

Martsenyuk, Tamara (2012) Ukraine's Other Half / Post-Soviet Post, online Stanford University journal. – accessed <http://postsovietpost.stanford.edu/analysis/>

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Post-Soviet Post: Observations and Expert Analysis from Eurasia

Ukraine's other half

International Women's Day brings disappointment and hope for the sex largely excluded from power in Kyiv

BY TAMARA MARTSENYUK | 3-27-2012

Springtime in Ukraine – time once again to remind women about their two vital main roles – to be mothers – after all, there's a demographic crisis – and to be beautiful – evidently, to promote tourism from abroad? That's what top Ukrainian politicians are saying, anyway. President Viktor Yanukovich implored an international audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos last year, "Come to Ukraine to see our beautiful girls!" In advertising this summer's Euro 2012 soccer championship and its slogan "Switch on Ukraine," he said, "In order to switch on Ukraine, it's enough to see it by your own eyes, when the chestnut trees start to blossom, when it gets warmer and women in Ukrainian cities start undressing. To see such beauty is marvelous!"

We can't measure the results of this "advertising" just yet, but we may be able to identify some problems.

Sexist speeches from high-level politicians have become more commonplace in Ukraine as of late. In spring 2010, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov said, "Some say our government is too large, others that there are no women – there's no one to look at during cabinet meetings. They're all boring faces... With all respect to women, conducting reforms is not women's business." His words caught international attention, and *The Guardian* printed a story with the headline "Ukrainian women berate 'Neanderthal' PM for sexist remarks."

Azarov's speech made it clear that he and many others at the top see Ukrainian women as a "beautiful commodity" – something to look at, perhaps to inspire politicians. Moreover, in his March 8 speech for International Women's (Rights) Day, the prime minister didn't touch on any real problems. He didn't promise to provide better state support for parents with children. Instead, he wished that spring would bring women "blossoming" and "bright colors."

The bright colors of spring have actually brought several unpleasant surprises for Ukrainian women. Just before the holiday, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church appealed to the Verkhovna Rada on prohibiting abortion, and on March 12, deputy Andriy Shkil introduced

a bill proposing a ban. Under the existing law, women may receive abortions within twelve weeks of conception.

Meanwhile, Ukraine has also seen several prominent examples of gender-based violence, particularly rapes, left unsolved by authorities. The ongoing Oksana Makar case has dominated headlines in recent weeks, elicited protests, and at least one petition to the president. On the night of March 9, in the city of Mykolayiv, three men lured 19-year-old Makar into one of their apartments, where they raped her. One attempted to strangle her to death and then, thinking he had succeeded, raped her again. The men left her at a construction site near a fire, which caused severe burns over 55 percent of her body. Makar survived and remains in critical condition, with both of her feet and her right arm amputated. There are suspicions that the two of the alleged suspects are from families with high social status and resources – in fact, they had been released from jail without bail. The petition by Accion Positiva, a Spanish feminist group, concludes, "We are concerned that the law enforcement is not doing its job in regard to this serious incident and shows no interest in investigating the facts and bringing the perpetrators to justice." Some debates surrounding the case have featured victimization and morality issues among the principal explanations of gender-based violence – basically, if she spent time drinking in bars, getting raped was somehow her own fault.

How could such an "object" ever hope to talk and protest, let alone participate on a national political stage?

In spite of it all, spring has brought some hope on the political front. In the time leading up to International Women's (Rights) Day, it's custom not only to wish women spring and beauty, but also to discuss pertinent issues. That's why on March 1, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) conducted an open discussion in Kyiv titled "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties." Political VIPs don't often appear at events dedicated to gender issues, but this was a definite exception. The discussion drew male leaders from four major parties eager to be seen as the autumn election season looms ahead.

At the meeting, the NDI and UNDP presented the key points from a comprehensive manual on the development of political parties through active and effective engagement of women as activists, members, and voters. Of course, in that venue, each of the leaders expressed agreement over the current situation with women in high politics – "it's wrong." It's wrong that during twenty years of independence, women have never constituted even 10 percent of Verkhovna Rada deputies. It's wrong that no women currently serve as oblast governors and that few were recruited as candidates in the last election. "Ukraine's record on women's inclusion in politics is indefensible," UNDP Ukraine's website says. After two years of the new ruling regime in the country, a female MP, Raisa Bogatyryova, became the first female appointee to the administration in February, when she was tapped as Minister of Health and Vice Prime Minister. The shortage of women at the highest levels is indisputable, and yet, data from the State Committee of Statistics of Ukraine shows that women make up 64 percent of the management among all civil servants. Almost all, of course, are at the local level. The rule simply seems to be, "The more power, the fewer women."

