal right. The same approach is applied to the Istanbul Convention. The fact that the ruling party prioritizes the family, ignores women's identity as an individual, and only reluctantly tries to curtail violence against women renders the articles of the convention meaningless.

Let's pin down the fact that Turkey's withdrawal from the convention would lead to further confirmation of the government’s lack of will on the issue. It is indirectly saying, "we could not care less if women died or not." The fact that the ruling party rejects gender equality inevitably causes the number of cases of violence against women to rise. The lack of deterring punishments and the decline in cases that prosecute murderers of women only encourage future assailants. Unless the political will to combat violence against women is convincingly displayed, solution-oriented policies that prevent it will remain elusive. And this state of deadlock leads women into a bottomless pit.

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We can date the beginning of this approach to police violence against demonstrators during the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Thereafter, the country experienced pronounced instability, from suicide bombings and the outbreak of a fresh round of conflict in the Kurdish region to the attempted coup in 2016. These events made it illegal to protest publicly, and political movements withered. During this painful period, the women's movement did not, however, abandon its street protests to defend women’s

legal gains and announce that women have a right to live. Women demonstrated most notably on 8 March 2020 and have held other protests as well, refusing to back down in the face of political power. Holding banners and posters, shouting slogans, and literally gasping for air, women exclaim that the private sphere is now political, femicide is political, and thus gender equality is political. These messages were exclaimed in Ankara and from all over the world.

Finally, we must consider how the women's movement in Turkey has galvanized action and elevated its message through social media. The #challengeaccepted campaign, in which women shared their black-and-white photos to raise awareness about violence against women, was the most popular social media movement in Turkey. Yet there is more. Younger generation feminists, notably young women in the universities, have raised their voices on social media and demanded justice for their peers, who have been murdered or found dead in suspicious circumstances. This pushback has been so effective that many cases that were about to be closed and in which the cause of death was determined to be suicide have now been re-opened. Although a damning indictment of the Turkish judicial system, these efforts reveal the depth of the new generation's ambition to defend women's rights and pioneer change.

Young women are strong and on fire. And it is not only women who are raising their voices; awareness of feminism across society grows every day. Efforts to degrade the women's movement have, in other words, been in vain. The women's movement in Turkey remains determined to pioneer political and social change, despite the enormous challenges ahead.

Disclaimer: Piece is written in Dec 2020.

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“I am first a woman and then a journalist. In a country where political oppression pervades our daily lives, so much so that it becomes, every day, harder to breathe, I am a "feminist journalist"—I see life and journalism from a feminist perspective. I can't think of any other way in Turkey, where women's rights are constantly under attack and not a day passes without a woman being murdered.”

“Women are encouraged not to file complaints about their abusive husbands. The recommendations given by the Offices of Familial and Religious Guidance, which is under the supervision of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, makes clear such expectations. I was once preparing a story, and called one of these offices, pretending to be a woman subjected to violence and seeking guidance. Religious officials told me, "don't blame your husband if he hits you", "violent attitudes will disappear if you put your Islamic life right", and "try settling the violence without consulting the police”.”

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FEMALE LEADERSHIP: COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE AS KEYS TO SUCCESS

Lose your armour women: be seen, be heard, and stand your ground.

Author: Dr Camelia Crişan
ALDE Individual Member, EWA Alumna 2019

Men and women in politics differ significantly in how they present themselves in public, not necessary as a personal choice, but rather in response to society's expectations. However, research shows that in general, women are better leaders than men because they have more obstacles to overcome in order to reach higher positions in organizations and parties. Fewer ever seem to reach the top in parties, not because we lack competence, but mainly because we start from a very narrow base of female members. Additionally, the way we elect our leadership is not in favour of women — we tend to value narcissistic people who display confidence. But confidence does not equal competence. And women seem to display less confidence, even when they are equally or more competent than men. This leads to various consequences, the most important being a decrease in leadership quality, which is bad for both parties and communities. One of the suggested solutions is a temporary introduction of quota policies, and where that is not deemed acceptable, a dedicated effort to attract more women to politics as well as the creation of support networks for their development and empowerment.

Do you think you have what it takes to be a politician? How about what it takes to be a good politician? How about a political leader? If responses to the above questions could be divided by gender, we would hear, in most cases, two very different answers.

Men: bring it on, I can run NOW for the presidency of the republic!

Women: I need to attend this course and at least another and perhaps finish my PhD first, and then I may be ready to run, but first let me gain some experience in the local council.

As a psychologist, I was always intrigued by these differences. I have heard them numerous times while facilitating workshops for female politicians for Union Save Romania (USR). I had in front of me accomplished professionals, leaders in their field, women with stellar careers and still they needed a little bit more education prior to embarking in a political campaign. Initially, I had thought that the situation was specific to USR, because it is a relatively new party, entering national elections for the first time in 2016. But subsequently, I have opened my eyes

and wings and met female politicians from across Europe as part of the European Women Academy (EWA), Eastern group, since 2019. Some of them were accomplished politicians but still reticent, still lacking the courage to follow their ambitions.

Upon completing EWA, the academic in me embraced this curiosity and started digging. And as they say: when the student is ready, the master appears; I actually stumbled upon a book which helped me clarify this apparent conundrum: how come competent professional women don't feel confident enough to act more often in line with their ambition.

A simple and handy answer would be:

Men: It's just their fault!

Women: It is only our fault! We are to blame!

I have anecdotal evidence to support these answers from the many university classes I teach: I ask male and female students to whom they think they owe their success or failures: to themselves or to others? Most of the women assign success to their teams and blame themselves for failure, while male students do the opposite. Some of this anecdotal evidence is confirmed by research (Sherman, Higgs & Williams, 1997). In psychology, we call this trait "locus of control".

"Women tend to assign success externally (e.g. to their teams) and failure internally (e.g. blaming themselves), while men tend to assign success to themselves and failure to external factors (e.g. technology, luck, collaborators)."

Of course, the full and comprehensive answer to my conundrum is a bit more complex than that. It is related not only to where we place the control over our actions, it has to do with political recruitment, political training, setting career paths in parties, media portrayal, and societal stereotypes. But because the answer is so complex, I will discuss below in more detail each of the identified problems. To illustrate each issue, I will use ideas and results from a research study we recently conducted in USR and will complement it with arguments drawn from academic research.

In his book, "Why do so many incompetent men become leaders?", Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) gives several arguments that provide robust answers to my question above. He defines competence as "how GOOD you are at something", and confidence as "how good you THINK you are at something", creating this clear difference between ability and the belief in that ability. Interestingly enough, in politics, we should think about someone's potential to be, in fact, competent, especially for new politicians who have not held a public office before. Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) provides anecdotal examples about how men and women are different from the competence and confidence points of view; while women are more qualified, they are seldom invited to apply for promotion, in meetings they speak less and are more frequently interrupted, they present their statements with caveats and several options to choose from. When they don't know an answer, they will admit it. Men are more interested in making great impressions, both in selection interviews and in meetings, they speak louder and bolder, interrupt others, tend to recommend one option and, when they don't know a precise answer, they find a way around the question.

Evidence for similar cases is provided by Sandberg and Grant (2015), who showed that when male employees contributed to ideas for a project, they got significantly higher performance evaluations, whereas women who came up with equally valuable ideas did not manage to improve their managers' perception of their performance. Brescoll (2012) showed that women who speak more are perceived, by both male and female observers, as less competent and less suitable leaders than less voluble women, while the inverse is true for men.

The dyad of competence/confidence is rather important, mostly because of the different impression men and women create on third parties. For women, seeming less confident triggers a perception that one is less competent. At the same time, the opposite is true and happens more frequently for men: the more confident you are, the more competent you are perceived. In some cases, there is no causal relationship between the two.

Actually, as research has shown, we seem to rely a lot on intuition and don't bother to check because we tend to think fast and in patterns (Kahnemann, 2012). While mediocre people will usually overstate their capacity and talents, the competent will show self-criticism and self-doubt about their expertise. There are some caveats to the above statements. For instance, research showed that women are internally confident, but unless they show it externally, they will not be perceived as competent (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). Moreover, in order to have an impact, women need also to appear caring. In fact, in a meta-analysis performed by Schneider and Bos (2014), all authors who evaluated feminine stereotypes of women politicians

included something synonymous to caring: affectionate, compassionate, or kind.

What does all this mean for women politicians? Speak less,

> **"Stereotypes value outspoken men and kind, affectionate women. Also, it is "socially forbidden" for women to ever publicly show even a trace of anger."**

be caring, show some confidence, but not too much, and never ever show anger, because it will always be attributed to personal characteristics rather than legitimate external situations (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008).

This situation is even more interesting because companies and parties tend not to look at these traits when they select their leaders, quite the opposite in fact. We demand from our leaders confidence and associate confident behavior with leadership potential. But it is a fact that women are disadvantaged when we judge leadership based on perception, namely high confidence. In other words, we prefer to have surgery performed by someone who looks very confident rather than by someone who is competent. It seems that this situation puts women in a lose-lose situation, especially if they aspire to a leadership position: they can't look too confident and when we do demand confidence, they should not aim high lest we penalize them for showing it. Overconfidence pays off for men, thus they will show this behavior more frequently than women will. In fact, concludes Chamorro-Premuzic (2019): "men are more likely to live in a world in which their flaws are forgiven and their strengths magnified. Thus it is harder for them to see themselves accurately. Overconfidence is the natural result of privilege." This leads to a series of negative consequences: reckless decisions, a lack of acceptance of negative criticism, overconfidence in their performance, and a preference for lies over painful truths (Santos-Pinto, 2012). As a result, over time, leaders' overconfidence pushes them towards incompetence.

How does that translate in politics?

When leaders of political parties are mediocre, so may be the people surrounding them. Reaching a position of power or leadership is easier to do for men than women and not only due to the glass ceiling. Companies and parties end up selecting leaders who are outspoken, confident, self-centred, creative, charismatic, extrovert, and easy-going people. We rank them high in interviews and praise their TV appearances. Unfortunately, many of these characteristics are nothing but pure narcissism. We find narcissists more frequently among men than women, and very often among politicians. A research study by Brunel et al (2008) shows narcissism as a main predictor for leadership.

Why is this important in politics?

Because in general, the same traits that help people get a position of power are not efficient or useful in managing the situation afterwards. Employees, staff, and citizens need empathetic leaders, people who put their well-being and common interests first, and who provide solutions. Narcissists can't form and lead successful teams. Narcissists charm people initially, but then they are more prone to display counter-productive work behaviours — white-collar crime and harassment, including sexual harassment (Zeigler-Hill, 2016). I will not focus further on the other two dimensions of the so-called dark triad of personality, i.e. psychopathy and Machiavellianism.

In a focus group conducted in December 2020 with USR female members elected to local councils, one of them was behaving similarly to the situation described above. The party members had elected by popular vote the list for local elections based on the candidates' public speeches. After they took office, members realized that the traits which persuaded them to give their internal, party vote to certain candidates were useless in running the communities.

During election campaigns, the perception of the candidates' competence is of utmost importance. Ditonto (2016) finds that subjects evaluate a candidate whose competence is in doubt less favourably, and are less likely to vote for the candidate, when she is a woman. In other words, voters are paying more attention to female candidates' competence than to men's. "Subjects may be more likely to believe that a bad debate performance or negative newspaper editorial is evidence that a candidate is incompetent when that candidate is a woman, while they may be more willing to give male candidates the benefit of the doubt. A female candidate who does particularly well in a debate or receives a ringing endorsement from a newspaper may never appear to be a victim of negative stereotyping, because the positive nature of the substantive information about her makes competence stereotypes less salient" Ditonto (2016).

What does this imply for women politicians? That in order to create an image of competence, they need to

carefully prepare supporting narratives or documents, have advocates pleading on their behalf, and make sure they have good media support.

If these pieces of advice work well for the campaign

"In political campaigns, women need more than men a favourable press and advocates speaking on their behalf."

outside the party, what are the solutions for internal party politics? How do we connect competence with the confidence that leads afterwards to external political action?

One solution we have identified in USR has been to increase female's competence, and as a result, raise their external confidence. In 2019, with the support of Friedrich Naumann Foundation, we organized two workshops attended by more than 60 women. 15 of them participated in a focus group, one year after the events, a year which had two electoral campaigns. Most participants mentioned that they had increased their competence at the end of the workshops, and some went back to the notes they took during the events to get inspiration for their election campaigns. However, the most important impact the workshop had was on their confidence, the one they show externally. A large number of participants in these workshops have entered local elections and became local councillors. They continued interacting in an online informal setting after graduation and realized that they are not alone in the problems they face within the party and with their male colleagues, and the fact that they could reach out to others for solutions provided comfort and resilience.

The percentage of women in USR is still very low compared to the national gender ratio — around 25% in the party, while women represent 51% of Romania's population. This raises a question of representation. It also shows a missed opportunity in terms of elections. USR PLUS has been constantly, in the last elections (EU, local and national) voted for by more men than women. It is clear that in the current circumstances, the party is not a very interesting option for female voters. The results of the December 2020 national elections show a great improvement in terms of the number of women who entered the parliament, from 8 in 2016 to 16 in 2020. However, in ratio terms the things stay almost the same, 18% women MPs in 2016 and 20% women MPs in 2020, with the party almost doubling its election results — 9% in 2016 and 16,5% in 2020. It looks good, but in fact, USR PLUS1 is not even in compliance with national regulations recommending that women represent a minimum 30% of the party's MPs.

