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All the way: women actors in the security environment

*By Sonja Licht*

In a recent media interview, the head of UN Women Michelle Bachelet expressed her frustration and discontent that the women of Tahrir Square had disappeared from the political scene of Egypt as soon as the protest movement against the authoritarian regime had ended. The same story applies to Poland where women were very active in building up the Solidarnosc movement – and were even crucial for keeping it alive when, after the military coup, almost all its leaders ended up in prison. However, after the victory of the ‘democratic revolution’ very few women remained active in political life, and the Polish women’s movement, for example, could not stop a very restrictive law on the right to abortion a few years later. In fact, all post-socialist countries faced similar situations – women showing determination and courage when fighting the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, but then not managing to really enter the male-controlled world of political and security decision-making.

In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, women have faced another unique experience, quite apart from the wave of ‘male democracies’ that characterized the beginning of the transition processes – the break-up of the country and the bloody civil strife that accompanied it. Women, and in particular those that were involved in an emerging civil society, have played an outstanding role in the efforts to prevent conflict. They formed the majority in the first anti-war initiatives and movements, organized numerous anti-war protests, and were among the first to start dealing with the consequences of the conflicts – by organizing humanitarian help to refugees, support networks for victims (especially women and children), and by raising awareness among the population about the terrible price of the war and the war crimes committed against civilians.

These conflicts in the Balkans proved once again that apart of being among the most afflicted victims of wars, women can also be very important actors of peace. However, their potential to build bridges even during the conflict among the communities belonging to different sides of the divide, and especially in its aftermath, was not considered enough when it came to approaching the process of reconciliation and rebuilding confidence among the newly established separate states and societies. Women organizations remained active in communicating with each other, in advocating for the necessity to face the responsibilities for atrocities, crimes and ethnic cleansing. But they were left aside by

state structures dealing with the reform of the security sector and did not even get involved in confidence building measures built on various forms of regional cooperation.

Admittedly, the first such mechanism – the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe – included the creation of a Gender Task Force that played a very important role in bringing together women civic and political activists from the whole region. This gender perspective, however, was not mainstreamed enough into other activities, especially those dealing with various forms of security cooperation. It is also true that women organizations themselves were quite often reluctant to develop full-fledged relationships with some of these mechanisms, out of fear that their independence would become compromised by the state-run processes.

International organizations such as the OSCE, the UN Development Programme, UN Women and NATO, are all not only involved in security sector reforms but also in the strengthening of confidence building processes, including the strengthening of human security. Their work in the region, in particular in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, could and should contribute more to encouraging an intensive dialogue among the various actors from the security sector, parliaments, and civil society. Through a thorough dialogue and cooperation they could develop the necessary confidence among each other and contribute to a lasting stability and security in the Balkans.

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