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Book Review: Gender (In)equality and Gender Politics in Southeastern Europe: A Question of Justice

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Gender (In)equality and Gender Politics in Southeastern Europe: A Question of Justice.
Edited by Christine Hassenstab & Sabrina P. Ramet. 2015. Palgrave Macmillan. 380 pages;
appendix and index included; Hardcover: \$119.99, Softcover: \$109.99

By Meltem Ince-Yenilmez¹

The collapse of the Soviet Union, while not completely unexpected, was certainly a bit abrupt. As the regime fell, the influence of socialism across Eastern Europe also began a dramatic, rapid decline. The result served as a catalyst that had a number of important effects on Southeastern Europe, in particular. While many of these have been discussed, one that has received relatively little comparative attention is the effect on the plight of women in terms of gender equality. This is remedied by the writings collected in *Gender (In)equality and Gender Politics in Southeastern Europe*, edited by Hassenstab, Ramet, and Hassenstab. This collection of writings provides a country-by-country analysis of gender politics in former Soviet republicans and areas of the Balkans.

Throughout the various sections and chapters, a collection of authors and researchers highlight trends evidenced in over a dozen countries. The results of these comparisons often paint a picture of struggle, decline, and resilience regarding the role of women while providing critiques of the various sociological, political, and cultural factors that served to instigate changes in terms of often-backwards gender equity. The book also contains more generalized reflections on the region. These adhere to exploration of the various indices of gender equality used in the construction of argument as well as the contrast of gender roles between nations in the region.

Ana Kralj and Tanja Renner's exploration into the plight of women in Slovenia paints a strong picture of the generalized problems faced by women in the region during the 1990s as the influence of socialism gradually waned. According to them, "[Women] became targets of interpolation into 'mothers who should ensure the biological survival and progress of the nation' and the 'guardians of home and privacy.' Thus, instead of the former (mostly economically enforced) 'proletarianism' and (politically enforced) 'emancipation,' an ideological model of domestication of women was introduced" (Hassenstab, Ramet, & Hassenstab, 2015, 49). In other words, the new capitalist society served as a mechanism to promote restrictions to the rights of women by enforcing more traditional conservative gender roles. The authors also highlighted high levels of unemployment during the shift to a market economy, which likely served as further justification for these changes, ensuring that men were more likely to have jobs at the expense of women.

This regressive nature of social progress in Slovenia can also be observed in most of the areas of Southeastern Europe during this transition. For example, Jill Irvine and Leda Sutlovic further commented, "A well-established body of work has pointed to the links between women's economic status and women's social and political progress. Women's economic status has been particularly important to activists in the CEE countries, since women were hurt so dramatically by the transition from state socialism to capitalist democracies" (Hassenstab, Ramet, & Hassenstab, 2015, 74). They also highlighted the seemingly curious dynamic that while gender roles have greatly widened, public awareness of discrimination and support for gender equality is seemingly

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on the rise. While this is certainly a positive notion, the reality is that the evidence for gender equality in the region is more negative than positive, with the authors describing the efforts towards gender equality as largely one step forward, two steps back.

While the authors have noted the dramatic expansion of gender inequality since the shift from socialism to capitalism, it should not be lost on the reader that complete gender equality was certainly never the case. In many of these countries, socialist policies gave women a number of rights. For example, Yugoslavia provided women “rights of divorce, employment, abortion, contraception, and education” after the end of World War II (Hassenstab, Ramet, & Hassenstab, 2015, 89). Additionally, over 40% of women worked full time which provided access to all-important financial independence. However, despite these positives, it was still very much a patriarchal society where women were expected to tend to the needs of the home and child rearing in addition to their roles in employment. Still, the current picture painted by the various authors of this work is one far from this, with expectations for responsibilities increasing while rights and benefits have largely diminished.

One of the most interesting aspects of this work has been the highlighting of factual information that greatly reverses general suppositions regarding the notion of democratic capitalism. Individuals tend to promote capitalistic societies as being more progressive in terms of human rights. However, opposition to socialism in the region was utilized as a cloaked method by new governments of stripping away assistance to women. Under socialist rule, the government in many of these nations provided daycare for working mothers and lengthy maternity leave. However, after the rise of the market economy, opposition to socialism was used to link these policies with the specter of socialism, fomenting opposition to providing these benefits to women (Hassenstab, Ramet, & Hassenstab, 2015). This process served to significantly diminish the ability of women to work outside of the home while also restricting their income earning potential. This was perhaps one of the most intriguing assertions of this work, as it frequently illustrated the uncommon view that socialism was more beneficial for gender rights than capitalism.

Overall, Hassenstab, Ramet, and Hassenstab’s collection of research-driven commentary on the status of gender inequality within Southeastern Europe is simultaneously enlightening and concerning. The fact that the independently written chapters generally confirm one another in terms of narrative adds to the credibility of the accuracy of the work. Additionally, the discussion of widely accepted metrics of gender inequality such as the Gender Empowerment Measure and reference to reports from various governmental and non-profit commissions further adds to the context of the discussion. The result is a book that is well constructed, flows smoothly throughout its various chapters, and provides interesting concepts for consideration of the reader. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the work is its breadth of coverage, with nearly a dozen countries analyzed in depth, which is paired with a closing reflection from a regional standpoint, which ties it together. Perhaps the only things missing from Ramet’s conclusion are recommendations for improving gender equality in the area; however, as a historical analysis rather than a promotion of specific policy doctrine, the exclusion makes logical sense.