



Poland, Czech
Republic,
Slovakia,
East Germany
and Ukraine

1989 
EUROPE ON THE MOVE



Women in Times of Change, 1989-2009



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Feminism as a Practice of Freedom

Lubica Kobová

It happened some time in July 1996 in the town of Humenné. We were on our way from a swimming pool that I had not found very entertaining. To me, splashing around in a crowded pool was an unfamiliar urban pastime and – as someone who used to spend most of her summer vacations in the countryside – I did not understand it. But for urban adolescents, water was a must, just like magazines and books during the summer and planting potatoes in the spring and harvesting them in the fall were a must for adolescent countryside intellectuals.

Humenné is called the metropolis of Zemplín. Maybe that's true – at that time it had one bookstore and names of all businesses were written in two languages – Slovak and Ukrainian. Maybe it was a deed of the blind hand of the book market that on dark brown cardboard shelves in the one-story house of the local bookstore I came across the magazine *Aspekt*. The subtitle on its cover read: "A feminist cultural magazine" and they only had two issues – *Female Writing* and *The Lesbian Existence*. I walked away from the store with one of them and spent that evening flipping through the pages of the feminist magazine – instead of watching horror movies which my uncle and aunt had bought after the revolution during their first trip to visit relatives in Switzerland.

A few years after several women in Bratislava and Prague had proclaimed that it was "time to take the words about equality and democracy seriously and apply them in real lives of people of the female sex in Slovakia."¹ I connected with them – feminists – through the already old-fashioned medium of a magazine. Seven years after "the revolution" a seventeen-year-old "gal" is perusing a feminist magazine on the periphery of a periphery, in eastern Slovakia. Isn't that the fulfillment of a dream about good – pardon the masculine bureaucratic term – dissemination?

I never experienced my "own" 1989. I spent those November days in hospital with pneumonia, a lump of teenage emotions and a strange realisation that there was something going on out there. But I had my year 1996. For myself I discovered feminism as a practice of freedom.²

¹ *O Aspekto* (2009). Available at <http://www.aspekt.sk/about.php>.

² Cf. Zerilli, Linda M. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

But have people – women and men – ever had their year 1989? Overtly, the change of the regime was described as a revolution and it was supposed to start something new. Hannah Arendt wrote that we can speak of revolution “only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom.”³ But has this political and social change meant the beginning of a practice of freedom for women and men of the old-new state?

When I look at the recent past with hindsight, when I go through newspaper clippings of articles on the state of women's rights in Slovakia, when I read feminist social critique and fiction books written by female authors I cannot see any single beginning, a single deep breath followed by a gradual transition to democracy and the market economy also *for women*. The past twenty years have not followed an ideal scheme of linear development from the declaration of liberation in 1989 to gradual – albeit faltering – democratisation in 2009. The thesis about non-linearity of democratisation may have become shared academic knowledge in social sciences dealing with transformation, but it only represents a small fragment of our beliefs and convictions.

I believe that most women and men wanted, and still want, to be part of a polity which develops in a sure and unquestionable direction, guaranteeing prosperity and “the future of our children.” And maybe it seemed that this would be brought about by the fall of a republic that for some unknown reason was called “socialist.” Anyway, there was “no other alternative” but the combination of democracy and free market. A rupture in the old regime should have been just one. However, it seems to me that due to hard-to-change social and political relations, this rupture has multiplied and induced smaller or bigger crises. To resolve them, politicians have used various strategies that, in line with their ideas, have been meant to ensure stability of the political and social system. And one of the ways to avert crises is to locate their causes or their solutions in women.

According to feminist theory, we should be wary of the category of “women,” which magically becomes whole when we fill it with various elements of race, class, age,

³ See Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 34.

ethnicity and sexuality What is denoted by the term “women”, and what is called upon as such when seeking the causes of crises or their solutions, does not have one common referent and is not a sum of several concrete referents. “Women” are an attempt at construction of a political subject in a concrete space, at a concrete time, here and now. Otherwise there would be no such category, just like there is no political category of “men”.