Starting discussions about quotas could make sense in the current situation, especially in a country with a very traditional view of social roles. Research is proving that a gender quota may be important in its own right to promoting equality in political representation. Systems for implementing it may vary, but we refer here to one where men and women are internally elected on different ballots and then the lists are combined in a zipper format. In terms of results, far from being at odds with meritocracy, female quotas raised the competence of male leaders too.

"Temporary quotas and zipper type election lists are the only solution for better representation and an increased leadership quality of leadership in politics."

Opponents of quotas claimed that supply constraints make them counterproductive, because one would be replacing competent men with mediocre women. But based on empirical evidence from a research conducted in Sweden, Besley, Folke, Perrson & Rickne, (2017) have proven the contrary: quotas can increase the competence of the political class by reducing the share of mediocre men. Additional arguments are provided by Murray (2010), who

1 Since July 2020, the name of the party has changed from USR to USR PLUS, after a merger be-tween USR and another party.

finds that women who entered parliament after France's quota law were as active and efficient as male lawmakers. The same is true in Italy, and in India (Beaman et al, 2008).

The quota debate is not a comfortable one, especially for liberal women. So even if it is proven to be the quickest solution to increasing the competence of both men and women politicians, we may need to leave it aside for the moment. In 2019 in USR I encountered some resistance from both males and females who opposed even the creation of a separate social media group to support women. It has to do with the principles people believe in; unregulated competition and the pride of women to prove themselves equal to men. For male leaders, it could be all the obvious reasons stated above. With a decrease in the number of women in the party and apathy of the electorate (almost 70% of Romanians did not vote in the last national elections), it is in the best interest of the party to think about ways of increasing its representativeness. So the problem needs to be addressed through a different method.

A few alternative solutions to quotas may be:

1. Creating a fuss about representation should be a priority, members who believe in this idea should raise the topic on the party agenda with perseverance. Until the issue becomes a priority for party leaders, interested stakeholders need to have the courage to meet, discuss, and create a critical mass.

2. Advocates should be looked for, both inside the party and in the cloud of specialists and consultants surrounding the party.

3. All other development tricks should be employed; empowerment actions, workshops and seminars, female buddies for new female members, informal networks at the local level, and community actions.

4. Female members can organize at a central level in order to create a nurturing environment for the confidence of others.

In such an environment, there will be no conundrums as stated at the beginning of this article, but the premises for a culture of inclusion and diversity, which will allow for one's armour to be taken off in a framework of respect and dialogue. If we aim for these objectives in our communities, why not start with our parties?

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"Women tend to assign success externally (e.g. to their teams) and failure internally (e.g. blaming themselves), while men tend to assign success to themselves and failure to external factors (e.g. technology, luck, collaborators)."

"The fact that women stay silent in a meeting is not a sign that they have nothing to say. It may be a sign that they are fed up with being interrupted or having their ideas redrafted by a man and thus appearing to have more value."

"The fact that women seem less confident to an external audience does not mean that they are internally not confident or not competent. It's a matter of focusing on what more you need to learn rather that becoming complacent with the things you already know."

"Stereotypes value outspoken men and kind, affectionate women. Also, it is "socially forbidden" for women to ever publicly show even a trace of anger."

"The traits that allow men to reach a position of leadership: being self-centred, overconfident, and having a je-ne-sais-quoi, are absolutely useless for efficient leadership once you got the job and need to show results."

"Overconfidence in oneself, which is not doubled by competence, leads to counterproductive work behaviours and, ultimately, to bad team morale."

"In political campaigns, women need more than men a favourable press and advocates speaking on their behalf."

"Temporary quotas and zipper type election lists are the only solution for better representation and an increased leadership quality of leadership in politics."

"As competence is spread equally among men and women, too many men in a political organization leads to a decrease of political competence. Increasing the number of women in politics could lead to both better representation and a gender-balanced distribution of competence by eliminating mediocre men."

"Liberal women may not view the quota debate as comfortable and understandably show resistance to it. If some of them got in a leadership positions through great sacrifices and overcome tremendous obstacles, anyone should be able to do it, right? No reason to make the way easier for other women. It's the same for men. But is it tough?"

"If the quota discussion is not acceptable in your party, the alternative is to make a fuss, organize and create nurturing environments for women's development."

How the Istanbul Convention became the hallmark of a culture war in Central and Southeastern Europe – and what liberals can do to deal with the conservative backlash against it

Author: Martin Dimitrov

Ten years ago, when the Council of Europe opened for signatures the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in Istanbul, Turkey, there was little fanfare and even less controversy associated with it. On the contrary – rights organizations like Amnesty International lamented the attempts of some states – notably Russia, Italy, the UK, and the Vatican to "unravel key provisions" of the draft treaty, which would later be known as the "Istanbul Convention."

A decade down the road, probably to the surprise of those who pushed it forward, the Convention is one of the hottest and most controversial topics in parts of Central and Southeastern Europe. What was supposed to be a landmark treaty aimed at establishing comprehensive legal standards ensuring women's right to be free from violence has turned into a target in a full-fledged culture war between liberal and conservative forces in various countries. How did it come to this?

A very misunderstood document

The Convention was never intended to cause any controversy at all. It was designed with four main pillars. The first one – Prevention – imposed an obligation on all countries that signed it to raise public and professional awareness of the value and benefits of gender equality and the need to eliminate gender stereotypes. The second pillar – Protection – sought to put safety and the needs of victims from gender-based violence at the heart of all state protective measures, such as shelters and supportive services for women and children. The next pillar – Prosecution – aimed to strengthen the legal response against gender-based violence and protect the victims, especially children, during due process. The final pillar – Co-ordination – sought to harmonize all of the above-mentioned policies in the signatory countries. It was an international treaty par excellence, written in bureaucratic language mostly talking about monitoring mechanisms,

"The Istanbul Convention is an international treaty par excellence, written in bureaucratic language that talks mostly about monitoring mechanisms, expert groups, and reporting procedures on the progress of states. It was never intended to cause any controversy."

expert groups, and reporting procedures on the progress of states.

Generally, the document was welcomed with optimism in liberal circles. "The Istanbul Convention is a great achievement for the protection of gender rights worldwide," says Dr Michaela Lissowsky, Senior Advisor for Human Rights and Rule of Law at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF). She adds that the convention is an attempt to purposefully counter stereotypes, to overcome gender-specific roles, customs, and traditions.

War against the "gender"

Now, the debate surrounding the Convention is all about gender ideology, Cultural Marxism and radical feminism, or a supposed attempt to promote the LGBTQ lifestyle, paving the road to same-sex marriages and eliminating the paradigm of sexual dimorphism that sees humans as only male or female. At least this is what people such as Poland's deputy justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro would claim. "We have brought a left-wing, gender Trojan horse into our system, and it's high time for withdrawal," he said in July 2020, as he fulfilled his promise to submit an official application to begin the country's withdrawal from the convention.

He is not alone. In Slovakia and Hungary, Parliaments blocked the Istanbul Convention's ratification in the same year, citing similar "ideological concerns" about its impact on "traditional family values." The Hungarian parliament said it is rejecting the ratification of the treaty and even backed a government declaration that the measure promotes "destructive gender ideologies" and "illegal migration".

One of the most ostensibly neoconservative movements arose in Croatia, where initiatives, inspired by US-based examples, such as the Walk for Life and 40 Days for Life, and festivals, "Progressive Culture Festival – Kulfest," and "Tradfest – a festival of tradition and conservative ideas," have been taking place. These initiatives promote "modern conservatism, its view on the economy, political thought, and the pro-life movement" as well as the promotion of

1/4 OF WOMEN IN EUROPE HAS EXPERIENCED **PHYSICAL AND/OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE** BY AN **INTIMATE PARTNER**

Source

World Health Organization

"Religious motivations or matters of honour cannot never justify acts of violence perpetrated against women. The drafters of the Istanbul Convention assumed that combatting traditional gender roles and stereotypes was the only way to correct the existing inequality between men and women," the human rights expert says.

Absurdly, the main controversy linked to the convention has very little to do with the substance at its core – to urge states to establish a framework to address the root causes of gender-based violence that would, ultimately, lead to legal and institutional changes in the signatory countries.

"alternative human rights and the protection of the unborn" while openly positioning themselves against "gender ideology and militant secularism." These anti-liberal activists considered conducting a referendum on the Convention, but ultimately failed to push it through.

Bulgaria was a trailblazer in formalizing the state fight against the dreaded "gender" – in 2018, after a brutal public backlash by religious groups and nationalist conservative parties, who were then in power, the Constitutional Court ruled that the convention's use of the word "gender" rendered the entire document unconstitutional.

"Now, the debate surrounding the Convention is all about gender ideology, Cultural Marxism, and radical feminism, or a supposed attempt to promote the LGBTQ lifestyle, paving the road to same-sex unions."

The crux of the struggle over the document in Bulgaria, however, emerged a long time ago in Poland. There, conservative critics deemed the introduction of the term "gender" (understood as the socially constructed role of a person as different from their biological sex) foreign to the Polish legal system. They saw it as a viable threat to "traditional family values," and therefore, as incompatible with the country's Basic Law.

Ultimately – and ironically – in March 2021 Turkey, the country where the process of signing the convention started, announced it was withdrawing from the pact. Turkey's minister for family, labour and social policies, Zehra Zumrut, wrote on social media that women's rights were already protected by the country's constitution, so there was no need for the country to be party to the Convention. Conservative voices in its self-declared "small brother", Azerbaijan, followed suit.

In all of these countries, those in power officially claim the same thing – that they already have in place provisions for the protection of women in their domestic laws and they do not have to subscribe to the treaty any longer. Of course, this is often far from true.

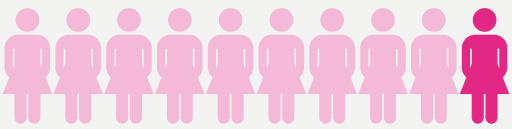
The loud conservative opposition to the Convention and to the purported ideology they associate it with has more to it than meets the eye. It is not simply a question of opposing an international treaty – it is an attempt to take away hard-fought basic freedoms from women in order to change their social status back to where it was decades, or even centuries, ago. At least that is what the people engaged with campaigning for gender equality on the ground say.

From Poland to Turkey – a movement to curb rights of women and children

What is worse, the attack against the Convention has coincided with a simultaneous move to restrict the already existing basic freedoms that women and children in the said countries enjoy. Poland tightened up an abortion ban that was already very restrictive and debates about the same issue have surfaced in Slovakia and Croatia. In Bulgaria, the same people who campaigned against the document in 2018 rebelled against the so-called National Strategy for the Child a year later. In the heads of these conspiracists, the document supposedly diminished the rights of parents over their children, giving the state and its social services a green light to take children away from their families "based on the Norwegian model of child protection" for banal reasons such as refusing to buy a toy.

"We are not talking just about not ratifying the convention – we are talking about an attempt made in 2017 to at least partially dismantle the system protecting against domestic violence in Poland," says Marta Lempart, co-founder of the All-Polish Women's Strike. The movement began in 2016 in order to counter the attempts of the Law and Order Party (PiS) to tighten abortion laws.

"We are not protesting against the government withdrawing from the Istanbul convention, we are protesting against legalizing domestic violence. Because dropping the convention is just a means while the goal itself is somewhere else," she said during the FNF-hosted conference dubbed "Backlash against women's rights: Istanbul Convention under threat." To her, any government that wants to withdraw from any human rights convention does it in order to pass laws that contravene the said convention. "We are talking about dismantling the system, we are talking about legalizing domestic violence," she concludes.



1/10 OF WOMEN IN EUROPE
HAS EXPERIENCED **NON-PARTNER VIOLENCE**

Source

World Health Organization

It is a feeling shared by many women across Central and Southeastern Europe in the last couple of years, who see the backlash against the Convention as one part of a larger attempt by the authorities to curb their governments' responsibility to protect them from violence.

"Turkey has a very high femicide rate, 327 killed since the beginning of the year. In the case of Turkey, when you go to the police or the prosecutor for a restraining order, you have to take these booklets prepared by human rights organizations to show the police what the law is. Turkey never fulfilled its obligations from the Istanbul convention," Turkish journalist Baris Altintas, who is co-director of the Media and Law Studies Association in the country, said during the FNF-organized event.

To her, the mentality that the country's current regime puts on a pedestal is one focused around the family ("whatever that means," she exclaims). "This protection of the family may come at a great cost to women and children. Women might not be able to breathe in this family, but it is not important as long as this family unit is protected," she said, adding that the Turkish government today simply does not want to see women as equal citizens.

