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Women in the Post-Communist World:
The Politics of Identity and Ethnicity

Executive Summary*

Women from the former Soviet Union and the West involved in academia and policy making recently met to discuss two interconnected post-communist transition issues -- the role of ethnic conflict and the role of women in the search for new identities. Suurupi, a former guest house for Communist dignitaries located 20 kilometers from Tallinn, was the host site for the conference sponsored by Women in International Security (WIIS), a Washington, D.C. based network and its sister organization in Moscow, Women in Global Security (WINGS).

A major theme was the political and social instability many women now face. The fall of communism improved people's lives in that they enjoy more freedom of movement and association without the oppressive presence of the party state. Nevertheless, the material situation for women has become increasingly precarious while they have lost even the token political positions they held under the old system. The most difficult problem is the breakdown of the social safety net of childcare facilities, unemployment benefits and societal support structures. Privatization has adversely affected the social safety net and women have not found sufficient employment in the private sector to compensate for disproportionate layoffs.

While conference participants could agree on political, economic and social issues affecting women, they found less common ground in their professional roles in which gender identification was subordinated to ethnic and national biases. On all sides, participants from the former Soviet republics took extreme positions showing no appreciation for the other points of view. The Americans, unused to confronting either the depth of ethnic animosity or the economic difficulties, remained more or less on the sidelines of the discussion.

At the conclusion of the conference, participants agreed on the need for conflict-prevention and regulation mechanisms. While the West cannot resolve these conflicts, it can play a role in facilitating dialogue. The challenge over the next few decades will be to integrate multiple identities - as women, citizens, politicians, or academics - in order to effect conflict resolution between ethnic groups and to ensure that women play a significant role in post-communist societies. Failing some meliorative measures the potential for conservative reaction is substantial.

* Prepared by NCSEER staff
Tallinn, with its pastel, angular houses and cobbled streets, has now begun to resemble the bustling Hanseatic port with close links to Scandinavia that it once was. There is very little physical evidence left of Sovietization, apart from the Russian street signs and an occasional ugly concrete building. It is as though the sharp wind that sweeps in from the Gulf of Finland has blown the remnants of the Soviet past away. Shops are well stocked, and people well dressed. Indeed, Estonia enjoys the highest standard of living among the republics of the former Soviet Union, with per capita income 40 percent above the average of the successor states. The capital of Estonia seems to have made the transition from communism with more ease than have its people.

Twenty kilometers from Tallinn, down a narrow and unmaneuverable mud road, lies the guest house of Suurupi, run by the Transport Resources Department of the Estonian State Chancery. Formerly used to house visiting Communist dignitaries, it now rents out rooms for conferences, while the Department itself sells Mercedes-Benz and Volvo cars. There, in a birch forest on the Gulf of Finland, women from the former Soviet Union and the West recently spent several days discussing two key interconnected issues in the post-communist transition—the role of ethnic conflict and the role of women in the search for new identities.

Even our cultural program in Tallinn illustrated (if inadvertently) the conference themes. We were treated to a spirited rendering of West Side Story in Estonian, performed for an enthusiastic audience in a packed theater. How appropriate, for, after all, the Bernstein classic deals with issues of ethnic conflict and women as a catalyst in clan warfare.

Estonia, like the other former Soviet republics, remains suspended between communism and something new, but no one is as yet sure what this new order will ultimately be. Four years after the revolutions in eastern Europe and two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the report card on the post-communist transitions is mixed. The political and psychological legacy of communism will long outlast the fall of the Soviet Union, even in its most Westernized provinces. People have gone from euphoria, to disillusionment, to a mixture of resigned skepticism and cautious optimism, depending on which country they live in, on their own situation, and on what kind of temperament they were born with. In the successor states, there are concerns about how and when democratic capitalism will successfully take root. The transitions will take much longer than many initially expected in the heady days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. No one feels that these states have as yet irrevocably turned the corner away from an authoritarian system, even if they all agree that communism will never return. There are too many people in power who are products of the old system. The nomenklatura have adopted new identities, but their mentality has not changed.