Let the elections be democratic

In 2001, for the first, I time placed my signature under a public initiative concerning women's rights. I joined thousands of women and men who disagreed with the planned ban on abortion, which would have ensued from changes in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic proposed by MPs from the Christian-Democratic Party. By signing the petition, called *The Pro-Choice Initiative*,⁴ women mobilised as a subject whose relations with the state should, according to some legislators, be derived from their ability to give birth. The mobilised subject of women clearly rejected this definition.

Just a few months after women, men and women's rights NGOs had united in the common public action which they – given the course of further events – modestly called an “initiative”, public space in Slovakia was occupied by one “informal women's movement”. It was the first time after 1989 when some collective activity of women called itself a movement. Feminists, intellectuals, academics were still uncomfortable with using the word “movement” when speaking about the activity of women's organisations in Central and Eastern Europe or in Slovakia.⁵

⁴ For more see the texts of the Initiaves of February 5 and 19, 2001 published in: *Iniciativa za možnosť voľby* (2001), in: Cviková, Jana, Jurášková, Jana, *Možnosť voľby. Aspekty práv a zodpovednosti* ASPEKT, Bratislava, 2001, pp. 102–104.

⁵ For a discussion of the women's movement in the Czech Republic and Slovakia see e.g. Farkašová, Etela, *Bola to naozaj šťastná zhoda okolností*; Havelková, Hana, *Ženské hnutí a genderová kultúra v Česku 1989–2003*; Kiczková, Zuzana, *Stretnutie s feministickou filozofiou bol na začiatku skutočne osobný a intelektuálny šok.*; Lacinová, Ľubica, *Subjektívne dejiny slovenského feminizmu*; Vodrážka, Mirek, *Diskursívni smrť a feminizmus bez feminizmu*; Wöhrer, Veronika, *Spôsob hovorenia o feminizme na Slovensku by som nazvala ako „doing feminism“* and discussion on these conference papers. In: *ASPEKT má 10+. Jubileum* (2003). Available at <http://www.aspekt.sk/desat.php?desat=17>.

"Women, let's speak about what bothers us! Women, let's claim what we're entitled to!" These appeals gradually, one by one, were addressed to women via billboards placed along roads and motorways several weeks before the 2002 general elections. When and where should we speak and claim?! Should we complain to our friends even more? Give a piece of our mind to our partners, be angry with parents and tell them to stop poking their noses into everything? Nobody understood those mysterious messages. An on top of everything – that name: *Let's Do IT!* This was not a campaign for the newest jogging collection for women from Nike, but an ad for a "women's movement". Like in a bad home video, a guy kept attacking us from the TV screen, for a seemingly endless half-minute, speaking about his plight. His wife joined a "women's movement". Take sympathy on him. All he wants is to have his wife back. Also that daughter standing next to him with a sad stare on her face will be happy when her mom is back home, with her family. Because when women of Slovakia join the "movement", their mom will be able to return where she belongs – to her daughter and husband. And will let the movement be.

But what wouldn't a Slovak woman do to make one man happy? Or two, three of them or...the whole government, coalition parties! Finally, all was exposed. A couple of days before the elections the third billboard appeared and a popular actress came up with her TV appeal: "Women, let's vote!" Thank you for reminding me. Isn't it nice to remind women – through flowers on billboards and a membership card that could be used in partner businesses for discount purchases – that they have the right to vote and are a dynamic force of democracy?

