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Gendered citizenship in the global European periphery: Textile workers in post-Yugoslav states



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SYNOPSIS

The paper analyses the parallel transformations of citizenship regimes and gender regimes in post-Yugoslav states, analysing the case study of women working in the textile and clothing industry, a traditionally feminised industrial sector in which employment rates have significantly declined in the last twenty years. On the basis of interviews with textile workers and former textile workers living in Leskovac (Serbia), Štip (Macedonia) and Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad (Bosnia-Herzegovina), the paper shows that post-socialist and post-conflict deindustrialisation and subsequent transformations in social citizenship had profound implications when it comes to gender regimes. The overall deterioration of labour and welfare rights in the region had major consequences on women's position as workers and citizens, producing the demise of the "working mother" gender contract which existed during socialist times. The "retraditionalisation" of gender relations in the post-Yugoslav region, therefore, is not only a consequence of nationalist discourses, but is also a direct result of transformations in social citizenship which occurred during the post-socialist transition.

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Introduction

The garment industry flourished in Yugoslavia from the early 1950s onwards, when the country started to practise its specific form of market socialism (Patterson, 2011). State-owned textile factories employed hundreds of thousands of workers, predominantly women, contributing to the industrialisation of rural peripheries. In the 1980s Yugoslavia was a leading producer and exporter of textiles and garments worldwide (Hanzl-Weiss, 2004). During the 1990s and early 2000s, after the collapse of socialism, and as a result of the global competition in garment production, many textile firms closed with a resulting increase in unemployment. In several post-Yugoslav towns, production has not been recovered and the former industrial districts have become a deindustrialized wasteland. Overall, even when production continued through privatized firms, labour rights and working conditions worsened significantly (Bonfiglioli, 2013).

This paper addresses transformations in *gendered citizenship* – particularly *social citizenship* – in the post-Yugoslav

region, focusing on the case study of women working in the textile and clothing industry. It compares women's narratives collected in three post-Yugoslav peripheral cities, whose socialist economy was largely dependent on textile production: Leskovac (Serbia, 78,037 inhabitants), Štip (Macedonia, 47,796 inhabitants), and Bosanski Novi/Novi Grad (Bosnia-Herzegovina, 28,799 inhabitants, hereafter: Novi). While textile production continues only sparsely in Leskovac and Novi, private garment firms are still very much present in Štip, where textile production represents the main industrial sector. The empirical data for the essay was gathered through fieldwork trips between December 2012 and December 2013. The interviewees were contacted through personal acquaintances in Štip and Novi, as well as through a women's NGO in Leskovac, and the interviews were conducted in Serbo-Croatian (including in Macedonia, where the older generation is fluent in what used to be Yugoslavia's main language of communication).¹ I asked open-ended questions on transformations in the textile industry, as well as on personal experiences related to work in the industry, unemployment, and current employment conditions; I also inquired about changes

in welfare arrangements for working women during socialist times (maternity leave, health services), as well as about current post-socialist welfare provisions and changes in standards of living more generally. I was particularly interested in transformations in social citizenship rights – particularly those related to labour – and their impact on women's conditions as workers, as well as on gender relations more generally.

In the first part of my essay I outline the post-socialist, post-conflict transition that characterises the successor states of Yugoslavia, and discuss the transformations in social citizenship and in gender regimes which occurred in the last twenty years. Secondly, I address the changes in the textile industry that occurred in post-Yugoslav states as a result of post-socialist and post-conflict transition, deindustrialisation and globalisation. Thirdly, I consider the position of women workers in the garment industry, on the basis of workers' and former workers' narratives collected in Štip, Leskovac and Novi.

Gender regimes and post-socialist transition in the former Yugoslavia

The social aspect of citizenship was defined by T.H. Marshall as “the whole range from the right to a modicum of welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society” (Marshall, 2009: 149). Social rights were seen by Marshall as necessary in order to expand the egalitarian potential of citizenship, against the inequalities created by social class in capitalist societies. More recently, social rights have been defined as “individuals' lifelong rights to income maintenance, and to access to employment, to health services, and to accommodation on the basis of need” (Roche, 2002: 71). Together with welfare entitlements, the right to labour and the right to a living wage, therefore, have been singled out as a crucial component of social citizenship (Zeitlin & Whitehouse, 2003: 774–775).