"Women are getting stronger in socioeconomic terms, and those who desire the permanency of the male-dominated order, such as the AKP government, oppose this empowerment. It would be fair to state that the attacks on the Istanbul Convention, a significant legal text ensuring legal guarantees in terms of women's rights, fighting against violence towards women, and prioritizing gender equality, are in fact the reflections of an anti-equality mindset," Turkish Journalist and European Women's Academy alumni Burcu Karakas wrote at the time.

It is a notion easy to sell to more conservative, religious, and rural audiences in both Poland and Turkey. "It's not Poland as a whole, it is the Polish government that is breaking the rules – that is important to me," Marta Lempart says. Altintas agrees: "As in Poland, there are these extremists – not normal conservative people – who have horrible opinions and are wielding a disproportional influence on government and shaping its policies."

Reject progress, return to tradition

How did it come to this rigid polarization? One possible answer comes from the former Yugoslavia, where FNF Ambassadors have observed how post-socialist nation-building efforts, alongside the reinvigorated power of the Catholic Church, galvanized anti-feminist attitudes.

"Since the war, Croatia has been undergoing a traditionalist reform. As a country, we are becoming much more conservative, much more religious, and less progressive. Voices that are dominant in Croatian politics and public life today are something quite different from the values that I grew up with," Croatian liberal politician from the GLAS movement and pro-adoption activist Diana Topcic-Rosenberg told FNF in an interview. "I think that, over a period of time, women had been pushed to the margins of public and political life and there has been an attempt to redefine our role solely as mothers, as family caretakers," she adds.

The marginalization of women in the public realm leads to a changing perception of what is acceptable and what is not among the women themselves. As Marijana Puljak, who heads the country's liberal Center party, says: "There were high-profile cases, even some politicians were reported to have abused their wives, but sometimes even women don't report it, because they think that it's the way it is supposed to be. It is the conservatives in the country that say that women should stay at home and obey their husbands."

This view is shared by outside observers as well. Dr Michaela Lissowsky from FNF sees many parallels between the conservative turn in Central and Southeastern Europe in general, and the opposition to the Istanbul Convention in particular. "The growing influence of right-wing populism, the spread of a general mood of fear of the other (LGBTI people, migrants, etc.) as well as the loss of confidence in democracy and democratic politicians are the main causes, from my point of view. Unfortunately, churches do not promote urgently needed progress and the development of a more tolerant society but stick to so-called traditional role models," she says.

These traditional role models see families as those in which women are chiefly mothers and housewives, only complete with men as breadwinners and with schoolchildren, the human rights advocate thinks, though this is only one among many shapes that a family can take. "A political stance which aims to prioritize this traditional model disregards the human rights of all those who settle for other notions of family," she concludes.

"The loud conservative backlash is not simply a question of opposing the Convention – it is an attempt to take hard-fought basic freedoms away from women in order to change their social status back to where it was decades, or even centuries, ago."

Governments against their people

By their deliberate attempts to dismantle the rights of half of their populations, the authorities in the region have practically turned against their own citizens, local activists claim. "We are seeing governments standing against their people, against LGBTI individuals and women, against everybody who they consider doesn't fulfil the requirements of a proper citizen. This is what has happened in Bulgaria since 2018, when we received the decision of the Constitutional court. I would say that this decision is irrational and destructive to human rights, to women's rights, and to LGBTI rights in particular, not only in Bulgaria – but in Europe," says Denitsa Lyubenova, Human Rights Lawyer and Director of the Legal Defence program of the LGBTI organization Deystvie ("Action") from Bulgaria.

Marta Lempart from Poland puts it even more succinctly: "We have it again – the state is the enemy, like in Communist times. The police are not a state force anymore. It is a party force. It is a pity." She has personally been attacked by pro-government media in her country, which has led to threats on her life by anonymous "anti-gender ideology" fighters.

OUT OF 190 MILLION CHILDREN IN EUROPE:

18 MILLION HAVE EXPERIENCED **SEXUAL ABUSE**

44 MILLION HAVE EXPERIENCED **PHYSICAL ABUSE**

55 MILLION HAVE EXPERIENCED **MENTAL ABUSE**

Source

World Health Organization

The change happened gradually. In Bulgaria, Denitsa Lyubenova remembers how the state – and even the Orthodox Church – did not find any "gender ideology" in the Istanbul Convention for years. "In 2016-2017, I was part of a government consultation process led by the Judicial ministry about the implementation of the Convention, and, at that time, the government wanted to ratify the convention; we were two groups of 40-60 professionals, each working on the criminal legislation and the legislation on social services," she recalls.

But then, after the far-right United Patriots coalition joined hands with the European People's Party affiliate GERB of Boyko Borissov, things started to change. Ultranationalists, protestant fundamentalists inspired by radical US-based churches, and various conspiracists entered high office and were given greater attention by the media. "At some point in 2017, the defenders of human rights in these groups were just removed. We were not notified and no explanation was given. This is when we understood something was cooking," Lyubenova recalls.

Just a few months later, on New Year's Eve 2018, the United Patriots threatened to leave the Borissov cabinet if the Istanbul Convention was ratified, and the country's Orthodox Church, which previously commended the goals of the document, changed its opinion and even the (woman-led) Socialist party took a conservative turn. Afraid of "the gender" – a word that quickly became an offensive term in Bulgarian – BSP's Kornelia Ninova went against her own Party of European Socialists' position on the topic and welcomed the decision of the country's Constitutional Court that the document does not conform to Bulgarian Basic Law. "I am happy that common sense and the law won. I congratulate the court and all Bulgarian institutions that stood as one against this attempt to disintegrate our nation's values with an ideology foreign to our society and family," Ninova notably exclaimed.

The backlash against the Istanbul Convention happened in a similar fashion in other places as well. According to Dr Michaela Lissowsky, there is a bigger purpose behind this. "We have noticed the attacks on the Istanbul Convention, the announced withdrawals or the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention at all. But we have to focus on something else which is a much bigger challenge: the attempt to turn the traditional family into a bearer of rights and responsibilities under international law – a concept which remains unaccepted in international law – and to disregard the equality between men and women," she says.

To her, these actions are intended as a conduit to restrict the individual rights of women and to undo the progress that has been achieved through decades of hard-fought victories of the feminist movement. "At the same time, the Anti-Istanbul Convention narratives are a targeted move to strengthen so-called 'traditional values' and reverse gender equality. Support for such approaches is developing chiefly in Eastern Europe and within the churches," the Human Rights officer concludes.

Women's movement to the rescue

Just as the anti-"gender ideology" movement picked up speed, so did the resistance against its toxic messages. The women of several countries with female-led civic movements have shown themselves to be particularly resilient. In Turkey, Croatia, Poland, and Romania, activism is reinvigorated to a level unseen for decades. And so far, they have managed to fight back against this encroachment on their liberties.

In Poland, the Women's Strike has managed to stage large-scale protests on a regular basis since 2016 against the government's proposal to restrict abortion regulations. Notably, the movement has managed to connect their messages to other human rights concerns. "The protests we are having now are not only about abortion, they are not only about women's rights, they are about LGBT rights, human rights and the economy – everything you can think of when it comes to a government that hates its people," Polish activist Marta Lempart says.

In Romania, where conservative politicians tried to push a referendum to ban gay unions that led to a famous nation-wide boycott campaign which ultimately made most people simply ignore the issue. In Croatia, an extraordinary pro-Convention march saw twenty women dressed as characters from the famous dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood, "The Handmaid's Tale," march through their country's capital, accompanied by famous public figures narrating excerpts from the convention aloud.

In Turkey, a platform for action called We Will Stop Femicide was launched, with its secretary general, Fidan Ataselim saying "millions of women" could not be ignored, imprisoned, effaced, or silenced. When the country announced its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, hundreds of people immediately flocked to the streets of Istanbul for a demonstration under the slogan "You'll never walk alone". "Despite the de facto ban on protesting since the Gezi events, social media and human rights groups raised their voice – even organizations close to the government. Even conservative women were active, protesting despite restrictions," Baris Altintas recalls.

The liberal response

The important question for the future is how liberals and feminists ought to carry on the fight against this encroachment on women's rights in the overwhelmingly conservative environments of Central and Southeastern Europe.

Protests and marches are indeed a useful tool for mustering popular support, but they sometimes can cause overzealous supporters to cross red lines. One example is the case of the feminist who disrupted church services and painted swastikas in Poland in October 2020, which harmed popular support of the All-Women's March movement. In fact, very often slogans such as "overthrow the patriarchy" pour oil on the flames, exacerbating moderate conservative's fears of progressive policies.

Dr Michaela Lissowsky proposes a values-based approach that does not try to oppose traditional values and stereotypical role models of the popular image of what a "typical" family ought to be, but instead espouse the individual rights of women within the family, especially equality between women and men.

"Women and girls experience most violence at home – by their partners, husbands, fathers, or brothers. We have to continue to combat domestic violence. Women must be able to develop to their full potential – within and outside of the family. They are entitled to equal and autonomous participation in public life. For this, their physical integrity is absolutely indispensable," the Human Rights expert says.

According to her, data collection and analysis of domestic violence cases must be improved, as a considerable number of cases remain unreported. "Studies on domestic violence are rare, but we need more data and we have to speak about these cases publicly. Greater consideration should be given to the link to violence against women online. And we have to observe the development of the case law and see if judges are sentencing perpetrators of domestic violence," she adds.

Lastly, women activists need to demand more financing from the state. Improved public funding for scientific analysis ought to ensure that the scale of domestic violence is monitored. "Protection from violence for women should also be reflected in economic policy. This not only includes the production of information and the provision of support for those affected but also economic empowerment," the Human Rights expert says, adding that this should turn into an important strategy to strengthen the societal status of women through a greater degree of independence.

In many respects, the first ten years of the Istanbul Convention could be deemed a success – the large majority of Council of Europe members, 34 states in total, have become signatory to the document and 10 have ratified it in their National Parliaments. States have begun coordinating policies and reporting their progress in implementing measures for the protection of vulnerable women and children as required by the Convention. What is more, despite the conservative backlash against it in the Central and Southeastern European states, the Convention has sparked a long-suppressed debate about violence against women in these countries. And very often progress cannot be achieved without stirring up controversy. Liberals and feminists in Croatia, Poland, Bulgaria, Turkey, and other countries just ought to stand up for their principles – and not be afraid to raise their voices.

"The Istanbul Convention is an international treaty par excellence, written in bureaucratic language that talks mostly about monitoring mechanisms, expert groups, and reporting procedures on the progress of states. It was never intended to cause any controversy."

"Now, the debate surrounding the Convention is all about gender ideology, Cultural Marxism, and radical feminism, or a supposed attempt to promote the LGBTQ lifestyle, paving the road to same-sex unions."

"The loud conservative backlash is not simply a question of opposing the Convention – it is an attempt to take hard-fought basic freedoms away from women in order to change their social status back to where it was decades, or even centuries, ago."

"We are not just talking about not ratifying the convention – we are talking about an attempt made in 2017 to at least partially dismantle the system protecting against domestic violence in Poland."

Marta Lempart, co-founder of the All-Polish Women's Strike

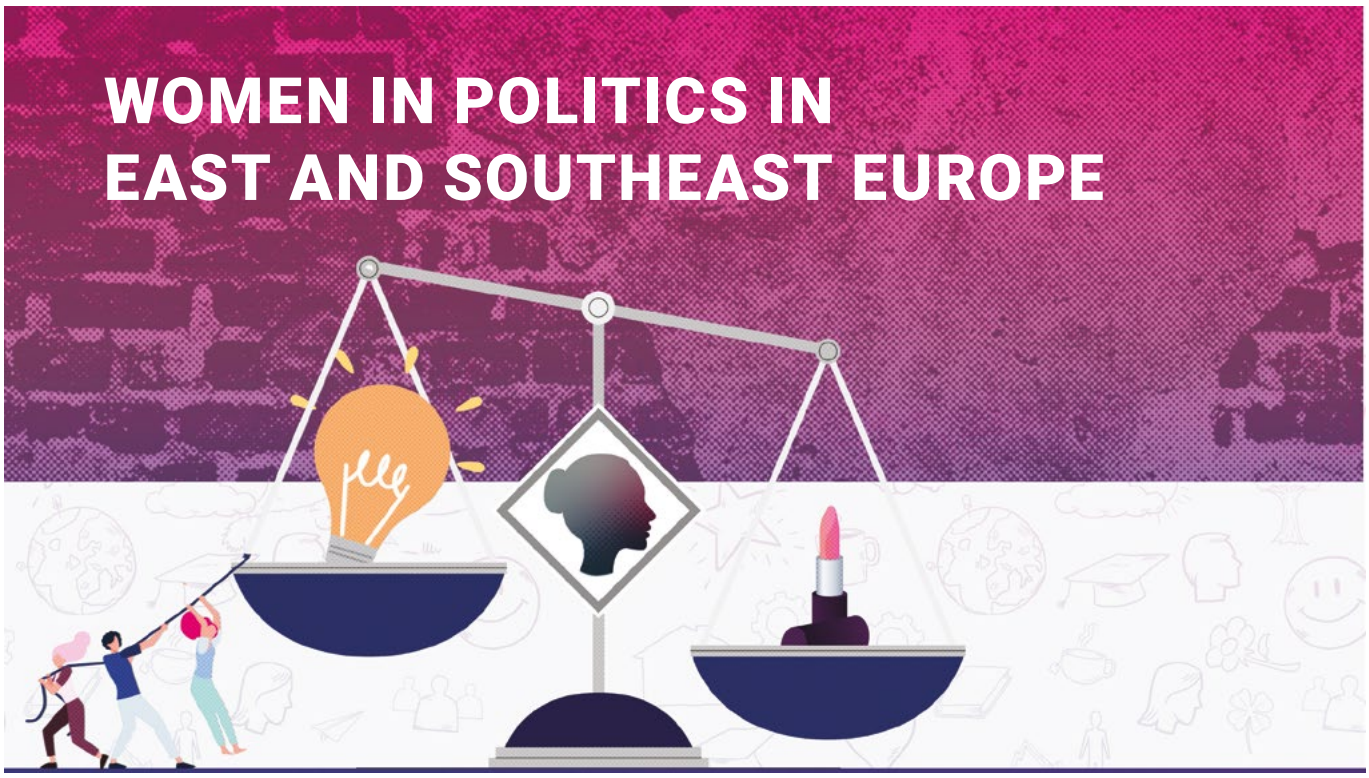
"The growing influence of right-wing populism, the spread of a general mood of fear of the other (LGBTI people, migrants, etc.) as well as the loss of confidence in democracy and democratic politicians are the main causes for the backlash against the Istanbul Convention."

