WHY IS THERE NO STRONG WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN LATVIA?

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The question – Why there is no women’s or feminist movement in Eastern Europe? – has been asked by many researchers. Different answers have been given, most of them in hope that a wider mobilization of women will appear, whether under the name of feminism or not (Tatur, 1992; Siklova, 1996; Watson, 1997; Goldfarb, 1998). However, I would agree with those who have detected the beginnings of the women’s movement in the region, although it is weak (Einhorn, 1993; Gal and Kligman, 2000). To start answering the question “Why is there no strong women’s movement in Latvia?” – first, it is necessary to define what the characteristics of a movement are, to determine what can be considered a strong or weak movement, and to assess the situation in Latvia (whether there is a women’s movement and whether it is strong or weak). Second, after determining that the movement is weak I will look for the reasons of it in Latvia. In this respect, different intertwining reasons – cultural, and briefly political and economic ones need to be addressed.

Is There a Women’s Movement in Latvia?

Some feminist theorists addressing women’s movements point out the politicized identity “women” that serves as a basis for political mobilization or movement, not reflecting extensively on the definition of a political or social movement itself (What does it mean to have a politicized identity as a woman? Is it enough to claim the existence of a movement?). For instance, Sperling et al. include in their definition of a women’s movement “all mobilization of women as social and political actors” (Sperling et al., 2001: 1158). When the movement is identifiable and “obvious”, like in the USA, it is easy to postulate: “movement definition, issue articulation, and issue resolution are specific to women, developed and organized by them with reference to their gender identity” (emphasis added) (Beckwith, 2001: 372). Is there something that is not a movement then? Others, however, are more specific and, in line with several “mainstream” theories, combine grievances, consciousness, collective identity with organizations, resources and political opportunity as characteristics of a movement (Pelak et al., 1999). In this respect a helpful definition is offered by Tarrow, who identifies social movements as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow, 1998: 4). The important point Tarrow makes is that a collective challenge (e.g., a riot), common purpose, solidarity and collective

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1 I will not talk here specifically about the definition of a feminist movement, which can be included under the broader title of women’s movements (Sperling et al., 2001: 1158; Beckwith, 2001: 372), though I will touch upon the implications of the naming a movement in the discussion of framing the issue of women’s mobilization.
identity (e.g., temporary) separately and without *sustaining* the collective action is not a social movement (Tarrow, 1998).

According to the criteria offered by Tarrow, there exists a women’s movement in Latvia. First, a collective action in terms of organizing and putting forward gender equality issues is present in Latvia. The activities on different levels include, for instance, efforts to influence government decisions in respect to gender equality (e.g., the Coalition for Gender Equality created the Conception for Implementing Gender Equality), providing legal consultations for women, creating crisis centers to deal with violence against women (several NGOs), and putting feminist issues on the academic agenda (gender studies centers in academia). However, most of the activity is concentrated on the level of a small number of NGOs, ministries and a few interest groups. In addition, the networking among the organizations involved in fostering gender equality issues is rather weak (Neimanis, 1999: 33-34). Second, there are common goals (certainly, not defined within strict boundaries), which the organizations and groups try to achieve: gender equality in various spheres is the broadest title for them. Third, there is solidarity and collective identity indicated by the formation of coalitions and umbrella organizations. Fourth, the activities are not totally sporadic and unrelated; the organizations existing for a longer period of time continuously address the issues.

As to the outcomes, they exist; however, they are not very effective. Mostly they are formal and remain on the level “accepted but forgotten” (like the mentioned Conception for Implementing Gender Equality that suggests creating some new institutions, which is not a very effective way of dealing with the problem in itself, but is not taken into account by the government either). Other outcomes are considerable (like changes in the Labor Law into which gender equality norms were incorporated) but achieved mainly because of the pressure of the European Union (which is the official direction pursued by the state of Latvia).