Women in Transition
Everyone in the former communist countries—with the exception of successful entre-
preneurs and mafiosi—has experienced serious personal and professional dislocations since 1989. They are glad that communism has gone, but many are materially worse off than they were under communism. Women have, however, suffered disproportionately and so far have been the losers in this transition. The collapse of the old system has not brought the immediate benefits that many people in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe expected. Many women who went to the barricades to bring down communism now feel betrayed. They believed that democratization would mean equal access to the levers of power. So far, it has had the opposite effect. The old economic system was decrepit and, of course, finally failed. But it did deliver a mediocre security, and the demise of the social safety net has hit women particularly hard. The political system that nominally supported full equality for women has also disappeared. Moreover, the post-communist search for new identities has brought with it a resurgence of traditional views about women’s roles. The nationalist politicians seek to resurrect a mythical, pre-communist past when idealized mothers took care of hearth and home and produced soldiers.

These problems of the transitions and their effects on women preoccupied the participants at the Suurupi meeting, which was sponsored by Women in International Security (WIIS), a Washington-based network for women engaged in professions dealing with national security issues, and its Moscow-based sister organization, Women in Global Security (WINGS). The conference brought together policymakers and academics from Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, the United States, and Germany. The initial organizational problems were symptomatic of the complexities of the post-Soviet order—the American participants were the only ones who did not need official invitations and visas for Estonia; the Russians did not know until the last moment whether the inefficient Moscow bureaucracy would issue them the new passports they had to apply for; and it was extremely cumbersome for the Ukrainians to travel from Kiev to Tallinn, and they expressed irritation that Moscow, not Washington, had coordinated their plans.

The conference underscored the political and social no-women’s land in which many women are currently suspended. Their position highlights many of the ironies of the transitional dislocations that have made people wish that they could get back some pieces of the old system. Under "real, existing socialism" the socialist woman was idealized as “worker, partisan, and comrade” and the rhetoric about equality was a major element in official communist propaganda. Yet the rhetoric was not matched by reality. The vast majority of women worked, often in heavy menial labor. When they were not working, they were standing in line for food. Up to 30 percent of communist-era parliamentarians were women, but the parliaments had no political power and women were excluded from the top party hierarchy. The few exceptions to this rule were a product of the rampant nepotism among the ruling dynasties. One need only think back to the dreaded Elena Ceausescu, or the dour Margot Honecker, to name just two women who wielded considerable power in the communist era. Moreover, women suffered the double burden of full-time work and managing the household with scarce food and few consumer products in societies where men scorned any hint of domestic responsibilities. The burden was intensified by the unavailability of reliable contraceptives—revealing how low a priority women's needs held for the ruling elite—and the prevalence of abortion as the only method of birth control. Often, women would reach their forties with 10 to 15 abortions behind them. Economic necessity meant that most women worked and few in urban areas had more than one child, if any. Behind the myth of socialist equality stood devalued and overburdened women living in societies that repressed all of their citizens.
The fall of communism has improved people's lives inasmuch as the oppressive hand of the party state has been removed. Walking the streets of Tallinn—or Moscow—people breathe easier and speak much more freely than they used to, and they can enjoy normal human contacts without the pervasive feeling that someone is watching them. Yet the material situation for many women has also sharply deteriorated. Unemployment among women is higher than it is among men, and women no longer enjoy even the token national political representation that they used to. In Hungary, where 16 percent of the mayors are women, this is only the case because, as one Hungarian commentator recently explained, "Women can take care of simple, everyday problems." Marju Lauristin, Minister for Social Affairs in Estonia, who gave a sober talk on the increasing social differentiation in Estonia, is an exception to the general rule in the post-Soviet states. So was Galina Starovoitova, the courageous and outspoken adviser to Yeltsin on ethnic affairs; but she lost her position a year ago and there are no other women in Yeltsin's inner circle. The conference was unrepresentative, as some women participants still were involved in politics. The academics were all struggling to survive economically, many were marginally employed, and some faced imminent unemployment. Even those who are employed can barely make do on what amounts to a salary of $20 a month with rising inflation.

