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Ukrainian women in post-soviet Ukrainian politics

When personal and political merge and diverge

OKSANA KIS

Whenever people outside Ukraine think about Ukrainian women and politics, two most powerful images immediately cross their minds: Yulia Tymoshenko and Femen. Their popularity however is of a different nature, and the goals they pursue using their unique images are quite distinctive, too. Tymoshenko represents a type of an ambitious self-made and hard-working woman who developed and used her excessively-feminine political image as another efficient tool in her personal political career. Performing the stereotypical roles of a virtuous Mother-of-the-Nation and an attractive National-Sex-Symbol she aimed to earn popularity among wider groups of ordinary citizens and thus ensure their strong electoral support (Kis 2007). Femen, to the contrary, have adopted an unconventional image of radical feminists, which evoked rather controversial response from the Ukrainian people. Their short-lived but spectacular bare-breast street protests drew great attention of media, while their appearance overshadowed the messages, so Femen's goals remained obscure and confusing. After the release of the documentary "Ukraine is not a brothel" by Kitty Green (2013) however it became clear that women of Femen were not independent activists, but puppets in a kind of social theater: girls have been recruited and manipulated by a certain male mastermind who in fact set up this project and staged all the activities (Macnab 2013). So, paradoxically, Yulia Tymoshenko used conservative gender stereotypes to facilitate her political career, while Femen members experienced gender discrimination under the plausible mask of (fake) feminism.

While Tymoshenko and Femen draw all the attention of media, a great number of women's associations quietly work hard to combat gender-based discrimination in Ukraine. Women's groups vary from several large-scale non-governmental organizations and well-established regional centers and informal grass-roots local initiatives; they deal with all kinds of issues related to women's rights in Ukraine – from drafting and lobbying laws on gender equality to helping victims of domestic violence and trafficking.

Three generations of women-activists

Initially feminism had no popularity among Ukrainians. Distorted by Communist propaganda, and discredited by Soviet practice, feminist ideas hardly resonated in the minds of ordinary Ukrainians. Being isolated from the international women's movement for decades, the activists of fledging women's organizations had little (if any) knowledge of feminism, so most of them perceived feminism as an alien and

irrelevant ideology. An "allergy to feminism" (Einhorn 1993) permeated virtually all the social groups in Ukraine in the 1990s, and that malady manifested itself in stigmatization and demonization of anything feminist.

There were three generations of women-activists who contributed to the progress of women's movement in modern Ukraine. In 1989-1999 the majority of women-activists were in their forties and fifties (born in the 1940-50s); their political views were based either on communist ideas (as many were former members of the Communist Party and served as high-rank officials in Soviet authorities) or on the nationalist ideas (those who participated in the dissident movement and opposed the communist regime for years). The first post-Soviet women's organizations positioned themselves as associations of mothers to address the most pressing social problems of the time; they spoke from a maternal standpoint – a culturally legitimized role, allowing them to be heard in the public space. The demands of these groups, rather social than political in nature, resonated well among the general public facing the collapse of the Soviet welfare system; thus, their activities found support among Ukrainian women and ensured mass membership (Hrycak 2002). Although at this point nobody raised the question of gender discrimination or women's rights, the very fact of women's mass public activism allowed women to acquire valuable experience of organized public action. These first activists however proved to be unable to change their worldview, so feminist ideology and respective practices remained alien to them.

In 1999-2009 women in their thirties and forties (born in the 1960-70s) took the lead in the Ukrainian women's movement. At the time of collapse of the USSR this cohort was young enough to be open to new ideologies. The first signs of paradigmatic shifts in the women's movement – namely progress towards concentrating primarily on discrimination against women – coincided with preparation for the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 (Hrycak 2010). In the second half of the 1990s witnessed a rise of powerful women's organizations whose goals, areas, and forms of activity can be defined as feminist. Quite often their leaders came from an academic background; others were professionals in respective spheres. Negative attitudes towards feminism started changing slowly after 2000, when women's rights advocates and gender scholars learned more about feminist ideas and practices, and finally adopted various versions of liberal feminism(s).These women contributed considerably to whitewashing the very concept of feminism, although they still refrained from identified themselves as feminists.

It must be noticed, that a close cooperation with authorities at all levels is a characteristic feature of women's movement in Ukraine. This is typical for societies functioning in the conditions of so-called "hybrid" – meaning quasi-democratic – regimes that support elements of partially-controlled civil society to legitimize the dominant authority. Being relatively weak at the beginning and having quite ambitious goals, activists developed many ways to negotiate and coexist with the state, using a strategy of small steps, making many compromises to introduce Ukrainian society to the ideas and practices of gender equality.

A new generation of activists

Since 2009, a new generation of activists stepped in and changed the face of the Ukrainian women's activism dramatically. These women are in their twenties and yearly thirties, so their formative years concurred with Ukraine's independence. They don't share soviet legacy and have no direct bonds to communist or nationalist ideas. Principles of gender equality resonate well in these young (well-educated and professionally-ambitious) women. What is more – they show enough courage and energy to defy discrimination against women openly and unconditionally, as several purely feminist initiatives during the Maydan protests in Kyiv proved.
There is a big paradox in Ukraine: on the one hand, Ukraine can boast about one of the most advanced legislation on ensuring gender equality among the post-socialist countries, on the other hand – glaring gender-based discrimination permeates all spheres.[1] Therefore a huge discrepancy between declared principles and their implementation into practice can be observed, as no efficient mechanism has been elaborated to enforce the laws.

Women's participation in politics and governance

Today women are openly claiming their proper place in the Ukrainian politics and governance. During the Soviet era women constituted approximately 30% in regional and national legislatures (owing to a gender quota), but in a country ruled by the Communist Party such status did not mean real participation in a decision making, while only few women made it to the higher echelons of politics in Soviet Ukraine. After Ukraine obtained its independence the share of women in the Verkhovna Rada dropped drastically (to some 3-4% in the early 1990s), and since then it never exceeded 10%. What is worst, the majority of those few female MPs is rather conservative in their views on women's roles in the society, so cannot be considered as advocates for gender equality. Only recently we received ground for some cautious optimism: in December 2011 15 Ukrainian MPs formed a caucus to strive for equal opportunities for women and men in politics and society. The cabinet of ministers of Ukraine represents an even more desperate picture, as currently it consists of 19 ministers, only one of them female. Ukrainian top-politicians are infamous for their sexist statements (Kis 2013). Women's participation in the politics and governance at the regional and local levels (where there is more work and less resources) is higher: women constitute about 17% in regional legislatures and about 28% in city councils. There are several factors impeding women's entrance and success in politics, but gender-biased socialization of girls discouraging them from leadership and public activities is perhaps the major problem holding women out of politics. Most recent events on the Maydan however proved that there are many strong, charismatic, professional and courageous women who are willing and able to take the responsibility for the country's wellbeing (Lesia Orobets, Olha Mohomolets, Ruslana Lyzhychko).

Women do not want to play a supportive, decorative or symbolic role any longer. Women contributed greatly to the Revolution of Dignity, and their input cannot be ignored. Today, when the country is making a fresh start in all possible terms, women of Ukraine are gaining momentum to make themselves present, visible, heard and fully engaged in the construction of our nation's future.

Note

1 After the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing (1995) Ukrainian government has adopted a number of laws crucial in terms of counteracting gender-based discrimination and violence: Law of Ukraine on Prevention of Family Violence, 2001; Law of Ukraine on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, 2005; Law of Ukraine on Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings, 2012.

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