How did women deserve such attention, so much TV time, so many billboards and – so much money? It was simple. Allegedly, at that time democracy was under threat and women needed to be mobilised. In 2002 the victory of the ruling coalition parties – which in 1998 had succeeded in breaking the authoritarian style of governance of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar – was far from certain. Pre-election polls, however, indicated that women were an untapped pool that the coalition parties could use. Some women over 55, with

lower education and from smaller towns up to 5,000 inhabitants, intended to cast their ballot for the opponent of the ruling coalition – the HZDS party. Many women over 55 were undecided.⁶ Was there any significant gender difference in voting behaviour in Slovakia? According to the polls, women's election participation as voters was at about the same level as men's, so was it legitimate to speak about a gender "gap" at all?⁷ Nevertheless, the target group of the *Let's Do IT!* "informal women's movement" precisely corresponded with the description of undecided female voters or those who intended to vote for the oppositional HZDS. These were supposed to be women with the following characteristics: "age 30-65, elementary or secondary education, living in smaller towns and villages."⁸ This women-targeting election campaign was successful – the pre-2002 ruling coalition secured another term in office and the support of women significantly facilitated the formation of the right-wing coalition.⁹

The movement *Let's Do IT!* indeed did a lot of "it" shortly before and after the elections. In addition to attracting women to the ballots they succeeded – for a time exceeding the very existence of the movement – in distorting the meaning of the notion of "women's movement" to denote something demeaning, a fake creation, a marketing product of one US media advisor and PR agencies cooperating with her in Slovakia.

Everything was organised unbelievably smoothly. Where before feminist and women's rights organisations had demanded better cooperation with the state, the *Let's Do IT!* movement succeeded immediately. After the elections,

⁶ Gyarfášová, Oľga – Pačková, Katarína, *Potenciál aktívnej účasti žien vo verejnom živote*, Inštitút pre verejné otázky, Bratislava, 2002, p. 9.

⁷ Filadelfiová, Jarmila – Bútorová, Zora – Gyarfášová, Oľga, "Women and Men in Politics", in: Mesežnikova, Grigorij – Kollár, Miroslav – Nicholson, Tom (ed.), *Slovakia 2002. A Global Report on the State of Society*, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, 2003, p. 335.

⁸ Slušná, Ľubomíra, Päť mýtov o Urobme TO!, in: *SME.sk*. 2002.

⁹ Cf. Filadelfiová et al. (2003), p. 336; *Slovakia Parliamentary Elections, September 20 & 21, 2002. Election Report*, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Washington, D.C. 2002.

its representatives met with politicians. Women presented their demands and ministers and MPs, without any hesitation, committed themselves to their fulfillment. Handshakes, smiles for the camera – and the new gender contract in Slovakia came into existence. Representatives of the female folk met with representatives of the male folk and, without having any real power to be able to monitor whether the men really upheld their commitments, they granted – as “women of Slovakia” – legitimacy to the new political elite.

Once again, women rushed in to help the state in a time of crisis; or more precisely they came to give their helping hand to faltering democracy. The women, who perceived themselves as those who were a little left-behind by the democratisation process, were supposed to be its engine – at least during the elections. Vis-à-vis the ideal state order they were somehow different and politically backward. Allegedly, they didn't know how to use their right to vote. But thanks to the noble intentions of the “informal women's movement” they uprose and uplifted the Slovak democracy, which, in turn, allegedly gave voice to women. Through their diligent work on the altar of democracy, the “women of Slovakia” earned their status of citizens of a state which, since 2002, was increasingly defined by its neo-liberal orientation.

For God or for the Constitution

The repertory of possible public roles for women has not been exhausted by their identification with democratisation. As a political subject, women were continuously constructed as a population of disorderly subjects whose morals had been destroyed by the allegedly excessively liberal abortion law of the 1950s. For right-wing and conservative politicians of both sexes, religious NGOs, Catholic clergy and one popular neo-conservative weekly “women” did not represent real women. This anti-secular coalition advocating neo-moralisation (which has become one of the most common ways of doing politics not only in Slovakia) constructed women as a discursive tool.