It's wrong that Ukraine has such (deservedly) poor ratings in international reports on gender equality, especially in regard to women empowerment measures. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2011, provided by the World Economic Forum, Ukraine takes 106th place out of 135 countries in political empowerment of women. In the Inter-Parliamentary Union database of Women in Parliaments, Ukraine is 120th out of 187 countries at 8 percent representation. Last year's Freedom House Report data says that "Gender discrimination is prohibited under the constitution, but women's rights have not been a priority for government officials. Despite Yulya Tymoshenko's prominent role, women still do not have the same opportunities as men. Human rights groups have complained that employers openly discriminate on the basis of gender, physical appearance, and age. The trafficking of women abroad for the purpose of prostitution remains a major problem."

According to the UNDP Millennium Development Goals, which Ukraine ratified, the Verkhovna Rada is supposed to be at least 30 percent female by 2015. However, by 2011, it was supposed to be 20 percent, a number it missed by more than half.

The 2012 elections do hold hope for addressing the imbalance, though maybe not much. One possible avenue could be affirmative action tools such as gender party quotas. This was a major topic on the agenda at the March 1 event, though legislative attempts to introduce quotas have failed numerous times in the past. Currently, the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men in Ukraine refers to only general definitions and statements about affirmative action, with no concrete quotas.

Another scenario to implement gender quotas, known as "the Scandinavian way," is the idea of volunteer party quotas. Ukraine uses a proportional electoral rule with closed party lists, meaning party leaders are responsible for placing representatives in top positions. As of yet, though, no leader has broken the ice by taking action within his (or her) own party.

What can we expect from the current situation in Ukraine? Could quotas help alleviate corrupt politics, raise the level of women's grassroots activism, and dispel overwhelming patriarchal gender stereotypes and sexism in society?

The political sphere in Ukraine is highly corrupt. According to Transparency International, Ukraine sits in 152nd place out of 180 countries. Politics in Kyiv are closely tied to business, which is dominated by men, so more opportunities naturally exist for those men to enter the political arena. Incidentally, business was Tymoshenko's route as well. On a whole, women have less money and fewer social networks to work with, and the stereotype of politics as dirty business further justifies patriarchal notions of blocking them out.

An active women's movement could help in promoting female empowerment issues. Quotas are not the only factor influencing representation of women in politics. There are also campaigns and activities organized by women's movements. Women's initiatives and lobbying are also important in the gender equality implementation process. But in Ukraine there is no strong, cohesive movement that could elevate women's rights on political agendas. Few female

activists actually work in gender equality issues. There's Kateryna Levchenko, a former MP who now leads the international anti-violence NGO La Strada-Ukraine, who tried to sue Prime-Minister Azarov for his aforementioned sexist speech. The offense was dismissed as mere opinion and not aimed at any specific victim. International Women's (Rights) Day marches took place in Kyiv both this year and last, organized by a young initiative called Feminist Offensive, but their 200-person street protests are hardly enough to raise real awareness. With their tactics of toplessness, the media-friendly group FEMEN has raised awareness of certain issues, but its overall effects are disputed. For better or for worse, FEMEN is the only nationally and internationally known grassroots initiative that counts women's rights and freedoms among its major functions.

There is also severe lack of female solidarity in politics in Ukraine, and as a result, the few female MPs are not likely to protest loudly against gender inequality in society or successfully promote women's rights legislation. But what can one expect when even the country's most famous female politician, Yulya Tymoshenko, never proved to be gender-sensitive? During the 2007 parliamentary elections, no other woman placed higher than 30th in her party list. Hence no Ukrainian women's organizations took up her imprisonment as cause for protest.

The international community plays a leading role in promoting gender equality and women's rights issues. Recent large EU projects stressed mostly violence prevention issues, education, raising awareness, and whatnot – issues important for overcoming perceptions of women as objects, but not much in the way of access to power.

However, the Equal Opportunities and Women's Rights in Ukraine Programme succeeded in developing an Equal Opportunity group in the Verkhovna Rada earlier this year. It comprises twelve female and three male deputies from both pro-presidential and opposition factions, and aims to promote gender equality across all spheres of life. According to the UNDP, "the group will also encourage parties to adopt a voluntary quota for women among their lawmakers." So it's certainly possible that Yulya Kovalevska from the Party of Regions or Iryna Gerashchenko from the Our Ukraine – People's Self-Defense Bloc may succeed in promoting volunteer gender quotas in their parties, but that sort of optimism has been difficult thus far.

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