Feminist scholars have long discussed the interdependence between citizenship – particularly social citizenship – and gender. The concept of *gender regime*, notably, was coined by feminist scholars after Esping-Andersen's “welfare regime” typology (R.W. Connell, 1987; Orloff, 1993; Walby, 1997). Gender regimes have been defined as “institutionalized practices and forms of gendered systems of domination that are constituted as social ordering principles in all societies” (Young, 2002: 56). Citizenship regimes and gender regimes can be seen as mutually constitutive, since gender is a fundamental organising principle of social difference at the level of the state (Gal & Kligman, 2000: 4). After 1989, changes in citizenship regimes in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe were often analysed from a gendered perspective. Scholars have noted the complex effects of post-socialist transition on gender relations, and the multiple ways in which post-socialist citizenship regimes and gender regimes have transformed hand in hand in the last twenty years (Daskalova, Tomic, Caroline, & Radunović, 2012; Kahlert & Schafer, 2011).

When looking at *post-socialist transition*, I seek here to abandon a teleological, neo-liberal framework implicit in many policy-making and scholarly discourses. Usually this approach to *transition*, argue Gal and Kligman, “homogenizes state socialism, which, despite its distinctive ideological and systemic structure, nevertheless took many forms and had many phases in the

different countries of the region. This approach also homogenizes capitalism, glossing over its varying and uneven forms, and the partially contingent, open-endedness of social change” (Gal & Kligman, 2000: 11). ‘Transitology’ studies indeed obscured the diversity and specificity of each geographical context, and Europe's different historical legacies (Blokker, 2005). The devastating social impact of neo-liberal ‘market fundamentalism’ in post-socialist Europe was also neglected (Einhorn, 2006: 5–7). Recently, also as a result of the world economic crisis, the dominant neo-liberal paradigm of *transition* became increasingly contested in Central, Eastern and South East Europe, as waves of discontent marked by citizens' anti-governmental protests emerged in Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria (Musić, 2013b).

The conflictual, ambivalent and geographically specific character of post-socialist transition has been most evident in the former Yugoslavia, where the economic transformations occurred simultaneously with the Yugoslav wars (1991–1999), as well as ethnic cleansing, massive internal displacement, and nation-building processes, from which new post-Yugoslav citizenship regimes emerged (Shaw & Štik, 2013). The ‘nation’ (understood as ethnically homogeneous) became the central constituency of elites' discourses, as opposed to the ‘working people’ of socialist times (Papić, 1994). At the same time, similarly to what happened in other post-socialist contexts, poverty, unemployment, and class inequalities started to have a “stronger and stronger influence on life chances and well-being” (Stenning, 2005:992). The industrial working class disappeared as a political subject and workers became strongly disempowered by material processes such as shady privatisation of formerly state-owned industrial assets, deindustrialisation and widespread war profiteering (Musić, 2013a; Vodopivec, 2012).

Transformations in gender regimes in the post-Yugoslav region have been discussed at length since the 1990s, mainly as a result of the gendered and ethnic violence that was perpetrated during the Yugoslav wars. Scholars have underlined the negative impact of war and militarisation on gender relations, emphasising the process of gendered re-traditionalisation and reaffirmation of patriarchal values provoked by nationalist discourses and by violent conflict (Iveković & Mostov, 2002; Papić, 1994, 1999; Žarkov, 2007). The militarisation of post-conflict societies and men's unemployment led to gendered violence in wartime and to an increase in domestic violence during and after the war (Cockburn, 2013; Korać, 1996; Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000).

In parallel to these processes, labour relations also underwent a process of restructuring, and workers lost many of the social rights acquired during socialism. Transformations in social citizenship – and its gendered aspects – have received little attention in the scholarly literature on the post-Yugoslav region, since discussions on ethnicity and nation-building have been most prominent. These processes, however, affected the daily lives of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav citizens. If 1960s Yugoslavia could be described as a country “aspiring to entry into the category of ‘core’ industrial countries”, in the 1980s and 1990s a phenomenon of “re-peripheralisation” took place for the region vis-à-vis the West (Schierup, 1992:79). Economic decline had started already in the 1980s, when foreign debt, inflation and unemployment skyrocketed (Woodward, 2003: 78–79; see also Woodward, 1995). During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, economic decline, inflation and unemployment rose

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