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2 I acknowledge that there is a problem assuming that only women would deal with gender equality issues. Certainly, there are men as well who are concerned with them. Although there has not been a wider men’s activity in this respect in Latvia (if one compares, for example, with Nordic countries where there are pro-feminist men’s groups), they are involved in the movement, too (for instance, among the members of the Coalition for Gender Equality there are men). In addition, even if gender inequality hits women the hardest, there is a number of issues that can be addressed in relation to men. Regardless, in this essay I address the problem of women uniting as women in dealing with widespread gender discrimination against women.

3 In the delineating mobilization structures (“ways of engaging in collective action” [McCarthy, 1996: 141]) I adopt the approach of the authors suggesting a wider continuum of them within social movements, not strictly cutting off party, governmental or interest group activities, which are related to the movement (McCarthy, 1996; Beckwith, 2001: 383), or movement models related to mentioned activities which a movement can transform into (Rucht, 1996).

4 The Coalition for Gender Equality consists of 23 (not necessarily only women’s) organizations and 54 individuals.

5 Neimanis reports that 0.2% of the population (in Latvia there are approximately 2.5 million inhabitants) belong to a “women’s organization” (Neimanis, 1999: 33). In turn, in the brochure *Women Can Do It!* (1999) information on 41 women’s organizations is provided.

6 There is a number of women’s organizations in Latvia, not discussed here specifically, which cannot be said to have a politicized identity, but in these organizations women as women (complying with the traditional role of women as caring) deal with general social issues (poverty, unemployment, ecology, ethnic integration, problems in military service).

7 Paragraph 29 of the new Labor Law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex; paragraph 32 addresses discrimination in job advertisements, and paragraph 33 lists the questions forbidden to be asked in a job interview (e.g.,
It is possible to conclude that there is a women’s movement in Latvia. However, overall it can be assessed as weak. One can mention the following reasons: first, it is not widespread; second, it is not very influential (in terms of changes achieved); third, the cooperation among organizations involved in the movement is weak.

**Why is the Movement Weak?**

There are a lot of gender inequality problems in Latvia; some have increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union (see Weber and Watson, 2000; Neimanis, 1999; Einhorn, 1993). They have been acknowledged also in a recent survey on the problem of gender inequality in Latvia. Why is women’s movement scarce, scattered and having little influence? One can speculate many reasons, as the existence of problems alone does not lead to the mobilization of people. Researchers on social movements have emphasized the interrelation of political opportunities, mobilizing structures and cultural framings in explaining, for instance, the form a movement acquires and the strength of it (McAdam et al., 1996). It has been noted as well that framing of a certain issue contributes to the political opportunities structure (ibid.).

The issue of women’s mobilization into a women’s movement can be assessed by looking at the wider political context – political participation and attitudes of the inhabitants of Latvia to politics in general. Therefore, first, the political participation and political culture in Latvia will be considered. Second, political action repertoires in terms of “cultural construction of repertoires of contention and frames” (Zald, 1996: 261) will be addressed. Third, it is necessary to point out the relationships of the movement to the state and international organizations, which contribute both an economic and cultural dimension to the political opportunities structure of the development of the movement. This factor, in turn, helps to explain the form, which the movement has acquired and consequently partly also the outcomes it generates. There are several other factors that definitely can influence, for instance, the popularity of the women’s movement and the attitude to it, like the media’s attention to and the way of addressing of the problem, as well as framing the activities of the women’s movement, or internal disagreements in the movement itself. However, since more systematic research is needed to determine the influence of these factors, they will not be touched upon here.

**Political Culture**

One of the most influential and contested definitions of “political culture” is the one introduced by Almond and Verba who define it as “specifically political orientations – attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system” (Almond and Verba, 1965: 12).

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8 In comparison, in Norway there are 300 000 women only in a network *Fokus*, which brings together women’s organizations having a minimum of 50 members (*Fokus*..., 2001), and even this amounts to approximately 6.7 % of the inhabitants of Norway.