Dr Michaela Lissowsky, Senior Advisor for Human Rights and Rule of Law at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

"We are seeing governments standing against their people, against LGBTI individuals and women, against everybody who they don't consider fulfils the requirements of a proper citizen."

Denitsa Lyubenova, Human Rights Lawyer and Director of the Legal Defence program of the LGBTI organization Deystvie ("Action") in Bulgaria

"Just as the anti-"gender ideology" movement picked up speed, so did the resistance against its toxic messages. The women of several countries, most notably Turkey and Poland, have shown themselves to be particularly resilient."



The joys and hardships of being a woman in politics in this transitional region

Author: Martin Dimitrov

Writing about women in politics in Southern and Eastern Europe is no easy task. First of all, one immediately invites anti-liberal anger that the topic is even raised. Secondly, it might also anger people on the liberal spectrum for trying to put too many, too different eggs in one basket. The greatest difficulty, however, comes from the complicated narratives within any single country in the region, and from the region as a whole.

On one hand, there are clear examples of anti-feminist backlash like the conservative wave that has swept over Poland and the ridiculous backlash against the Istanbul Convention in Croatia and Bulgaria.

On the other hand, we see countries like Estonia electing both a female President and a female Prime Minister and the top three EU countries where women dominate the science professions are Eastern European (Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Latvia). In addition, the examples of Polish and Turkish women's resistance, including street protests, against the conservative authorities in their countries have resonated across the world and have shown that women in the region are far from helpless.

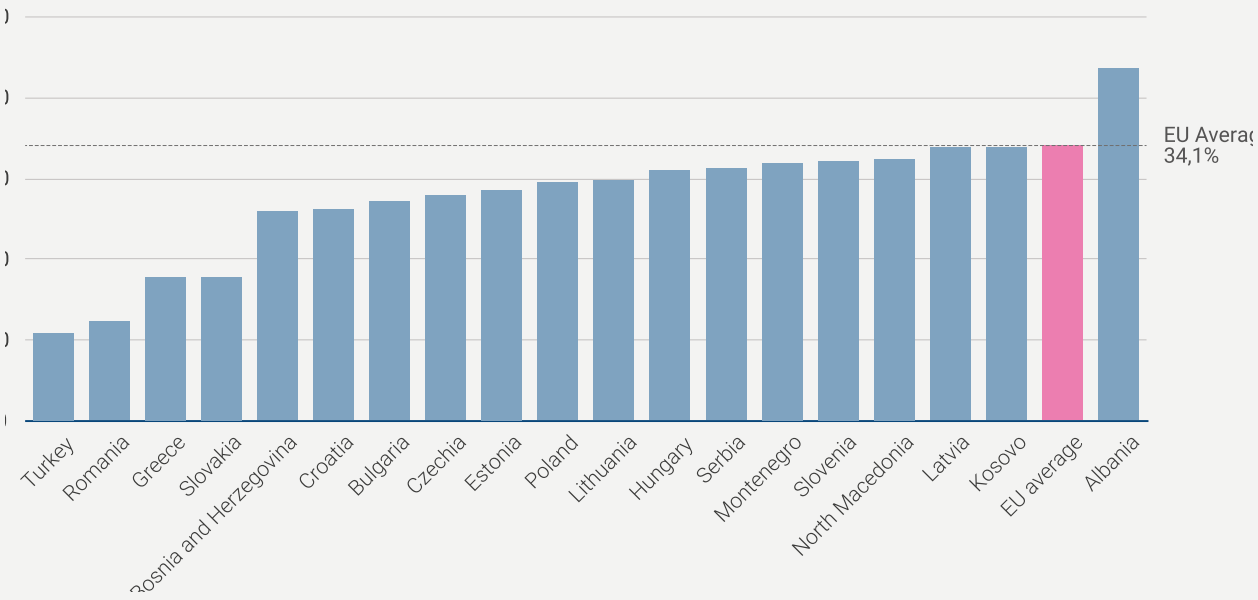
Economic empowerment vs. political underrepresentation

Seeing both sides of the coin makes casting judgment much harder. But there are some clear trends that cannot be ignored. When it comes to the general representation of women at the national level of politics, the worst-scoring countries are from the region (see Graph 1).

It is true that, overall, the EU still hasn't reached an overall gender balance, even in the European Parliament, which is supposed to be a trendsetter though it can still only claim a 1:2 ratio between the two genders. But the difference is once again exacerbated precisely by the Eastern and Southeastern members, with the Bulgarian, Estonian, Cypriot, Lithuanian, and Hungarian delegations having less than 20 percent women, while the overall percentage of women in the institution is 36.

The situation is even worse when it comes to representation in regional legislatures, where Romania, Cyprus, Greece, and Croatia "boast" even lower overall levels of representation (see Graph 2). Only 19 percent of members of national governments, 6 percent of leaders of

Graph 1: Female members of the municipal council (or equivalent) in % of total in selected European countries



Source

Gender Statistics Database (GSD) of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)

major political parties, and around 10 percent of members of regional assemblies and regional governments in the EU partner states are female, compared to about double that number in the EU.

According to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum, the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia's high scores for Health and Survival and Educational Attainment is a top performer in the West and it even leads in Economic Participation and Opportunity. But on the level of Political Empowerment, the results are staggering – the region's score is almost three times lower than Western Europe's and, as a result, is lower than any other region's except the Middle East and North Africa.

It is not only about formal representation in legislature. In fact, participation in politics or the lack thereof is a by-product of a wide range of problematic trends in the societies of East and Southeast Europe. One such issue is societal attitudes towards the role of women, and a 2019 poll by the Pew Research Agency on the topic of gender equality in different European states illustrates that well.

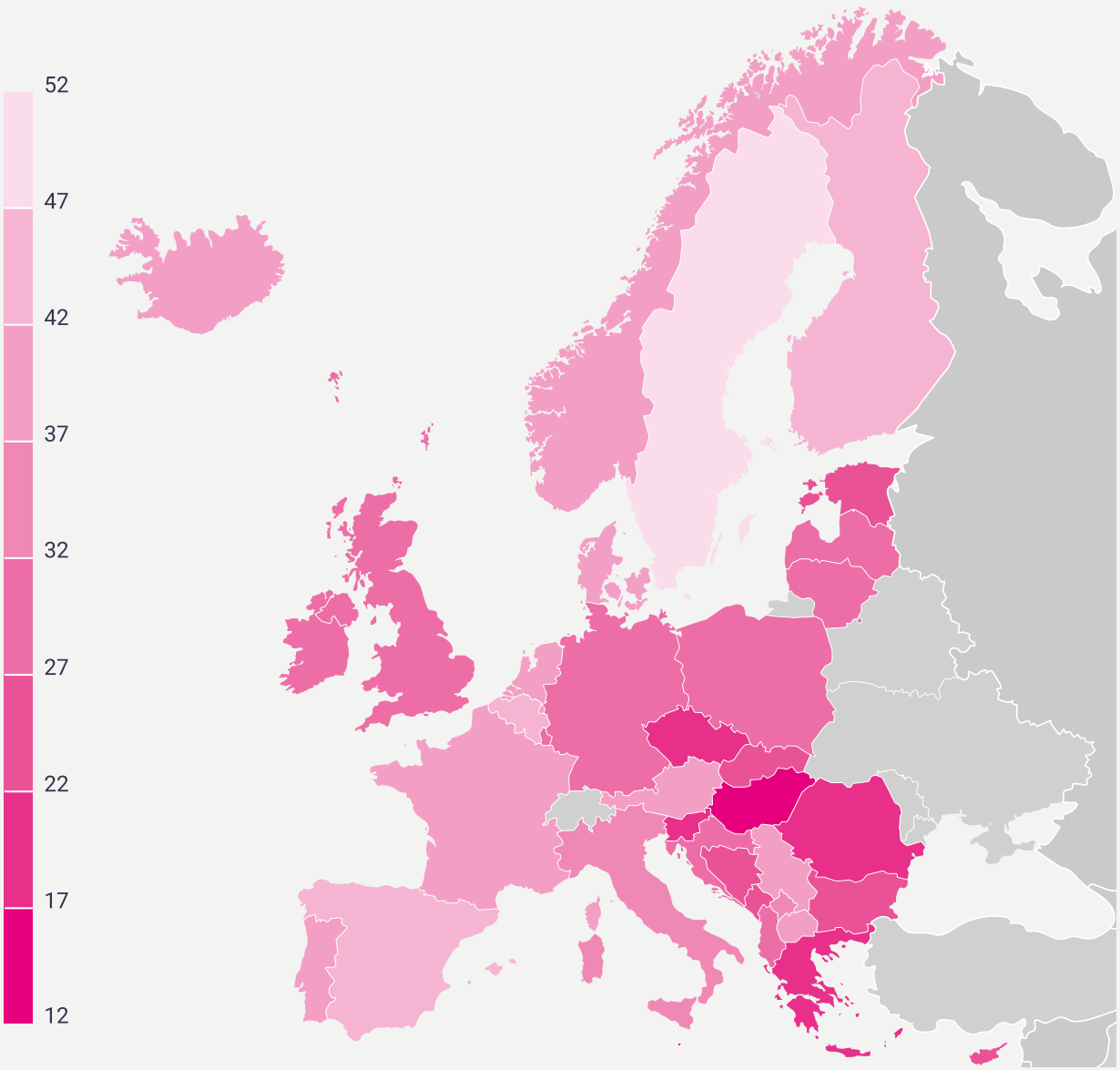
The study found that, whereas in Western European societies nine out of ten persons said that having equal rights regardless of their gender is important to them, in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia only seven-in-ten said so. In Russia, Ukraine, and, notably, Lithuania, this proportion goes down to close to under six out of ten.

Cultural attitudes, different economic opportunities, recent conservative trends, and a legacy of authoritarianism could be cited as other important reasons for these perceptions, though the list could go on and on. Let us examine them one by one.

The heavy legacy of culture

While culture has always been an easy – and often wrong – explanation for why some societies adapt to novel customs while others find it hard to do so, almost all female politicians FNF interviewed for the #FemaleForwardInternational campaign confirmed that in this region, societal norms have really affected them. At one point or another in their political careers, these politicians have faced some sort of backlash for daring to enter the political realm as women.

Graph 2: Map of Europe with different shadings for the different % of female representation



Source

Gender Statistics Database (GSD) of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)

"I think in Romania being a woman is subject to many clichés," says Diana Mureşan, regional coordinator for the centrist Save Romania Union in the city of Sibiu and a recently elected municipal councillor. "You are expected to neglect your career and your dreams in order to maintain a household and raise children. It is expected for the husband to have a political career, to earn the money in the household." Another young liberal, Monika Zajkova, a Member of Parliament from the North Macedonian Liberal Democratic Party, shares a similar concern: "We live in a patriarchal society, with a stereotype that women need to be housewives and that politics is none of their business;

a lot of people say we are unable to make important decisions."

Notoriously, even when many women do join political parties, they do it in order to fit within the framework "allocated" to them by the male majority rather than to carve a path of their own. An anecdote told by Croatian politician Diana Topcic-Rosenberg, who was previously part of the leadership of the GLAS alliance, illustrates this attitude pretty well. After a long and versatile career in international NGOs, on her return to her homeland she decided to see which political party she should join. "There were women's associations in the parties and when I got curious about what they were doing, I realized they were baking cakes for political events and were engaged in charity. I started wondering what they talked about when they baked cakes, do they talk about what they dream of for their daughters, what they want to change today so that they can live better tomorrow? No, they were exchanging recipes," she recalls, half-amused and half-baffled. She adds that sometimes female politicians themselves are happy with the position allocated to them by the party heads and choose to follow party lines rather than raising their voices on topics that are important to women.

