

CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST COMMUNITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: POLITICIZATION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AT THE SEMI-PERIPHERY OF EUROPE

ABSTRACT

Civil societies in the post-socialist space have been the subject of much academic debate. For more than two decades, the majority of scholars agreed that post-socialist countries had weak civil societies, due to low levels of civic activism. Current empirical research attempts to revise this image, by focusing on new forms of self-organizations within post-socialist civil societies. Whereby recent forms of contemporary women's self-organization have received little attention so far, and this even though women have become a constitutive part of post-socialist civil societies over the years.

Thus, in contrast to the existing literature, this PhD project focuses on contemporary post-Yugoslav informal women's groups advocating for gender equality, as one example of contemporary women's self-organization. It is based on the following research question: *Whether and how do contemporary informal women's groups advocating for gender equality represent a collective actor within post-Yugoslav civil society?*

The post-Yugoslav space is of particular interest because, unlike the other post-socialist countries, former Yugoslavia has a rich history of women's self-organization and developed already in the 1970s an explicitly feminist positioning. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, women from different backgrounds continued to advocate for gender equality and continue today. The research question will be approached with reference to the theoretical concept of collective identity, and critical approaches such as Orientalism, Balkanism and feminist postcolonial thoughts. A combination of Grounded Theory and Ethnography is considered to be the most appropriate methodology.

Informed by these methodological considerations, the research question will be investigated by qualitative research process composed by participant observations, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Therefore, this PhD project aims to contribute to a reassessment of contemporary post-Yugoslav civil societies from a feminist perspective, to provide a detailed picture of a recent form of women's self-organization for gender equality and to offer useful insights for general theory building about the process of becoming a collective actor within contemporary civil societies.

Hence, this PhD project contributes to a broader international research field at the intersection of women's and civil society studies, which still mainly tend to overlook the specificity of the Eastern European position and post-socialist conditions.

Keywords: Civil Society, Feminist activism, Collective Identity, post-Yugoslav space