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Women and Election Law: Civil Society Development in the Balkans

Topic of Research:

In the past three months I have traveled throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro speaking with activists, politicians, administrators, professors, students, trade union representatives, and journalists about women's participation in elections and civil society. The research has sought to further understand the interconnectedness of international aid, institution building, local government activities, and civil society development in terms of nonprofit and grassroots activism. Themes of poor implementation and coordination problems between local government and nonprofit organizations have continually emerged through these conversations. These themes are illustrated within the issue areas of violence against women including trafficking, women's economic empowerment, and supporting women in obtaining decision making positions in government and elsewhere in society. Within this work I have tried to focus on the position of Roma women.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

Women's rights and feminism have been through many stages in the former Yugoslavia. A network of feminists actively participated in civil society particularly in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb until 1992. The upsurge in nationalism resulting from the wars in the region divided women's groups, in simplistic terms, between those who put nation before the shared identity of women in Yugoslavia and those who wanted to continue with regional level action despite new borders and divisions. The work of organizations fitting the latter model was pushed underground throughout the 1990s and only reemerged with the ousting of Tudjman and Milosevic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the feminist scene was less developed than in Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, but is trying to be a presence in civil society. As women's organizations have developed, they have been highly dependent on international sources of funding and are now trying to navigate the waters to self-sufficiency and greater sustainability. Redundant networks exist in all countries studied, and efforts to merge are not very apparent.

Attention continuously moves away from the Balkans to other regions of the world because almost ten years have passed since the cessation of violence and violence elsewhere in the world, particularly in Iraq, has become a larger priority. As funding has moved away, dependent nongovernmental organizations have been sent in a tailspin, struggling to survive. Competition for funding has created

divisions in civil society, despite the need to unite in order to accomplish goals. Increasing international funders' awareness of the consequences of their decisions, specifically in terms of women's organizations, is not an insignificant contribution if this research succeeds at all in this regard. With elevated awareness, perhaps international influences could see it fit to better coordinate efforts in the region. The lack of coordination among external actors in the region creates duplicative efforts that squander financial and local participatory resources along with dividing nonprofits who should be allies. This research seeks to exemplify instances of this coordination problem among women's rights groups in the region.

As the European Union becomes the dominant external influence in the region, there is increased pressure to harmonize laws and institutions with Western European norms. This has meant a lot of movement in the area of women's rights, but thus far a lot of this energy is only apparent in legislation and regulations and not in the day to day lives of people in the region. Creating and implementing mechanisms to ensure implementation of these laws, as well as increasing cooperation between governmental, nongovernmental, and international organizations is vital to ensure the changes made regarding women's rights are not only paper-deep. This research attempts to see what mechanisms have been employed successfully and unsuccessfully. From these observations perhaps it will help other organizations and localities to be more able to decide which mechanisms might best work in their cases.

One mechanism examined is 'training the trainers' programs which have been employed by numerous women's groups in order to increase political participation of women, with many of these efforts targeted at local level government. One has to ask why women's representation on party lists remains low, despite these efforts along with official and target quotas. This research will try to tease out how much can be expected from the mechanisms in light of the inertia of societal norms.

A final goal of this research is to illuminate the interconnectedness of economic, social, and political issues. I hope this research will demonstrate strong connections between these issues in terms of women's lives and rights in these countries. Possibly this will impact policy creation in a positive way.

Approach and Research Methodology:

My research has been based primarily on semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of nonprofit organizations, international organizations, political parties, professors, student union leaders, activists, journalists, trade union leaders, and ordinary people met in trains or cafes. I have spoken formally with more than 60 people and informally with many more. I have also had the chance to observe a variety of meetings and conferences on women's and human rights throughout the region. A wealth of documents and reports were gathered from interviewees and conferences that are being analyzed for content.

An additional component of the research is a survey which is being conducted primarily with Roma citizens looking at issues of electoral and civil society participation and views of women in these topic areas.

Research was conducted in the following cities:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - Banja Luka
 - Konjic
 - Mostar
 - Sarajevo
 - Tuzla
- Croatia
 - Karlovac
 - Vukovar
 - Zagreb
- Serbia-Montenegro
 - Belgrade
 - Nis
 - Novi Sad

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas:

Many of the laws regarding women's rights were just passed or are still being drafted or debated. Questions of implementation may be premature in some cases because of the immaturity of this legislation. Implementation mechanisms are just being discussed and tested now. The situation will continually ripen and there will be more examples of good and poor results to study and learn from.

Civil society will also be reshaping dramatically in the next few years as nonprofit organizations attempt to sustain activities with less or no foreign support. Examining the cooperation between all levels of government as well as the business community will be extremely interesting and instructive for future researchers, especially as more post-conflict situations appear in the globe.

Further research questioning the results of institutionalizing civil society could also be interesting. Has the creation of institutions to deal with certain problems ghettoized these issues and made government and society less willing to grapple with them because an institution exists? This could be very enlightening especially if researched in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community:

Discussing priorities and coordinating activities with other players in the region is important to lessen duplicative or contradictory work. As the European Union is posing to take over the reigns from the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia readies itself for admission to the European Union and Serbia and Montenegro work toward signing the Stability and

Authorization Act, it is increasingly impractical to not align with European strategies in the Balkans.

A broader recommendation would be to not disassociate economic development from issues of women's, minority, or human rights. Looking at economic issues devoid of the larger context of humanity is folly, though often done. Gender mainstreaming, while often a code-word for forgetting about gender, can be a step toward shifting societal perceptions of human rights as secondary to economic development. Human rights concerns should be a more central component of economic development projects and strategies. Perhaps this translates into longer term projects with a new set of outcomes and outputs required which are created from a human rights perspective rather than an economic one. Possibly by redefining what success means, better results could be achieved through US policy in the Balkans, worldwide, and in the US.