Popular distaste of politics

And those are only the cultural stereotypes that target women in politics directly. For many of our interviewees, other social norms are just as problematic for women who decide to try a public affairs career – albeit indirectly.

For most Western Balkan countries, one such shared social norm is the essential topic that dominates political discourse as a whole – anti-fascism. "There are still discussions in Croatia about who won the Second World War, but we don't want any of that, we know who won. Our country's constitution is established on the grounds of anti-fascism – so let's not talk about the war anymore," says Marijana Puljak, who co-chairs Croatia's newest party – the liberal Center ("Centar") party and entered Parliament on its ticket in 2020. By talking only about the distant past, politicians from the mainstream left and right parties mostly just distract attention from much more pertinent issues: for example, human, economic, and social rights, and the anti-corruption effort. "We cherish the idea of anti-fascism, but we are talking about looking to the future and closing the gaps that divide our society, how to change the constitution so that all people have the right to be elected," says Nasiha Pozder, a member of the Federal parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the liberal party Nasha Stranka.

Then comes the pressure from the family, which is much more of a driving force in all the region's countries compared to the West. Diana Mureşan has felt that pressure twice – first, over the question of why she joined politics in general, and second – over why she, as a woman, is more proactive than her husband. "In the beginning my family didn't really understand our involvement. Because politics in Romania is not considered something you want to do, that good people don't get involved in politics – this is the perception here. Our parents and relatives always told us – ok, you are successful people, you have your own business, you have travelled a lot around the world – why do you want to do that?"

Burden of an authoritarian past

Last, but not least, when it comes to cultural influences one cannot ignore the mixed legacy these countries' recent authoritarian past had on women's political participation. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Socialist regimes drastically improved female education and employment levels in the post-war years. The grassroots participation and the behind-the-scenes, inspiring influence of socialist women within this system of tightly controlled politics have been revealed in archival studies on Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, as demonstrated by US cultural anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee and Italian historian Chiara Bonfiglioli, respectively. At least on an everyday level, women's equality was ensured, as testified by Diana Topcic-Rosenberg, who experienced the last years of socialism in Yugoslavia. "Croatia was part of the former Yugoslavia, a socialist country, and as a young woman growing up there, I didn't feel much of a gender gap in terms of opportunity."

These examples, however, were the exception rather than the rule in the authoritarian socialist states that were gradually turning to nationalism in the stagnant 1970s and 1980s, with women pushed back into the "mother of the nation" stereotype of a darker past. "Socialism as ideology wanted to make men and women equal, but that was not the fact in Romania. If we speak about birth control, after a decree in 1966, Romanians were supposed to give birth to many children; as a woman, it was difficult to do something else outside of the family," says Diana Mureşan. She also underlines the lack of role models of Socialist-era women politicians – all big shots in government at the time were men. To Marijana Puljak, besides the ideological scars, another legacy of State Socialism that influences women's choices today is the feeling that having a job is a "scarce good" that might be lost – so it's better to not take chances. "I don't think it's something good most of the time, especially if you are not happy and you are told to stay safe, not to take risks. Safety is somehow overrated in the ex-socialist countries," she says.

Neo-conservatism on the rise

This is just one of the lingering legacies of a "good old past" which is haunting East and Southeast Europe nowadays. Another potent danger for female representation – and rights – is the normalization of a special kind of neo-conservative discourse across the region. Fuelled by disillusionment with the way that the transition from authoritarianism into liberal democracy and market

economy proceeded, societies east of the Oder River have one by one started spawning illiberal populist movements. "A fear of diversity and a fear of change, inflamed by the utopian project of remaking whole societies along western lines, are thus important contributors to eastern and central European populism," Ivan Krastev and Stephan Holmes wrote in "The Light That Failed," their illuminating study of the rise of nativism in the region. Promoting and protecting women's political and other basic rights suddenly became another thing to be feared, rather than celebrated, by the powerful of the day.

"We now live in a time of change in all countries, and people are not always reacting in a good way when change comes their way," says Diana Mureşan. She thinks that, when change comes about, many people tend to look back into the past and start imagining it as a place where everything had been simple, perfect, and beautiful. Her colleague from North Macedonia, Monika Zajkova, shares this view and says that she sees in it the clash of generations." "Maybe it is attractive to people that are still living with the image of a past when we had huge families, but now individualism is much more important than collectivism," she says.

Sadly, many of the liberal female leaders relate that their colleagues from conservative and even socialist parties are often content with being "party soldiers" that follow, rather than stand up to, the often socially conservative lines of their factions. Diana Topcic-Rosenberg shared a case in which her attempt to push a cross-party bill on the protection of child privacy backfired because conservative Croatian female politicians refused to stand behind a "liberal" policy. "I called women from various political backgrounds to back it up. The law was about children, it had nothing to do with one being a liberal, a conservative, or a socialist, it had to do with the particular rights of children. But the women from the ruling party were against it simply because it was proposed by the opposition." Her experience is an echo of what Nasiha Pozder has gone through in the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina: "I have a hard time talking to female colleagues from the right-wing parties, but that is their position in the party talking. When they get a task from the party, you don't hear their female voice, you hear the party's voice."

Liberals still not living up to their own goals

An additional challenge is the fact that even liberal parties, supposedly on the forefront of progressive policies, lag behind in terms of female representation. According to the 2020 Women in Political Parties Index, part of the Gender Equality Report of the Liberal International, 56 percent of the liberal parties that are part of the International have never appointed a female leader, and most had neither leadership quotas (83 percent) nor a female

Graph 3: Gender gap indexes

		Subindexes			
	Overall Index	Economic Participation	Education	Health	Political Empowerment
Western Europe	0.767	0.693	0.993	0.972	0.409
North America	0.729	0.756	1	0.975	0.184
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.721	0.642	0.996	0.979	0.269
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0.715	0.732	0.998	0.979	0.15
East Asia and the Pacific	0.685	0.663	0.976	0.943	0.159
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.68	0.666	0.972	0.972	0.211
South Asia	0.661	0.385	0.943	0.947	0.387
Middle East and North Africa	0.611	0.425	0.95	0.969	0.102

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Source

Global Gender Gap Report 2020 - World Economic Forum

wing (83 percent). "While the results in this report show that liberals are performing above average on female political participation, we still have much to do," wrote the organization's president Hakima el Haité in the preface of the report. "Many of our parties have still never elected a female leader. Some work remains to ensure that our party structures are equipped to record and follow up on the threats and harassment we know that female candidates and politicians face," she adds.

> **"When I was Minister of Defence, the only comments I heard were about the size of my earrings and about what kind of lipstick I was wearing."**
>
> **Tinatin Khidasheli, lawyer and ex-Georgian Defence Minister**

to take an active stance against that. We've seen it in the plenary of the EP, it is not as if it is happening only in deep rural Moldova," says Ramona Strugariu, Romanian MEP from the PLUS/Renew Europe group. What keeps her – and other interviewees – going is their sense of responsibility and an ultimate belief in their own capabilities.

These examples might seem anecdotal to some, but now there is data to prove that they are the norm. According to the "Igniting her ambition: Breaking the barriers to women's representation in Europe" report, a majority of liberal female leaders reveal that they have encountered sexism and harassment at some point of their careers. While over 32 percent say this happened only once or a few times, less than one-third say that they were never an object of harassment at work.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

But facing resistance have not stopped FNF's #FemaleForward ambassadors from taking up politics. What motivated them to do so, and why did they opt to join a liberal party – which is far from a popular choice in the region at this moment? For most, it was a natural choice – either because they felt that these are the only parties that share their values, or because they were disillusioned by the track record of the classical anti-communist right/post-

Female politicians themselves sense the difference in social attitudes towards them. According to the 2021 study "Igniting her ambition: Breaking the barriers to women's representation in Europe" issued by the ALDE Party, liberal female leaders feel that gender stereotyping is still prevalent and plays a big role in the party and national politics of their country. According to a survey of female members of the party's European affiliates, 78 percent of the respondents from Eastern European liberal parties said that they disagree – somewhat or strongly – with the statement that men and women are valued equally in their country. None agreed strongly. While female leaders from Nordic and Western countries were also divided about the perception of men and women in their countries, the differences are huge – 49 percent of leaders from the Nordics and 60 percent in the West shared a similar view with their Eastern peers.

Ad hominem toxicity

Apart from those overarching trends that have negatively impacted the participation of females in politics, every single woman-politician FNF interviewed shared at least one story of the daily harassment she had experienced. From sexist remarks to media and male colleagues solely focusing on their looks rather than their policy, these underlining attitudes create a toxic environment that certainly dissuades many from participating actively in public life. "I was fighting for this important piece of land in the city of Sarajevo back when I was an activist, and I was called "teethy" by my opponents. It was not important what I was talking about, it was about mocking how I look," says Nasiha Pozder, recalling her first experience of this sort.

Georgian lawyer and ex-Defence Minister Tinatin Khidasheli, who has over 30 years of public affairs experience under her belt, has a plethora of similar stories that illustrate the struggles of female politicians. "When I became Minister of Defence, the very first orchestrated and systematic attack against me was that I'd bring gays into the army," she says. She also recalls moments when she was simultaneously "accused" of being Jewish, an agent of the Jewish-Hungarian financier and philanthropist George Soros, a Jehovah's witness, and a Satanist ("because I am for gay marriage," she notes) who wants to spoil Georgian children. "When I was Minister of Defence the only comments I heard were about the size of my earrings and what kind of lipstick I was wearing. It was funny, but for me it was not an issue – I didn't become Defence Minister out of high school or because my father promoted me. But psychologically it damages you and you ask – don't you have anything to say about the policies I am implementing, the budget money I am spending, about the projects I am running?" she asks rhetorically. She adds that never in her life she has heard anyone speak in a similar fashion about male politicians.

"It has happened to me, without affecting me as much as it might have hurt other women. But I know how it hurts, I've seen it with people, and it will not stop by itself. We need

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> **Diana Topcic-Rosenberg,**
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communist left parties that have all seemed to have lost credibility during the decades of transition away from State Socialism. "Knowing the past of my country and knowing that my parents lived under an authoritarian regime with very few liberties made me appreciate freedom even more," shares Diana Mureşan and adds: "I identify myself with the liberal values and freedom is the value I cherish the most." Her Georgian colleague Tinatin Khidasheli has an even more profound explanation of her choice of political ideology. "I am not simply a conscious liberal," she says. "I am an instinctive liberal – it is not just from books, it happened to me naturally. When I was that age that determines your long-term choices, I was on the streets fighting communists. This fight for freedom defined the whole structure of my life forever."

For all the women in the #FemaleForwardInternational campaign, it seems like the details of liberal ideology and the diverging schools of thought within it are of secondary importance in the context of their own countries. "What does it mean to be liberal here? It is not about details in your political theory – it's more about answering questions. What is your opinion on gay marriage? Are you for adoption of children by gay couples? What about religious minorities – do you believe that all religions should have the right to practice the same way as the monopolistic Orthodox Church does?" Tinatin Khidasheli says. "So it is not about what kind of educational policies I defend or what sort of health or social care I want, no – it is still about the big issues we are discussing, the basics of freedom – mainly equality and equal access to life's basics," she adds.

Quotas or no quotas?

One of the topics that divides opinions among liberal female politicians in the region is the matter of quotas for representation. In short, most of them do not believe they should be imposed – at least not permanently, but for pragmatic reasons are ready to support them until at least basic gender parity has been reached. "As a liberal I am against quotas, even though they are a kind of positive discrimination and they are necessary in a society like ours. But I think they can be useful by allowing women to show their potential in institutions," says North Macedonian Monika Zajkova. Marijana Puljak, however, wants to hear nothing about quotas: "I believe that you need to promote people to parliament who are good, who have experience, who want to do that job, and not just based on their gender," she says, adding that the path towards better female representation goes through the education of young people. "Tell them what politics is, tell them how to organize themselves, how to present the positions they stand for, how to change things, and how to educate them from the ground up," she concludes.

On the other side of the spectrum is a person who unequivocally backs quotas, a Turkish politician from the DEVA party, Zeynep Dereli. "I believe that we need positive discrimination. We need quotas until we reach the state where we do not need quotas. Especially for countries like Turkey, we need it," she says, adding that she believes that the more women in politics, the greater the tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen's needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace.

Even politicians who back quotas, however, have little illusion about what they can attain in the toxic political environment of the region. Diana Topcic-Rosenberg, for one, thinks that even though quotas are needed, they can be harmful to female empowerment if they are designed to let parties simply tick boxes. "It is good to have a quota system because it does force parties to put forward an equal number of men and women and give them a chance to fight for political positions. However, just by itself, it is window dressing," she notes. Or, as Tinatin Khidasheli puts it eloquently, "it is the culture of politics that has to change, not simply the numbers."

> **"The ratio of women in representative political roles is less than 20 percent in Hungary, Cyprus, Malta, Croatia, and Greece, compared to 32 percent for the EU as a whole."**

"Only 19 percent of members of national governments, 6 percent of leaders of major political parties, and around 10 percent of members of regional assemblies and regional governments in Balkan and Eastern European EU partner states are female."