For many women, the most difficult problem is the breakdown of the social safety net that has led to the closing of child-care facilities and kindergartens, the erosion of unemployment benefits, and the breakdown of societal support structures. So far, nothing has replaced them. Women have been hardest hit by privatization, both because it has affected the social safety net and because few of them have found employment in the private sector. Consequently, many are skeptical about the advantages of the market. The election results in Slovakia in 1992 and recently in Poland—where former Communists did surprisingly well—can in part be explained by what one conference participant described as "the revenge of the politically disenfranchised."

**Redefining Identities**

All the conference participants found much with which to identify when they discussed the political, economic, and social situation of women in the transition. But when they took off their gender hats and put on their professional hats, the consciousness of shared problems diminished and was subordinated to their different national and ethnic identities. Finding new identities is one of the most important challenges in the post-communist world. Communism forced different ethnic groups to coexist with each other by seeking to Russify the population of the Soviet Union and denying self-determination to non-Russians. Now that communism is gone and all of the former Soviet republics are independent, the first task is to redefine one's national—and personal—identity. Too often, the line between legitimate self-determination and intolerant nationalism seems all too unclear. Most participants agreed that "diaspora nationalists"—Estonians, Ukrainians, or Russians who lived in the West and have become involved in the politics of the new states—have exacerbated ethnic conflicts by their uncompromising definitions of nationalism. Economic difficulties have intensified these animosities. As one Ukrainian put it, "We know whom we are against, but we don't know what we are for."

The tensions between the Russians and Estonians, on the one hand, and the Russians and Ukrainians, on the other, were palpable around our conference table, requiring intermittent peacekeeping efforts by the Americans. There was a tendency toward extremism on all sides, with few former Soviet participants willing to try to understand the other side's point of view. It has been easier for the non-Russians to develop a new...
identity than it has for the Russians, because the former define themselves largely in opposition to Russians. Estonians seem more self-confident about their identity than do Ukrainians, perhaps because they have a longer history of independence from Russia. Russians have the most difficulty with this question, because for the first time in 400 years, Russia does not dominate its neighbors. Consequently, Russians no longer know who they are. The Russians appealed to the rest of us for sympathy in understanding their plight—but only the Americans were able to express any empathy.

The difference in size between Estonia and Russia is enormous. Russia has 149 million people and Estonia 1.6 million. But the Russian-Estonian relationship remains potentially explosive. The Russians have no trouble accepting Estonians as a separate nationality, but the gulf between Russian and Estonian perceptions about what is happening in Estonia is huge. The problems in Estonia result from Russian occupation and the way in which Estonia has dealt with questions of citizenship. Over a third of Estonia's population is ethnically Russian, the result of deliberate colonization policies by the Soviet government to ensure Estonian loyalty, and the presence of the Russian army. Russians are concentrated in areas, such as Narva, that border on the Russian Federation. Russians are almost totally absent from Estonian political life, but are disproportionately active in the economy. In 1992, Estonia passed a citizenship law that Estonians defend as legitimate, but that Russians—and some international experts—regard as discriminatory. It grants citizenship to all those who were citizens in June 1940—before the Soviet takeover—and their descendants. All others have to become naturalized, and the provisions for naturalization, including knowledge of the Estonian language, are no more stringent than those of the United States. However, the law has become politically explosive because it has disenfranchised thousands of non-

Estonians and barred them from owning property.

Minister Lauristin vigorously defended the legitimacy of the Estonian law and pointed out that Russians have been treated the same as Estonians in terms of social services, unemployment compensation, and pensions. An official from the Russian embassy—invited by the Estonians—reacted angrily to her claim, citing the plight of Russian soldiers who have been separated from their families by what he—and some of our Russian participants—consider a deliberate Estonian policy of "apartheid." It was clear from this dialogue that, so long as Russians feel discriminated against, the potential for violence in Estonia is real—particularly if more nationalistic forces come to power in Moscow. The politics of resentment are potent in the post-communist world.