9 See *The Understanding*..., 2001 (the survey of 2006 respondents), in which 55% of people (irrespective of gender) acknowledge that in practice there are limitations of rights according to gender (p. 37); approximately half of the inhabitants of Latvia think that the problems of gender equality are important to address (p. 52), however in comparison with other problems (inequality because of health, age, income, ethnicity) this problem is mentioned only as the fifth according to the number of people agreeing (p. 63).

10 Which in turn influences the potential number of adherents of the movement (Zald, 1996: 271).
Almond and Verba are extensively criticized for their understanding of political culture: values and beliefs are the same preferences that the concept of political culture aims to explain; they still need to be explained by the culture that is behind them (Wilson, 2000). Values do not always explain action: people can hold common values but act differently (Swidler, 1986; Laitin 1988). In addition, survey data are insufficient to describe the cultural meaning systems (Laitin, 1988; Ross, 1997: 56). Also, aggregated data about the “majority” of people do not help in explaining the action of a small group. Political culture cannot be viewed apart from economic and social contexts, either. However, within its limited scope the concept retains its explanatory value\textsuperscript{11} – in this case, the notion of political culture is used to analyze a context and overall subjective environment of a weak movement: Are there any activities people participate very actively in? What are the attitudes of people towards acting in politics? (But one still needs to answer what may be the reasons or sources of such attitudes.)

Overall, in Latvia political participation is low.\textsuperscript{12} The long-term participation, which includes membership in non-governmental organizations, amounts to approximately 6-7% of the whole population (\textit{HDR}, 2001: 86). In 1997, a study devoted specifically to political participation showed that 75% of citizens and 90% of non-citizens did not belong to any organization; approximately 75% of both citizens and non-citizens characterized their overall interest in politics as “I am interested in the most significant events” or “I am sometimes interested in politics”, which does not signify a very keen interest in politics (Zepa, 1999: 8). Later another study showed that the political activity and interest in politics has grown in 1999 in comparison to 1994, but insignificantly (Trapenciere, 2001: 177). It is very difficult to assess trends because of the different samples of the surveys; therefore I will only discuss the present situation, which can be described as low participation and low interest in politics.

On a cognitive and affective level (Almond and Verba, 1965: 14) the orientations towards protests are weak\textsuperscript{13} (Zepa, 1999: 8-9). Moreover, the role of the self in politics is assessed as low as well. In 1997, 26% of respondents answered that they “believe that they are rather well informed about the political problems important for Latvia”, however, 66% believed that most of the people are better informed about politics and government than they are. There is a lack of positive expectations in respect to the result of political participation (Zepa, 1999: 10). More recent results are available: in 2000, approximately 83% of inhabitants

\textsuperscript{11} In a later formulation, Almond notes that “[p]olitical culture is not a theory: it refers to a set of variables which may be used in the construction of theories”, and the set of variables in turn “imputes some explanatory power to the psychological or subjective dimension of politics, just as it implies that there are contextual and internal variables which may explain it” (Almond, 1989: 26).

\textsuperscript{12} The best situation is with short-term participation – elections: 72% of citizens participated in parliamentary elections in 1998; 62% of citizens participated in municipality elections in 2001 (\textit{HDR}, 2001:84). It should be noted that in 2000 there were 21.15% of in habitants of Latvia who were non-citizens (\textit{Demographic...}, 2000: 38) and cannot participate in elections, though they are free to involve in other activities. However, aside from elections, in 1997, 71% of citizens and 89% of non-citizens did not participate in any political activities (Zepa, 1999: 7).

\textsuperscript{13} In comparison with Norway, they are approximately two times weaker: in Latvia 27% of people would organize public meetings to protest against an action of the government which they are not satisfied with; 21% would organize demonstration; 16% would organize a strike of all workers; 14% would attend a public meeting; 12% would participate in a demonstration (Zepa, 1999: 8-9).
did not believe that they could influence the result of decision-making in politics (HDR, 2001: 75); the low evaluation of the possible influence of people can influence the participation.