On the nature of leadership

The fundamental reason for this divergence of opinions comes from the different understanding that female politicians have on whether leadership "has" gender. Turkish politician and businesswoman Zeynep Dereli is on the one side of the debate: "Women's political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen's lives, and helps democracy deliver." Others, like Tinatin Khidasheli, do not think there is anything special about female leadership that differentiates it from the male version. "I don't believe that strong, qualified, conscious leadership depends on gender. I think it comes from the honesty and professionalism of the person," she says, and adds: "I know it is important [to encourage women to join politics], I do it every day, but at the same time I don't believe that we should get in this position and have this attitude that just because we are women, we can do a job better if we are given the opportunity. It's not like that."

Diana Topcic-Rosenberg, on the other hand, holds a nuanced position: "There is a perception that women are more participatory, that they are oriented towards cooperation, that they listen more... I think a lot of this is actually stereotype," she says. "What is very important is that [women] can put on the agenda issues that specifically address other women that a man would not."

To her Croatian colleague Marijana Puljak, the question of greater female participation in public affairs is not about introducing an alternative type of values to politics, but rather bringing forward topics that men cannot put on the table. "Women should get involved in all aspects and topics that concern good governance and give their view on topics concerning women, like domestic violence," she says. Zeynep Dereli shares this view: "Research indicates that whether a legislator is male or female has a distinct impact on their policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalized voters and help improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance."

The importance of a good example

If there is one thing that all #FemaleForward leaders can get behind, it is the fact that getting more women involved in politics is for the public good and that they have a role – as role models – to inspire the next generation of female leaders. "By entering politics, I wanted to be a role model for my generation of young women, to show them that even if it is not easy, we can do a lot for society," Monika Zajkova says. "Let's just do the things that are worth doing, and actively encourage other women to take a lead. Self-confidence is so important – women don't have to look at themselves through the mirror of a certain cultural path or prejudices that come from the past. They should be looking at the mirror, seeing themselves today, and looking at the future, because they are building it," her Romanian colleague Ramona Strugariu thinks.

For this Romanian MEP, the role of today's female politicians is not only to serve as examples, but also to point out the structural problems that prevent more women from joining politics – and public life in general. One such issue she singles out is the lack of paternal leave in many societies, which makes it obligatory for women to stay at home and leave their careers once they have children, but there are many others issues we could add, some legal, some purely cultural.

"This is where we, as liberal and, in particular, female politicians, should be going," says Diana Topcic-Rosenberg. For her, it is about creating a space for women to be perceived not simply as someone with a domestic role, but also with a general social role as well. "Actually, this is one of the reasons that propelled me into politics – I didn't want to allow the silencing of women who happen to think differently," she concludes.

In order to help aspiring female civil leaders get out of the silence, the ALDE Party has moved on to transform the EWA academy into an even broader initiative, The Alliance of Her. It aims to expand the reach of its world-class academies to more talented and ambitious liberal women at all stages of their political journey, to build a network of female political leaders, and to work towards the removal of barriers to female political participation. Such support is invaluable if we want to see progress beyond the "snail's pace," as the ALDE "Ignite her ambition" report concluded. Or, as the Vice-President of the European Commission Margrethe Vestager said, "We still have a lot to do when it comes to the equal representation of women and men in politics. This is a core value for us as liberals and social liberals, and to see it achieved in practice is essential."

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

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"A Pew Research survey found that in Western European societies, 9 of 10 people said that having equal rights regardless of gender is important to them; whereas in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, only 7 of 10 said so."

"Only 30 percent of liberal female leaders said they have never experienced some form of harassment related to their political work."

"When I was Minister of Defence, the only comments I heard were about the size of my earrings and about what kind of lipstick I was wearing."

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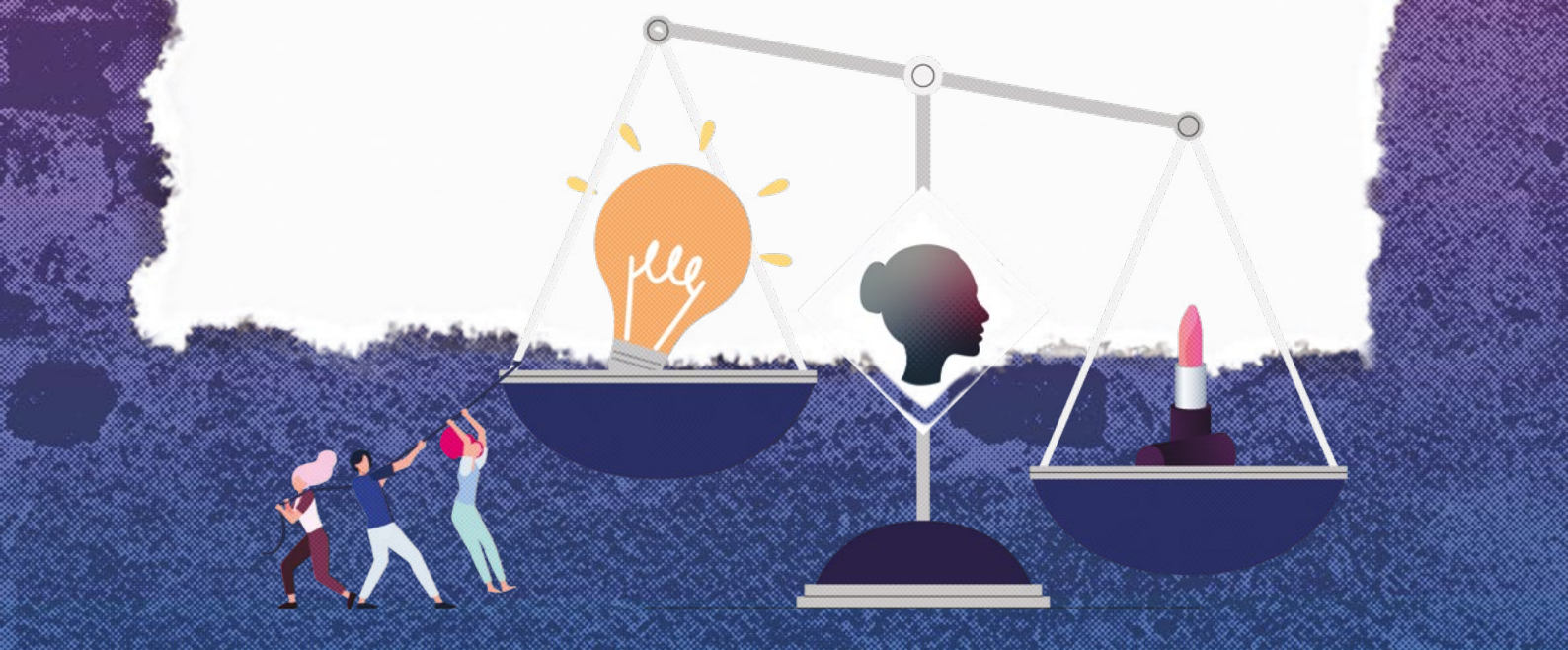
Diana Topcic-Rosenberg,
Croatian NGO activist and ex-parliamentarian



WOMEN IN JOURNALISM IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

The main storytellers of our time, journalists, tend to be predominantly female and though they are outspoken, they tend to be discriminated.

Author: Mila Cherneva

When you walk into an Eastern European newsroom, you might notice there are mostly women there. When you see who is holding a microphone in front of politicians, it is usually a woman. This situation in many countries in East and Southeast Europe can be seen as a huge paradox. We spoke to women from Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and Turkey and it was remarkable how similar their observations and experience were; women predominate in this profession because it is low paid, yet their dominance does not mean that discrimination and unfair treatment are absent. Furthermore, they are still often judged by their appearance while having to face the challenging reality of media nowadays — less freedom of speech, more political influence, and a broken business model.

Women work, men get promoted

According to an article by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, "Fighting Words: Journalism Under Assault in Central and Eastern Europe", it is more common to find female journalists in Eastern Europe than in other parts of the world. Yet this news is not all good. One of the likely explanations for being predominantly female is that this profession is known for its low salaries. Thus, men, who are stereotyped as the "breadwinners" in families, are often not willing to work for such low wages.

Lora Fileva, a Bulgarian journalist at the online publication www.dnevnik.bg, has over a decade of experience covering the judicial system, human rights topics and lately, the media environment. She quotes a publication by Foundation Media Democracy from 2017 where the small salaries are pointed out as exactly the sad reason behind female domination in newsrooms. She adds that another reason might be the fact "that journalism is related to TV — it's glamorous, beautiful and prestigious. Journalists are close to the people in power and they are famous. For young girls, this could look like an easy escape from reality in the small town."

The Russian situation is "colourful", as investigative journalist Anastasia Sechina puts it, since the country itself is huge. "The situation in Voronezh and the situation

in Chechnya are incomparable. In Chechnya, it is very seldom that women are journalists, but if we put aside the Caucasus region, Chechnya, Ingushetia, etc., there are many women journalists", she says and adds that female journalists face the same discrimination women might "enjoy" in other fields — employers promoting men as opposed to women since the latter might give birth and go on maternity leave.

The same goes for Romania. Cristina Cileascu is a producer of the Diplomatic Passport program (Pasaport diplomatic) on television, Digi24. Her program is a high-quality production about foreign policy. She has noticed that newsrooms might be mainly made up of women, yet senior roles are reserved for men. She blames that on society's superficial understanding of female nature. "Maybe this is because age marks a female body more and the mentality in this part of the world is that a woman who appears in public must be beautiful and beauty is normally a quality of the young. We still care more about looks and less about brains and experience", she says. Teodora Trifonova, a successful reporter at one of the national TV channels in Bulgaria, also points out that men are preferred for managerial roles and that is the "bitter reality" which "is ridiculous, having said that most of the reporters are already women."

"In the past ten years of my journalistic career, I have been assigned to cover hardcore stories like clashes, protests, natural disasters, etc. Areas, which were once considered dangerous and inaccessible for women, are now being covered by them. And it's absolutely normal. I think this is a blessing in disguise in times when we witness women having to fight for their right to equal opportunities."

Teodora Trifonova, Journalist, Bulgaria

Does the female voice count less?

If we try to remain positive, the fact that men are put off by the reporting profession gives enough space for female journalists to have an opportunity to develop. Teodora Trifonova adds that, "In the past ten years of my journalistic career, I have been assigned to cover hardcore stories like clashes, protests, natural disasters, etc. Areas which were once considered dangerous and inaccessible for women, are now being covered by them. And it's absolutely normal. I think this is a blessing in disguise in times when we witness women having to fight for their right to equal opportunities".

Yet this good news has its own limits. Burcu Karakas, a journalist working at DW Turkey, has noticed an even more puzzling phenomenon. "There are these men-dominated TV programs [where] only the presenters are female. They even talk about women's rights. Six men talking about women's rights on TV. It's just ridiculous!", she laughs bitterly. "Although journalists in Bulgaria are mainly female, very often there is a lack of important topics about the problems faced by women in media. The conversations are more focused on the lifestyle, rather than rights", Lora Fileva observed. Burcu Karakas believes that since women make up half the world's population, their perspective needs to be tackled in the media, as they have their own experience when it comes to health, education, or even the pandemic. We might expect this to be highly important in societies with more conservative views.

It is usually men who are given the chance to talk about "serious" topics. "For example, during election night when everybody waits for the results, women are rarely the ones who comment on the results [on TV]. They are usually in the field, to report something in short [clips], but the deep analysis is made by male journalists", Romanian journalist Cristina remarked. "There is still good news, in foreign politics the number of female senior journalists is growing. Maybe, again, because we still think that what happens in the rest of the world is less important than what happens inside our country", she points out ironically.

Sexism from superiors at the workplace is also not a myth. Teodora remembers that a colleague of hers was promoted instead of her even though she had produced more reports and better- quality ones too. Burcu Karakas had a similar experience: "[A while ago] I worked for an online media platform. Of course, the boss was a man. He is a respected journalist in Turkey. I worked there for more than a year and I never got paid. I knew they had no money, but at some point, the platform started to make money yet I still had no salary. After a while I said I would quit and would get other jobs from other platforms. I told my boss he had not paid me and I had worked there for more and a year. He replied: Well, but you are married. You don't pay rent."

Strong men and the problem of accountability

Turkeys - this is what Bulgarian female journalists were compared to by the Bulgarian prime minister in February 2020. Not many professionals can brag about being insulted by their country's leader, but reporters working in the field are among them. Yet Lora feels that politicians have treated her in a certain way. "I have felt neglected by the men in power when I have asked them questions because I am not a certain type of woman: I am not dressed provocatively, I am not flirtatious, and I do not work

> **"This abuse of women circles back to the extremely sexualised language used by politicians when attacking the press."**
>
> **Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism**

for television. I have been abused, although that is a strong word, and I have seen men in powerful positions (such as a former prosecutor general) abuse women reporters. As an argument not to answer (my) questions, they have used facts from our personal lives; who our parents are, who we are living with, and how our salary is earned", she explains.