The Ukrainian situation is rather different. Russians have a much harder time accepting that Ukrainians are a separate nationality than is the case with Estonians. After all, Russia and Ukraine are historically closely intertwined. Russians by and large view Ukrainian independence as a Russian defeat. Even the most liberal Russians admitted that it is very hard to accept that their favorite vacation spot, Crimea, is now on foreign territory. Ukrainians feel that the international community has not taken them seriously and has oriented itself toward Russia too much, neglecting the legitimate interests of Europe's second largest nuclear state. "The world looks at Ukraine with Russian eyes," complained an adviser to a prominent Rukh politician.

Ukraine, with 110 different ethnic groups on its territory, has, since independence, and in contrast to Estonia, passed some of the most liberal and nondiscriminatory legislation on minority rights, including citizenship and language rights. Russians have gained immediate citizenship and Russian is an official language. So far, there has been comparatively little ethnic conflict in Ukraine between Ukrainians,
Russians, and the other major ethnic groups—Jews, Belorussians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, and Poles. The major sources of tension are between Ukraine and Russia and are potentially dangerous because Ukraine itself is divided between its western half, which is largely Ukrainian, and its eastern and southern parts, where a majority of ethnic Russians live. Their economic situation has rapidly deteriorated since independence, which many of them supported, and the possibility that Ukraine could split up—aided and abetted by Russian groups who cannot accept the loss of Ukraine—has intensified ethnic tensions. Unresolved territorial and security issues, such as the status of Crimea and of the Black Sea fleet, the transfer of Ukrainian nuclear warheads to Russia, the dependence on Russian energy, and the general fear that Russia is reestablishing a droit de regard over the the entire territory of the former Soviet Union, could easily spill over into the domestic arena.

Ukrainians certainly have good reasons to suspect Russian intentions. However, the discussions at the conference also suggested that Ukrainian politicians may be overreacting to threats by some extremist Russians. The constant preoccupation with the Russian danger may be counterproductive and may have become a convenient excuse for not moving faster on economic and political reform. Certainly, if the economic situation deteriorates further, the potential for ethnic conflict and secession will also grow. If Ukraine does not move forward with democratization and privatization, then the chances that Russia might intervene will surely increase.

And what of the Russians? As they sat listening to the catalogue of complaints against them, their reactions were mixed. There was resentment that the Estonians and Ukrainians blame Russia, as well as communism, for most of their difficulties. After all, Russians were also victims of communism. The minority among the Russians who were Yeltsin supporters were more sympathetic to the grievances aired, although one participant who works for the State Committee on Nationalities was highly critical of the Ukrainians. Most of the Russian participants were, however, opposed to Yeltsin. They viewed his burning of the White House and his banning of some extremist parties and newspapers as undemocratic. They were angered by the attacks on them by the non-Russians and assertive of their right to special treatment by the international community and the new states of the "near abroad."

There was one issue, however, on which Russians, Ukrainians, and Estonians agreed. As we sat at our festive dinner on the last evening of the conference, after toasting each other with potent Estonian fruit punch, the subject of crime and mafia came up. The increase in crime is the most evident and frightening manifestation of the breakdown of the old security system and the anarchy that has resulted from the end of communist repression. Everyone had her own horror story about fear of walking around at night, about the dangerous subways, and about the need to pay protection money for the smallest private enterprise. Suddenly, there was a consensus: it is the Azers, Chechens, Dagestanis, and other non-Slavic, non-European groups who are responsible, not only for much of the crime in the post-communist world, but also for people's economic plight. They have taken over the markets and stores, denying legitimate economic opportunities to Russians, Ukrainians, and Estonians in their own countries. The complex politics of identity have created differing hierarchies of ethnic animosities in the former Soviet Union. Ukrainians and Russians may be suspicious of each other, but they can unite against other ethnic groups that they both dislike. Although everyone agreed that nationalism and women's roles were interconnected, there was disagreement over whether nationalism was itself desirable. Some participants were quite nationalistic. But they agreed
that extreme forms of nationalism in the post-communist world are dangerous, because they resonate with fascistic images of women fulfilling their duties in the home and deny them full citizenship. Yet significant numbers of women are attracted to the more radical forms of nationalism. In this time of dislocation, violence, and upheaval, nationalism is comforting, because it appeals to tradition, offering women certainty and security. With its evocation of a harmonious, glorious past, it provides a sense of roots and communal identification for bewildered people. As one Estonian said, “History is our only reality.”