Women are used to stabilise the limits of the sought-after political order. As a discursive category they are supposed to proceed from sinning, through repentance to understanding their nature and, finally, to redemption – not only in heaven but, ideally, in a non-secular state, already on earth. Disorderly women must be continually disciplined and their inner evil called upon so that they could discover their inner good. And if it is not possible to achieve this once and for all with one law, then it is convenient to tame at least one woman, once in a while.

When in April 2009, sociologist and – from fall of 2005 until the elections in 2006 – Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family Iveta Radičová ran for president, she dared to do something unforgivable. She proclaimed – not in an academic journal with hardly any readership – but in public: “what is moral or immoral in society is a matter of social convention.”¹⁰ She spoke about abortion and about the fact that the opinion of the church has its limitations – a secular state with its constitutions and its citizens of both sexes. I presume that by social conventions she did not mean a unilateral decree that she would have issued as the future president of Slovakia. But maybe this is precisely how those whose power rests upon hierarchical relations – representatives of the Catholic Church in Slovakia – picture a social contract on social change. No wonder that statements of the presidential candidate were repeated by both lower and higher ranking priests. From Polish priests who a few years back had come to evangelise the godless capital city, and who anxiously strove to do so also through publishing colorful magazines preaching sexual abstinence before marriage, to Catholic bishops, of whom we have eighteen in Slovakia, but of these only one or two can be heard in public.

Immediately after the statement about morality and abortions, representatives of the Catholic Church denounced the public activities of Iveta Radičová.

¹⁰ Tódová, Monika, *Radičová: Slová biskupa ma ranili*, in: *SME.sk*, 26. 2. 2009. Available at <http://volby.sme.sk/c/4325397/radicova-slova-biskupa-ma-ranili.html>.

In sermons and media statements they commented on the presidential candidate, but claimed they were only presenting their personal opinions as common citizens. All right, let's consider this option as well. But who was it who, a few days after a sermon preached by Bishop Rudolf Baláž, in which he had indirectly compared Radičová to Hitler, had a meeting at the Bishop's Office in Banská Bystrica? Was it Ivetta Radičová – a citizen and presidential candidate and Rudolf Baláž – a citizen from Banská Bystrica, or was it Ivetta Radičová – a Catholic and presidential candidate and her shepherd, bishop and politician Baláž?

After a fifteen-minute discussion they presented to the media a common statement saying they had “no difference as concerns fundamental questions”¹¹ and refused to provide the media with any further answers to their questions. I tried to imagine what could have been the subject of their discussion and what political, non-civic, Christian lesson Radičová had received. Maybe her talk with the bishop resembled the dialogue between a bishop and a nun in a book written by Jana Juráňová: “‘You must, my child, learn that our plans are not in our hands,’ the bishop told her the other day. Klára does not comprehend why the bishop's office wants to change people's plans. Does the office represent God on this earth in this respect as well?”¹² Let's swap Klára with Radičová and we get the first political message of the Catholic Church to the candidate. She too was obliged to grasp this lesson – in Slovakia a representative of God has more power than a symbolic representative of the people.

And let's swap Klára for other women who in 2001 – when the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH), at that time a parliamentary party of the ruling coalition, proposed changes in the Constitution that would have meant a ban on abortion, added to their signatures under the peti-

¹¹ SITA (2009), *Radičová si vyjasnila svoje postoje s biskupom Balážom*, in: *SME.sk*, 9. 3. 2009. Available at <http://volby.sme.sk/c/4341167/radicova-si-vyjasnila-svoje-postoje-s-biskupom-balazom.html>

¹² Juráňová, Jana, *Orodovnice*, ASPEKT, Bratislava, 2008, p. 85.

tion comments such as: “The KDH proposal is idiotic.”, “I add my voice to support the pro-choice stance. And, of course, I’m a woman and I’d love to kick the asses of those men who talk such baloney.” “It is absurd that political sects would usurp the right to decide in the name of all citizens.” “I disagree that men from KDH should decide about us, women. No man has the right to decide on behalf of a woman. Each woman has the right to decide about herself freely and on her own.” “How come it is men who initiated this proposal to change the abortion law?” “I’m against the ban on abortion. I believe I have the right to decide freely, we live in a democratic state, don’t we?”¹³