As a Council of Europe report summarizes, the drop in newspaper readership, the loss of viewers of public TV channels, and the changing "forms of news consumption" are the new reality, but they are more phenomena of the media's new business model. However, censorship and political influence over journalism also stains the media. "Many journalists who criticize the government or officials become the object of smear campaigns in tabloid media outlets. The reason why is that this is the way the people who should answer questions avoid them and neglect important issues and journalistic work", says Lora Fileva. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism observed that insults thrown at women reporters are a key issue in this field, since women "often bear the brunt of these online attacks". "This abuse of women circles back to the extremely sexualised language used by politicians when attacking the press", the article continues.

While Bulgaria's media freedom has been deteriorating, as observed by Reporters without Borders, Romania has been doing better. "The media in Romania is freer than the media of the countries surrounding us. This is the way I see it, since I do cover foreign affairs and I normally work more with colleagues from various states. I haven't heard about somebody being fired or forced to resign just because they wrote something about a politician or businessperson since the 90s. But there is also something fake in this freedom because most powerful people have a tendency to become less communicative when the media is not friendly. The effect is not the journalist being fired, but that the media is avoided in the next informal meeting or important conference, etc. Or even simpler, the spokesperson doesn't answer the phone at all, etc. There is an improvement in freedoms, but there are also new ways to pressure the media", Cristina Cileascu shares.

Outside the EU the situation might be more difficult. As Anastasia Sechina mentions, Russian legislation, the "so-called abolition of propaganda of LGBT-values, the law about foreign media agents, and the law on the justification of terrorism", create obstacles for working journalists.

"These laws are written in such a way that if they want, they can convict you, they will find a reason if they really want to. There are no clear criteria and the application is selective. When we talk with my colleagues about these topics, we all understand that in any one moment, one of us could be charged under one of the articles of these laws and you don't know who that would be. This is our reality now and there aren't any methods to minimize these risks", she says.

Turkish journalist Burcu Karakas is concerned about the way the "political weather" influences media freedom in her country as well. "We, as women in the media, are going to struggle for our rights but we are not going to give up on our lives and rights", she confidently concludes.

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> **Burcu Karakaş, Journalist, Turkey**

#FEMALEFORWARD INTERNATIONAL

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"We, as women in the media, are going to struggle for our rights but we are not going to give up on our lives and rights."

Burcu Karakaş, Journalist, Turkey

"In probably most countries in Southeast Europe newsrooms are composed predominantly of women, but senior roles are reserved for men."

Mila Cherneva, Journalist, Bulgaria

"Topics related to female security, health or life or simply a women's perspective is somewhat missing, even though women are the majority of reporters."

Mila Cherneva, Journalist, Bulgaria

How females play a role through the non-governmental sector

Author: Mila Cherneva

Back when women did not enjoy a full range of rights, were not successful businesswomen, nor prominent journalists, nor world leaders, the female movement was their principal way to express their strengths, ambitions, and beliefs. For decades, civil society has been a comfortable environment where females can express their opinions or publicise the issues they face.

Since every different country in East and Southeast Europe has its own complex relationship with feminism, each of their non-governmental sectors and women's movements vary by its own specific nature. Thus, there are post-Communist countries like Romania and Bulgaria, though the youngest members of the European Union, trying to seem democratic and progressive. However, there are also situations like Turkey, with its struggles to acknowledge female freedoms and equality.

As civil society grows stronger and more and more female-focused organisations emerge, political and social backlash, as well as gender oppression, will continue to push back.

The female issues

A non-governmental organisation does not have to define itself as feminist in order to support female rights, empowerment, and equality between genders. For instance, as mentioned in a 2016 report, "Mapping of NGOs working for women's rights in selected Member States", requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, there are non-governmental organisations like the Bulgarian Centre of Women in Technology or the Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria, which are not explicitly feminist, but deal with such issues. As Svetla Kostadinova, the executive director of the Bulgarian economic think tank Institute for Market Economics, observes, businesswomen are more and more present in the public eye lately. It is indeed the emergence of professional women's organisations that show, in a way, that civil society helps with career development and can be a tool to diminish the "all male club" that different professions have had for centuries.

Another quite important part of civil society focuses on gender-based violence – an issue that the region is still struggling with. Countries might not have the strong

institutions or legislation that can support women in these difficult times. So when needed, NGOs take over and provide them with help.

> **"The efforts of civil society are of key importance when it comes to dealing with gender- based violence and abortion rights in different countries."**
>
> **Prof. Mihaela Miroiu, Romanian philosopher, prominent feminist, and academic**

In this region, civil society organisations play a significant role because there is a lot of work to do. For example, the recent efforts to ratify the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria and Turkey have been quite controversial. The non-governmental sector struggled to defeat the propaganda tools used by both politicians and other organisations that opposed the Convention. Denitsa Lyubenova is a Bulgarian lawyer who leads the legal programme of the Bulgarian NGO

Deystvie (meaning "Action"). "Over the last couple of years, I have noticed that civil society is becoming more united, so I hope that can help overcome the obstacles raised by the anti- gender movement, such as their opposition to

> **"Non-governmental organisations in Turkey have been under increasing attack after the coup attempt [of 2016]... Detentions, arrests, or cases against members of civil society over their statements or even reports are now common."**
>
> **Barış Altıntaş, founder of Media and Law Studies**

ratification of the Istanbul Convention. All these things help the positive side of civil society to unite and work more together", she says. The situation was similar in Romania though the country eventually did ratify the Convention.

In Turkey, local journalist Burcu Karakas, employed by Deutsche Welle, explains that though abortion is legal there, it is somehow becoming less and less available. The country's leadership's rhetoric has become increasingly anti-abortion, so hospitals now pretend that they are not allowed to perform one. Thus, a strong female movement is needed to counter these negative trends.

"Non-governmental organisations in Turkey have been under increasing attack after the coup attempt [of 2016]... Detentions, arrests, or cases against members of civil society over their statements or even reports are now common", Barış Altıntaş, the founder of Media and Law Studies, says. In such turbulent times, even more support will be required to protect female liberties.

Civil society: female dominated

Anecdotal evidence in some countries like Bulgaria, for instance, shows that the non- governmental sector is dominated by women. "In the non-profit world, there are more women because they care more, it is the nature of women to be affected easily by problems. Women more or less believe they can address those problems'', says Svetla Kostadinova. However, there might be a darker reason behind female domination in the non-governmental sector: salary size. Civil society jobs are usually not highly paid, so men, perceived to be breadwinners in families, might avoid them.

Barış Altıntaş has another opinion. "There is no research on this question, but I wouldn't describe it either as a male or female dominated area. To begin with, there are many women's organizations and Turkey's women's movement has been very powerful for a long time", she claims. Also, she adds that while females participate in the civil society sector, some other fields – like media or politics – are more restricted and that "women are left out in Turkey''. Thus, the best way for them to have any impact whatsoever is to join a NGO.

They manage to reach top positions as well. Svetla Kostadinova, by her own admission, is a leader at an economic NGO and she succeeded a man without any problems. Barış is the co- founder of an organisation as well, and she mentions that many of the leading human rights organizations in Turkey are also led by women.

The past and future of feminism

Women change people's perceptions and even other women's lives through their work in the civil society sector. Countries that used to be under totalitarian rule have a

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more fragile understanding of democracy and gender equality; thus, they need to be constantly reminded of these values.

Post-communist countries, for example, carry the burden of decades of non-liberal perceptions. Actually, feminist historians and philosophy groups have debated whether Communism was good for women. For example, Prof. Mihaela Miroiu, a Romanian philosopher, a prominent feminist, and an academic, explains that during Communism, prior to 1989, equality between all did not help females much. "In my opinion we cannot talk about feminism under communism. Feminism is a road to women's autonomy and communism is a road to no one's autonomy. It was impossible to have a different, dissident point of view", she says. Also, she points out that the first independent organisation of women was actually in Russia. Thus, women's civil society in Eastern Europe actually first appeared there; however, it was precisely the first Communist leader, Lenin, who rejected it and the organisation was eliminated, Prof. Miroiu explains. "In communism, feminism was understood as a bourgeois reactionary ideology. You cannot claim that something is feminist in this kind of regime", the philosopher says.

As research by Pew Research Centre from 2019 shows, Eastern Europe is a lot less progressive than the West, especially on social issues like homosexuality and the role of women in society.

Fortunately, there are heroes who work hard to alter this situation. As a lawyer, Denitsa Lyubenova is changing family policies and helping women with different sexual preferences to receive equal treatment just like ones who are in heterosexual couples. She faces double standards even in the European Union; the municipality in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, required evidence that a woman from a same-sex couple was the birth mother of her child in order to grant it citizenship and register it. After its refusal to register the baby, Denitsa and her clients appealed and the Bulgarian court decided to refer the case to the Court of Justice of the European Union. The hearing was in February 2021. The decision of this court might provide women in same sex couples the right to be mothers and for their children to receive citizenship.

Also, Prof. Mihaela Miroiu was the one who taught and inspired a generation of feminists in Romania. She has had such a strong influence in feminism that her "students", the people that were inspired by her work and took up the fight, were the ones who actively participated in these new discussions on gender issues. Feminists in civil society not only fight in the present, but also create a better future.

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"Over the last couple of years, I have noticed that civil society is becoming more united, so I hope that can help overcome the obstacles raised by the anti-gender movement, such as their opposition to ratification of the Istanbul Convention. All these things help the positive side of civil society to unite and work more together."

Denitsa Lyubenova, Bulgarian lawyer,
head of the legal programme of
the Bulgarian NGO Deystvie (meaning "Action")