These observations may give a part of hypothetical\textsuperscript{14} answer as to why there is no strong women’s movement in Latvia: since the participation in different organizations is low, and overall attitude towards politics and involvement of people in it is rather passive.

**Repertoires for Action**

In this part of the paper, a semiotic approach to culture will be used. The main concepts that I will employ are “repertoires for action”, “tool-kits” and “framing”. Several authors argue that movements in their ways of protest and organization (or repertoires for action) largely draw on culturally available ways of doing it (Zald, 1996: 267; Tarrow, 1998: 20-21). Here, Swidler’s concept of culture as a “tool-kit” or repertoire of habits, skills and styles, which provides components for constructing strategies for action (Swidler, 1986: 273, 275) is useful. This conceptual framework concentrates on what practices are used for contention and whether cultural legacies provide the tools for action. In addition, the concept of “framing” referring to a present conceptualization of issues and repertoires of action important to the movement will be used.\textsuperscript{15} The focus on symbolic and discursive practices of particular groups in a particular context (in contrast to the political culture approach) provides a means to analyze how actors themselves employ certain meanings, and how it influences the development and form of the movement. I will take up two issues: the shifts in public/private division and the legacy of repertoires of action in the women’s movement in Latvia.

A rather long period of being part of the Soviet Union and experiencing certain ways of organizing is not the only, but still an influential historical experience, which in a sense provides repertoires for action or “tool-kits” in a political sphere. Civil society as a social space for political action was virtually absent in the Soviet Union. The official ideological and token political actions were performed mainly on the state level (which was discredited because of the ideological nature of the action), while unofficial ones, as well as the real views of people were expressed in the “private” sphere, at home, thus “valorizing the family as a refuge marking the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Heinen, 1997: 579). For instance, the political activities of dissidents were carried out in “private” spaces. In Latvia, moreover, people still do not trust the “public” politics: people value individual and family ties more, rather than state or other organizations in providing help in case of problems (Zepa, 1999: 17). It is important to note, however, that this fact can be related both to the distrust to the state officials remaining from the Soviet period and to the present performance of the government, as well as the effectiveness of the organizations in question.

\textsuperscript{14} Comparative research would be necessary to determine whether it is really so.

\textsuperscript{15} McAdam et al. provide the original definition of D. Snow: framings are “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al., 1996: 6).
Gal and Kligman emphasize the *discursive* and shifting nature of public/private distinction (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 40). In this view the important aspect is what is *defined* (and by whom) to be the sphere of political action. The definitions of public/private have shifted in the present acquiring gendered dimensions (Gal and Kligman, 2000). Now it is theoretically possible for both women and men to participate freely in “public” activities and to be involved in a range of formal and informal organizations, nevertheless men constitute a much greater number in national politics (Neimanis, 1999: 28-29). If in the Soviet period both women and men were oppressed by the state, why are men present in politics in greater numbers than women now, when both can participate in it? There is at least one continuity with the Soviet period. In the Soviet time gender equality was postulated as the ideal but on the everyday level women and men acquired messages about differentiated “femininity” and “masculinity”; women still needed to perform domestic duties; the division of professions into women’s and men’s spheres was perpetuated (Voronina, 1994; Puga, 1992; Krutskiḥ, 1992). Similarly, nowadays the messages of traditional17 “femininity” and “masculinity” continue to exist in the media (Sulmane and Zarina, 2000), schoolbooks (Picukane, Kikule and Zemite, 2001) and even are articulated by some women activists, ironically, as if constituting an opposition to the Soviet situation with gender equality.

In sum, one can say that there are some shifts in the public/private distinction; the public/private has shifted into divisions along gender lines. The upbringing of children in a family (transmission of values of “femininity and “masculinity”), education in school and media messages definitely contribute to the explanations why women are located more within a “private” sphere and do not mobilize.

It is also necessary to pay attention specifically to the traditions of the women’s movement in Latvia and how they are articulated or framed in the present situation by the activists of the movement. Are there any continuities with Soviet or perhaps pre-Soviet time? Perhaps the concept of the legacy of repertoires of action can provide some explanation for the form and strength of the women’s movement in Latvia.