To sum it up: we live in a democratic state, don’t we? In 2001, the change of the Constitution did not come into being. In 2002, political games with abortion led to the demise of the government and the life of women and men in Slovakia now goes on with a new, allegedly social-democratic, government. At the end of 2008 the government discussed the National Programme for Protection of Sexual and Reproductive Health – a document that, not without a reason, had been put aside for a long time. The recapitulation of the discussion about it looks like a mass crash: the minister of health who had prepared the document was recalled, none of those who had proposed their comments was able to successfully push for their interests, and the national programme ended up as some incomprehensible amalgam. The whole – democratic – discussion led to a stalemate. But what is decisive for the nature of politics shaping women’s lives is the fact that it was not about a clash of pro-life and pro-choice organisations. The National Programme that was supposed to define the steps to the improvement of sexual and reproductive health of men and women was sent to the shredding machine due to one meeting of the Prime Minister with bishops, during which the “bishops (finally) came to an agreement with Prime Minister Robert Fico that the controversial material would not be discussed by

¹³ *Iniciatíva za možnosť voľby* (2001), pp. 102-104.

the government.”¹⁴ It must have been a rather pleasant meeting; the conversation must have proceeded non-conflictually and smoothly. Neither of the attending parties would want to ruin their *common dinner*.

Burdens from the Times of Emancipation

What to do with the women who will not bear any more children and whose wrinkles make them unfit for a commercial of the “women’s movement”? Pensioners have ended up badly. They are unattractive, they eat up the state budget – as some would say – and maybe they are good only for taking care of their grandchildren whom could not be place in daycare. The best thing these women could do is be invisible.

But in the past two years they have received ample media attention as supporters of the main ruling party SMER-SD, when the party organised celebrations of International Women’s Day for them. Elderly women have become the visual materialisation of a socialist society. Hundreds of women, pensioners were packed in theatres and sport arenas to see the show, a handful of politicians and get a red rose.

Authors of video recordings from these celebrations, published with pleasure by internet news portals, never missed a chance for mockery: some elderly women are trying to find seating in a packed hall, another one is chewing on a hamburger; yet another is covering her face maybe wondering how the whole thing would turn out. But whom should we laugh at? The Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior as well as the Minister of Culture are decorating cakes, telling jokes, revealing secretes from higher politics. They make a few jokes when they call the neatly groomed women in the audience (only a few of them are accompanied by their husbands) “dear girls” and introduce themselves as “handsome guys”. But the

¹⁴ Program sexuálneho zdravia nebude. Cirkev uspeľa. (2009). In *aktuálne.sk*, 21. 1. 2009. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/domov/zdravie-skolstvo-spolocnost/clanek.phtml?id=1173702>

air does not thicken; there is no erotic tension of male-female courtship. However, it is not imbued with the rage of forgotten and excluded old women either.

The mother of the politician resembles the women in the audience. She worked hard and, besides, brought up the politician and his siblings. If it is impossible to properly appreciate her work, then it is necessary to ritualise this appreciation. The politicians face women who in their lives experienced the double or triple burden of the “socialist emancipation” of women. Nowadays, the women themselves are burdens left over from those times of “emancipation”, so what shall we do with them? Nothing, we’d rather do nothing. There are more and more of them and so it is a good thing to make peace with them, and wish them all the best “on the occasion of your holiday, International Women’s Day”.¹⁵ And, in turn, to expect they will cause no trouble.

When society, its politicians, husbands, employers and children show “respect” to women – and it does not matter whether they do so on IWD or Mothers’ Day – they publicly acknowledge that they ignore them for the remaining 364 days of the year. It is necessary, then, to symbolically include women in society on that 365th day, and stop looking at them as some incapable beings who do not even understand their own pensions, low salaries, abuse of their maternal and family “obligations” by their relatives and the state. But the Prime Minister understands this well when he tells them: “Let me symbolically embrace you all...”¹⁶ And so the state embraces them and there is no problem whatsoever.