The West’s Impact
Listening to the discussions about the difficulties that women from the former communist countries face, we Americans were very conscious that we were outsiders. We were spectators who could listen and empathize, but we were unused to confronting either the depth of ethnic animosity or the economic difficulties that our colleagues face. We talked about the relevance of the American experience both on questions of ethnic identity and on the role of women. They listened to our discussions of how the United States works—and sometimes does not work—as a pluralistic, tolerant, multi-ethnic society, in which one can be a patriot without defining oneself by whom one is against. But they questioned how useful we were as a model, given our very different history.

How relevant is the experience of American women seeking to be accepted as equals? When I returned from Suurupi, I attended a conference with women from the United States and eastern Europe in Washington. It was organized by the Network of East-West Women and the Atlantic Council, its subject was “Gender, Nationalism, and Democratization,” and it had an explicitly feminist agenda. Beyond the discussion of such common issues as access to and promotion within professions and questions of child care, the concerns of the more radical American feminists seemed light years away from the needs and realities of most women in post-communist societies. Postmodernist “gendered” sociological analysis, with its emphasis on “phallocentric” society, its hostility to a market economy, and its own distinct vocabulary is a long way from the food lines in Russia, the carnage in Sarajevo, or the struggle to clothe and feed one’s children in an inflation-plagued economy. The position of women in post-communist societies is deteriorating and the solution to their problems lies in creating the basis for a sound market economy and an inclusionary, democratic political system.

Many people from the former communist countries were highly critical of the West’s economic policies. Somehow, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), one of many multilateral agencies, has been transformed in the minds of many people into the Svengali—or the Rasputin—that is orchestrating the transition to capitalism with all the inevitable dislocations. If there were no IMF, everything would be easier, jobs in obsolete military plants could be preserved, day-care centers would be open, and safety on the streets maintained. If only it were so easy! The IMF has become the symbol of what is wrong with Western assistance and its role in and impact on their economies is greatly exaggerated in the minds of many women. There is a widespread perception that the IMF has imposed economic shock therapy without any consideration for the human costs of these policies. The IMF exemplifies what they see as arrogant and dictatorial Western interference. Obviously, this is a distorted view both of the IMF and of the G-7 countries, but it is a view shared by many in this part of the world.

Despite the criticism of the IMF, all the participants—even the most nationalistic—want Western involvement and assistance, not only economically, but also in helping to resolve some of the more dangerous ethnic conflicts. They also want the West to
derstand that women have largely been excluded from political and economic life in the transition process and that they need more employment opportunities. They would very much like Western private and public organizations to pursue programs that encourage the participation of women. The nature and quality of the give-and-take at both conferences was a reminder of how few opportunities there are for women in the former communist countries to meet and talk to each other. Organizations like WIIIS and the Network of East-West Women are able to bring together women from former communist countries who normally would never have the opportunity to sit in one room together and listen to what the others have to say, however painful it is. The International Research and Exchanges Board, which funded both these conferences, has done much to promote a broad dialogue between citizens of the former Soviet bloc.

Reflecting on these two conferences, I realized that what initially were sharp exchanges, particularly in Estonia, ultimately served to clear the air and facilitate dialogue. Many of the tensions at the first conference evaporated toward the end as women gathered in the fine Suurupi sauna. There, our common identities as women mitigated the ethnic divides between the women of the former Soviet Union. We agreed on the need to develop conflict-prevention and regulation mechanisms both within these countries and between them and Russia. For many, it was the first time that they had ever heard directly how the other side felt, both about the position of women in the transition and about ethnic politics. We in the West cannot resolve these conflicts for our colleagues, but we can facilitate an ongoing dialogue. Only Western organizations today have the means to bring together people from different parts of the former Soviet Union. The challenge for the next decades will be to integrate multiple identities—as women, citizens, politicians, or academics—to facilitate conflict resolution between ethnic groups in the new states of the former Soviet Union, and to ensure that women will not be the losers in post-communist societies but will be able to play a significant role in the emerging nations. Like all other attempts to build new structures on the ruins of communism, this will be a long and difficult process.