If one looks back there is no tradition of a radical women’s movement in Latvia. Most of the organizations during the time of the independent Republic of Latvia (1918-1940) were oriented towards reforms in politics, the professional, legal and social status of women, or address social problems, like charity, anti-alcoholic propaganda, etc. (Rubina, 1992). Beginning in 1940, these voluntary organizations did not exist anymore. At the end of 1950s women’s councils were created in Latvia (Rubina, 1992: 174). They were, first of all, created by the state, not initiated by women themselves; second, their agenda was set by the Communist Party; third, though they provided *some* space for solving gender inequality problems, they remained rather formal during the whole time of their existence (see Browning, 1992; Voronina, 1994: 46).

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16 The distinction public/private as well as the notion of civil society is deemed to be historically specific by other authors as well (see Berezin, 1997: 4).
17 In this ideal, women are primarily those who take care of the children and home, while men are primarily breadwinners, thus also more connected to the sphere of politics.
Some of the present women’s organizations associate themselves with continuity from the pre-Soviet Republic of Latvia, like the Latvian National Women’s League, which is named the same as the organization active during the period of the independent Republic of Latvia. It explicitly tries to revive the aims similar to the “historical” organization: along with charity work and youth education (“national, state and family values”) their goal is to improve the situation of women through “voicing proposals to government”.

Other organizations are newly established and they usually do not emphasize any continuity; they rather deny any connection both with the Soviet understanding of gender equality and “Western” feminism (often understood as a synonym for radical organizing and hatred of men). However, in their approach to solving the main causes of gender inequality mainly legal solutions and introducing new formal organizations are proposed. For instance, the Conception for Implementation of Gender Equality created by the Coalition for Gender Equality and approved by the government, proposes a bureaucratic apparatus (a net of institutions) as the primary remedy against gender inequality. Although the authors of the Conception emphasize the necessity to involve all the levels of the society in the process of implementing the decisions of the proposed institutions, the whole process is envisioned as being directed from above (The Conception…, 2001).

A significant aspect that differentiates the set of issues of the Conception from the Soviet one is a particular concern for men’s problems, along with the discrimination of women. It emphasizes that the problems of both genders should be dealt with. In several conferences on gender equality issues and the gatherings of women’s organizations I have heard such questions as: “And what about men? Are only women discriminated against?” In my view, it can be a symptom of two, perhaps interrelated, processes: one is introducing a new issue (of men) and the necessity to address the problem of gender inequality not only on the part of women, but on the part of men as well (the title of a conference in 1997, I think, tries to emphasize the need for this process – “Women and Men in Dialogue”). Another process is to avoid the conceptualization of women as a potential political group with their own interests. Perhaps here lies part of the explanation of women’s movement being weak in Latvia. Indeed, why would women and men not work together for gender equality? It is probably best if both women and men are involved in such a movement. The problem is, in my view, that in some respects women and men (or different groups of women and men) do have different relationship with the problem of gender inequality deriving from the different character of the problems directly influencing them. Gal and Kligman question whether the focus on the category of women is the best way to gain support of more people for the necessity to address gender inequality.

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18 In some cases they are both conflated. This interpretation, which is not based on facts, can be found, for instance in Beitnere 1999.
19 In comparison with organizations that address the consequences of gender inequality, like many NGOs: providing services for women through self-help groups, business support groups, and crisis shelters (Neimanis, 1999: 33). Nevertheless, these organizations in many cases are involved in eliminating gender discrimination at its root as well, like in the Association for Gender Equality.
20 For example, it is mentioned that men in Latvia have a much shorter average life expectancy (11 years less) than women; men die three times more frequently than women from external causes, alcoholism and drug use; they have higher suicide rate and the level of apathy (The Conception…, 2001: 7).
21 There is larger number and more specific problems that women face in Latvian society because of structural inequality and hidden discrimination (Neimanis, 1999; Weber and Watson, 2000).
problems; they suggest that in East Central Europe it might be more fruitful to use rhetorical strategies focusing on motherhood and different aspects of citizenship, rather than women’s autonomy (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 103-104). However, in Latvia mobilizing people around such categories is not strong, either.