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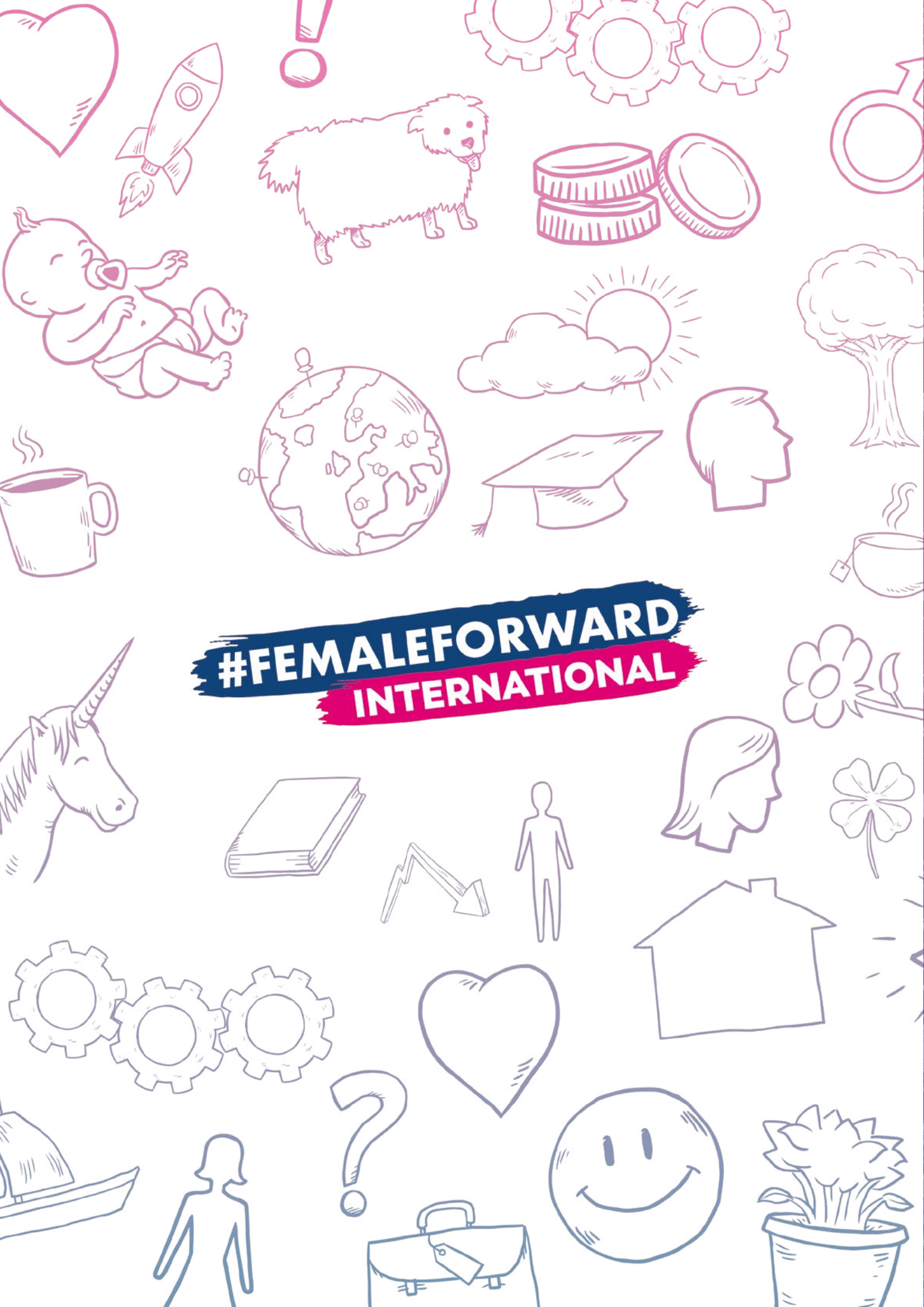
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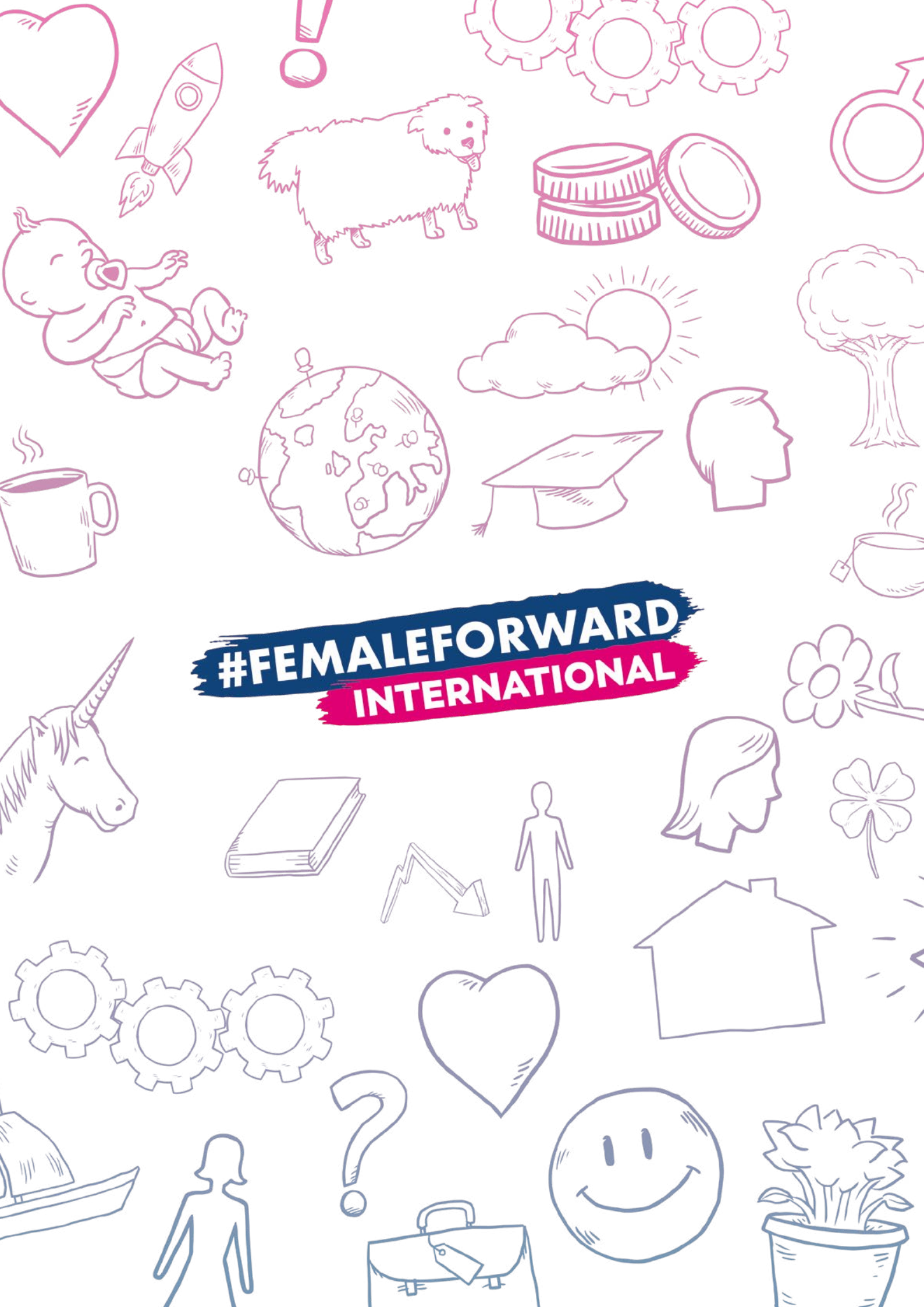
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MEET THE TEAM BEHIND FEMALE FORWARD INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

"I find great inspiration from, and I am amazed by, the women I have interviewed for #FemaleForwardInternational. Telling their stories about hope, determination, and fighting injustice gives me a sense of purpose. That's what journalism is all about – telling stories that matter."

Zornitsa Stoilova is a journalist based in Sofia. Currently, she's exploring how innovation is shaping our future. Zornitsa is an editorial director at The Recursive, an online media, focused on emerging tech and start-up ecosystems in Southeast Europe (SEE).

Prior to that, she was a reporter and editor at the Capital newspaper, a leading business publication in Bulgaria, for thirteen years. Her journalism there focused on social issues, human rights, and civil rights.

Zornitsa is also keen on podcasting. Currently, she's produces The Recursive Podcast, which tells inspiring stories about leadership and innovation from different corners of Southeast Europe. Before that, she produced and hosted the weekly podcast The Voice of Capital.

'I believe that the active participation of women in key roles in political, economic, and social life is vital to overall progress. Their rights and role in society need to be widely discussed and protected by all actors - citizens, NGOs, politicians, etc."

Mila Cherneva is currently a Project Manager at Capital Newspaper, Bulgaria, and a Communications Officer at the IMF. Previously, she worked as a journalist for the Capital Newspaper. She covered a wide range of topics including environmental issues (with a focus on air pollution and water resources), infrastructure, and public procurement abuse. She holds a BA (Hons) in International Relations from University of Exeter and MSc in Environmental Technology from Imperial College London.

"It's an honour to contribute to #FemaleForwardInternational because I believe that gender equality, an awareness of the different layers in society, and having more voices heard out loud are essential tools for building a better future, even if that's a hard thing to imagine sometimes."

Svetoslav Todorov is a journalist and writer, based in Sofia where he is a cultural editor at the respected business/economics weekly Capital as well as Bulgarian correspondent for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and for the Romanian outlet Veridica. His journalism, while connected to the arts, is also associated with education, human rights, and various social issues – from feature articles and interviews with leading world cultural figures to issues within minority communities and subcultures. As a correspondent for Balkan Insight, he has covered the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 anti-government protest wave, and the 2021 elections in Bulgaria. He is the author of three books of short stories, the latest of which, an audio project called 'Nothing Will Happen to You', was adapted as a performance piece in 2020. Between 2020-2021, Todorov curated several contemporary art projects. He is also a contributor to two independent local magazines, VIJ and Boyscout.

“Female empowerment matters for the simple reason that you cannot pursue fairness and justice where half of the population is underrepresented or marginalized. I have been raised by strong female characters and have observed the additional hardships they have had to endure in their lives. I hope that by contributing to this project, the next generation of women will face fewer challenges.”

Martin Dimitrov is a Bulgarian journalist and politics editor of the English language website Kapital Insights. He also works on a media literacy education project run by the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria. He has previously reported for Capital Weekly-Bulgaria and Balkan Insight and his stories have appeared in The Guardian, the Financial Times, the LA Times, and other international publications.

“I dream of a future where the framing of “female” and “women” campaigns will not be necessary because we will have already achieved equal recognition and standing in society. Until this is the case, I plan to work on meaningful projects like #FemaleForwardInternational campaign of FNF, where I had the chance to interview several inspirational people and – hopefully – told their stories well enough for others to get to know these civic leaders as well.”

Joanna Elmy is an author and a current contributor to the independent weekly Toest.bg. She also co-hosts a podcast at the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria. She has studied in both Paris and Amsterdam, and currently lives in the United States.

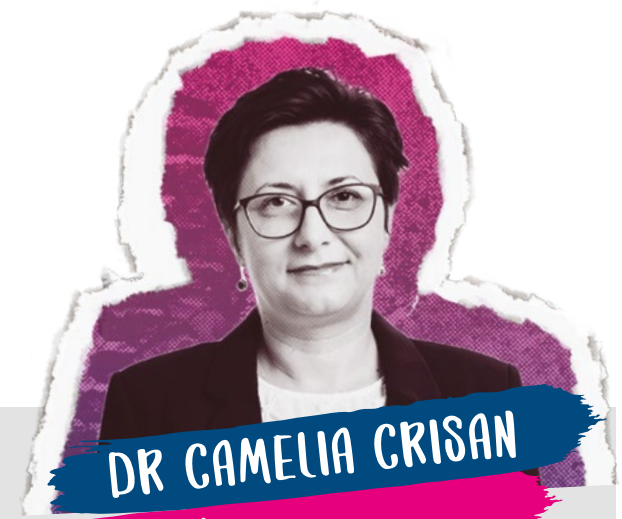
BURCU KARAKAS

Turkey
JOURNALIST

"I am first a woman and then a journalist. In a country where political oppression pervades our daily lives, so much so that it becomes, every day, harder to breathe, I am a "feminist journalist"—I see life and journalism from a feminist perspective. I can't think of any other way in Turkey, where women's rights are constantly under attack and not a day passes without a woman being murdered."

Burcu Karakaş is an independent investigative journalist based in Istanbul, Turkey. She is a Non-Resident Scholar with MEI's Turkey Program and the Turkey correspondent for Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle. Her reporting focuses on human rights, migration, free speech and gender issues. Over the years, she focused on the stories of ethnic, sexual and religious minority groups in Turkey. She is an award-winning reporter, including the European Union Investigative Journalist Prize for her work on suspicious deaths of women in South Eastern Turkey. Karakaş has teamed up with the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) for "Media Ownership Monitor Turkey" and the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC) for in-depth investigative journalism projects. She is the author of four books on minority issues and media landscape in Turkey. She teaches journalism students at university, lecturing on interview techniques and media criticism. She was a Logan Nonfiction Fellow at the Carey Institute of Global Good in 2019. Karakaş holds a MA in International Relations and International Communication from Boston University and BA in Political Science from Marmara University in Turkey.

"Become aware that you are competent enough now, there is no need for more school or more diplomas, jump with courage into the game. I am a woman in education and I want to convince more and more women that NOW is the right time to join politics. I want to contribute to the growth and development of our communities through cooperation, authentic leadership and smart use of technologies."



DR CAMELIA CRISAN

Romania
ACADEMIA & CONSULTING

Camelia Crișan, licensed in Psychology and Communications Science, holds a PhD in Sociology from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA), Bucharest, Romania. She is a Senior Lecturer at NUPSPA and works as a researcher in a Horizon 2020 project about the effects of automatization on the labour force. Previously, Camelia worked as a consultant and training manager within the national initiative Biblionet, funded with 26.9 million dollars by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and coordinated a national programme called Code Kids - where over 2000 kids from Romanian rural areas learn coding and STEM competencies.

Camelia is an ALDE Party Individual Member. She joined Union Save Romania Party (USR) in May 2018 and left the party in May 2020. Camelia is an 'Alliance of Her' (AOH) alumna from 2019 and was a European Parliament candidate from the USR Party. While a USR member and still a student of AOH, in July 2019 she conducted a two-day workshop with women politicians. In November 2019, with the support of FNF and a small team, she organized the first school for USR female politicians with more than 45 candidates for local elections. Furthermore in 2019/20, she helped organize gatherings for women and party members of USR PLUS in more than 30 party branches. During the 2020 local elections campaign, Camelia provided consultancy in political storytelling for 14 mayoral campaigns, with 3 candidates being elected as Mayors and 9 others becoming local councilors.

"I feel privileged to work on #FemaleForwardInternational campaign with some many inspiring ambassadors and trailblazers from East Europe. As Kofi Annan shared: 'There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women'. I do believe that behind every successful woman there is a tribe of other successful women, who have her back."

Boryana Atanassova is the Regional Communications Officer for East and Southeast Europe of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), based in Sofia, Bulgaria. As a proud brand manager of freedom, she contributes to the promotion of liberal values since 2015.

Boryana is passionate about communications for non-profits in international development context. She strives to tailor best practices from marketing in the business world to the non-profit communication for causes, ideas, policies.

Professionally before FNF, she possesses diverse work experience in international relations and nongovernmental organizations such as the United Nations Association of Bulgaria, brand management in FMCG corporations and a publishing house; and management consulting. Academically, she holds two bachelor's degrees from the American University in Bulgaria in European Studies and Business Administration, with one-year Open Society fellowship in New York University (USA). She possesses a Master's degree in Brand Management, Advertising and Innovative Marketing in cooperation with Saatchi and Saatchi advertising powerhouse and a professional qualification in Digital Marketing from Softuni University (Bulgaria).

"I am grateful to FNF's team for inviting me to work on this meaningful campaign. At the end of this journey, I feel inspired and empowered by all these amazing women. Their stories will continue enlightening the "big picture" of my life as a mother and a visual artist."

Slaveya Georgieva is a freelance graphic designer and digital artist. Whether working on social media, food packing, or print design she aims to build a creative connection between a client's story and people's minds. Her passion for fine arts and explorer's mindset led her to multimedia art forms such as digital illustration, watercolor painting, ceramics, motion art, and animation.

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom
Regional Office for East and Southeast Europe
Sofia, Bulgaria

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