How much liberation, how much freedom

Women, then, do not exist on their own, be it in transforming society or in any other political, social and economic regime. Each question asking what has

¹⁵ Robert Fico, in: Mátyus, Róbert, *Video dňa. MDŽ skončil, šou musí pokračovať*, in: *aktuálne.sk*, 11. 3. 2009. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/video/?id=962863>.

¹⁶ Robert Fico, in: Holičková, Zuzana, *Video dňa. Premiér oslavoval MDŽ aj v Bratislave. Zdobil tortu*, in: *aktuálne.sk*, 13. 3. 2008. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/video/?id=948836>.

happened to women then and there first asks about the meaning ascribed to women in social relations and the meaning that women give to themselves. I tried to describe three figurations of women – actors of democratisation, mothers under moral scrutiny and useless pensioners – through which politics and public debate have politicised the category of women in Slovakia after 1989. This has happened in order to foreclose the category from further possible problematisation. However, the politicisation of women should take the opposite direction. It should open the category of women and enable also conflictual figurations of the subject of women. Such politicisation should be a legitimate part of unstable democratic politics, the conflictual nature of which is related to the fact that democracy is a practice of freedom and not some administrative machinery carrying out democracy according to some scheme.

Finally, I would like to get back to two questions which the texts in this publication touch upon. How much have women gained or lost during transformation? If I leave out the problem of the non-existence of one homogenous subject of woman, even if it were delineated by the territory of Slovakia and the time period of 1989 and 2009, I am still unable to answer this question no matter how much I try. A partial answer to the question “how much” could be found in gender disaggregated statistical data collected by the state, gender indicators in evaluations of recently finished “European” projects, the number of female MPs or institutions dealing with gender equality. However, I consider the real informational value of these indicators to be null as long as there does not exist a group of female scientists, teachers, authors or simply intellectuals who have enough time and money to critically interpret these data, to research current problems of women and of gender organisation of society, publish their findings and critically discuss them. If feminist research existed in Slovakia, then I would in this place write about problems of those women I have so far only heard of from news or from final reports of NGO “women’s projects”. I know only very little, for instance, about unemployed women in Eastern Slovakia working as caretakers of dying Russians or Poles in the USA, about the current gender division of labour in small factories producing semi-products for the automobile industry, scattered all over Slovakia, or

about the reasons why the total devaluation of the work of teachers in elementary and secondary schools has not induced mass protests yet. And I don't think that these problems of women would be any smaller than those embodied by the described figurations of women as actors of democratisation, mothers under moral scrutiny and useless pensioners. I simply don't know them or know very little about them, and I think that this is the case of other female intellectuals in Slovakia as well.

To the second question: Have the changes of 1989 “liberated” women? In contrast to equality, which I have always deemed as something measurable, I have for a long time regarded freedom as a concept too vague and too often instrumentalised to be meaningful. Just like the editors of this publication, I usually understood freedom as a notion in quotation marks. This indicates that the status of this grand word is unquestionable, but its meaning is problematic. Nevertheless, I believe that freedom is tangible. It is experienced as a strategy of action against oppression. What else but their own practice of freedom could explain women's opposition to the attack on their freedom when they spoke up against the ban on abortion? The “liberation” of women that has happened after 1989 in the sphere of reproductive and sexual rights does not contain the pathos of the questions posed at the beginning of this paragraph. However, it contains a different pathos – of a collective action of women against their oppressive relations with other people and institutions. I don't want to narrow the freedom of women in Slovakia down to a single sphere, but this example is blatant. I don't have doubts that many women and girls follow the lines of freedom, be it in smaller or bigger events of their lives. My practice of freedom is feminism.

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**