In sum, the organizational structure of the women’s movement in some assertions peculiarly resembles the Soviet one (as directed from above). However, there are organizations that claim continuity with the pre-Soviet Republic, as well as the new ones that struggle with problems which were present in the Soviet times, but are only being addressed now (like violence against women).

**The Role of International Organizations**

Goldfarb argues that the activities of Solidarity movement in Poland in which women were actively involved provide repertoires for action (if one uses the terminology of social movements theorists) for women presently involved in women’s movement. He points out that in this case the experiences of the recent period of a struggle, rather than older legacies of the Soviet time are employed (Goldfarb, 1998). What determines which ways of action are chosen and which tool-kit is employed?

Laitin argues it is the hegemonic powers that privilege one arena of symbolic production over the other (1986: 19). What could these powers be, if any, in the case of Latvia? Who has the power to define how the women’s movement develops? Certainly, partly the women themselves, and I briefly explored the discourses of women involved in the movement on their position in it in terms of historical heritage. Another actor that significantly influences movements is the state. The actions of the state can both circumscribe a movement’s activities and help to expand them (for instance, through financial help). In the case of Latvia, the state is largely indifferent.\(^{22}\) On the international scene, however, there is a number of organizations, which, first, directly exert pressure on the government of Latvia, and second, which cooperate with women’s organizations in Latvia. The first case is the European Union, which pressures the government of Latvia to adopt changes primarily in the legislation concerning the labor market, including gender equality norms. The other organizations (like UNDP, PHARE Democracy Programme, Open Society Institute, etc.\(^{23}\)) are of extreme financial help in many projects of women’s organizations.

However, it is argued by many feminist authors that there are advantages and disadvantages in cooperating with transnational organizations. Among advantages, fostering the women’s movement in areas where it is not strong, as well as help to persuade the state to take up some action in securing women’s rights are mentioned (Sperling et al., 2001: 1160-63). On the other hand, transnational organizations have certain priorities, as well as rules the organizations have to follow; in addition, the international organizations prefer certain types of organizations to cooperate with; competition for the resources may weaken the movement as

\(^{22}\) There are virtually no resources provided by the government for solving gender inequality problems. The minimum that is done is the creation of a position for an official dealing with gender inequality in the Ministry of Welfare.

\(^{23}\) See Weber and Watson 2000 for a more detailed description of gender equality activities and the organizations that allocate resources for these activities.
well (Sperling et al., 2001: 1178). Financing and preference for certain types of organizations (well-established ones, for instance) may partly account for the form the women’s movement has taken in Latvia. At the same time, in cultural terms, international organizations frame gender equality issues in certain ways that funded organizations have to comply with. One can suggest that not all organizations agree with how the issues are framed in “Western” organizations, that there is a discrepancy among the local and international organizations in this respect (for instance, emphasizing only women’s problems, or advocating women’s participation in “public” sphere as the main remedy for gender inequality).24

Conclusion
The aim of this paper was to find some answers to the question why there is no strong feminist movement in Latvia. The answers were looked for, first, in the sphere of political culture as a wider context for passive women’s political organization. Second, repertoires of action were considered, tracing their roots to the Soviet period and the interwar independent Republic of Latvia, and examining the framing of them by women involved in the movement. As cultural, political and economic aspects intertwine in shaping the contemporary women’s movement in Latvia, also the relationship of women’s organizations to international organizations was briefly touched upon. It was shown that among some other reasons, these factors might have a considerable influence on the shape and strength of the current women’s movement in Latvia.

References


24 In the context of Baltic countries Kivimaa (1999) suggests such a discrepancy.


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. (1996) “Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes – Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements.” In McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


