

# A REVOLUTION IN POLITICS IS REALLY NEEDED: WE WANT HALF THE POWER

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SONJA LOKAR

### BY INGRID RÖDER

---

The sociologist Sonja Lokar specialises in political party development, social welfare-state issues, and gender issues. She has been active as a researcher, political analyst, and politician (she was elected in the first multiparty national election in Slovenia in 1990). Currently Sonja Lokar is the Executive Director of the Ljubljana regional office of the CEE Network for Gender Issues. She is also one of the initiators of the Stability Pact Gender Task Force and has been its Chair since 1999. She cooperates with various organisations, including European Commission, European Parliament, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and World Bank, and participates in training programmes of National Democratic Institute and election observation missions.

**IR:** You have been involved in a number of gender-related activities over the years. Can you say what the most formative moments of your life were that led you into gender issues and politics?

**SL:** That's a good question, because when I became a member of a political party – in those times there was just one political party, the League of Communists of Slovenia – I was not especially interested in gender equality issues. For me it seemed clear that this was just a part of the class emancipation question. And I needed years of personal experience and of experience in politics to understand that even if you solve or try to solve the issue of class emancipation, that will not automatically bring about the emancipation of women. I needed some time to understand this. So I was not a feminist from day one when I started as a politician. But I definitely became a feminist in 1990, when Slovenia held its first free elections. In the process of the preparation of these first free elections, I understood that there was not one political party, including my own, that was reforming and becoming a modern social democratic party, which was really keen to work on gender equality issues. That was the moment when the focus was much more on every other theme and gender equality was pushed aside. As I was at the very top of the political establishment of my party, overwhelmed with other work, I didn't realise what was going on. But I discovered it when the election was over and I was the only woman in my party parliamentary group in the most important Political House

of Representatives, which later became the Lower House of Parliament. And it was a shock. All of a sudden I understood that if we really didn't change the approach of the parties towards this issue, whatever was achieved in the past might easily be lost. And it was already too late. The preparations for the first free elections were also a golden opportunity for women to make our claims on democracy, and we lost that opportunity because we were so naïve. We thought that what had been good in the past would be there also in the future. And we didn't understand that democracy was coming in a package, where many things, already achieved and so crucial to the equality of women, could be lost, and that we would have to work hard to keep what had already been achieved along with women's human rights that had not been achieved in socialist times.

Slovenia was a very special transition country. It was one of the only three transition countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia), as far as I know, where before the first free elections, the gender equality issue was an issue in the mainstream political debate. It was not *the* issue, but it was an issue of political debate. In fact, some years before the first free elections, in Slovenia, we already had an independent modern women's movement. This movement in civil society was not structured as formally registered NGOs. But there were several women's groups, very loud, very outspoken groups, speaking on all the issues that were then top issues in the modern western women's feminist movement: political representation, violence against women, freedom of sexual orientation for women, demilitarisation of society, ecological issues... All these issues were at that moment already debated in the Slovenian new women's movement. But when the parties came onto the scene and got registered, all these issues were somehow excluded from the real political debate. And the debate became centred on the sovereignty of the nation, the separation from Yugoslavia, privatisation, the market economy, and, of course, the crucial issues of democracy: freedom of speech, freedom of political organising, freedom of religion, free and fair elections, the separation of powers, parliamentary control over the army etc. Even though we had this modern women's movement in society, in the new mainstream politics, gender equality was not seen as one of the crucial issues of democracy building. A very similar situation was in Croatia and in Serbia. In Slovenia, we even had an attempt to es-

establish a women's political party. Women activists formed several women's-only citizen's lists, which ran in the first free elections. They were made in haste, at the very last moment before the elections, and did not cover all the electoral units. These lists didn't gain enough votes to cross the 3% threshold and didn't make it into Parliament. As the parties didn't really give women candidates a chance, they entered Parliament with practically all-male representation. From 26% of women in parliament in socialist times, we went down, for example, in the House of Political Representation, to 8%. This was a complete disaster.

**IR:** Were you part of this former women's movement?

**SL:** I was part of the reform of the League of Communists of Slovenia into a modern social democratic party. And I tried very much to connect this reform with the new women's movement in civil society and to take active part in all the issues of the big political debate: violence against women, the demilitarisation of society and, of course, the political representation of women and the right of women to get politically organised on their own. In former socialist times, we could not even imagine this kind of approach.

**IR:** Was family and work/life balance an issue for you? And if so, how did you deal with it?

**SL:** In fact, it was a latent issue, because I lived with my father- and mother-in-law. And my husband was as busy as a manager as I was in politics. But my father- and mother-in-law were more than willing to take care of the children and to take care of the household. We had very good services for childcare. When things really became hectic, in the eighties, my children were not that small, they were already teenagers, but also before my activism and political career I don't think it would even have been possible without the support of my parents-in-law. And we lived in the same apartment, so logistically it was easy. They helped me enormously. And my husband was not a macho man, he tried to do his very best, but in fact he was not a big help because his work was as demanding as mine. So my balancing of work and family was based on generational solidarity. The help of my parents-in-law made my work in politics possible.

**IR:** You are the regional director of the Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues – how would you summarise the goals of this network and its outcomes so far?

**SL:** This network is now quite an old thing, because we started as an informal working group in 1994. The group of women who started it is still together, we still work together. It's a wonderful experience of teamwork, which is very informal and yet so powerful. Our Network started as support for women in reformed communist parties or newly formed social democratic parties in transition

countries, in order to help these women to become aware of gender equality issues and to force their parties to seriously take gender equality issues on board in their programmes, in their activities, and to start to make room for women's agency in their parties. So this was the first goal of this network. And at the beginning it was really hard, because gender equality was thrown out of many, many political parties on the left. There were two excuses for this: either gender equality was seen as an issue "already solved in socialist times", so why speak about it, which was one illusion, or it was seen as something that was not really important, so the excuse was "not to waste our time with that". And there was a lot of lip-service at the beginning. All these newly established social democratic parties desperately wanted to become members of the big international family of the Socialist International, and there were some gender equality rules. These rules said: you have to have women's organisation, you have to have quota rules, and you have to do something for gender equality. So they tried to accomplish it, at least formally. They would put a nice, very general little paragraph on gender equality in their programme; they would accept quota rules in their statute and then not respect them. And our Network was there to help these parties to transform this lip-service into real political engagement. And it was really difficult. It was maybe even more difficult with women than with men, because women were very reluctant to separate, to organise, to be, in a sense, in confrontation with the male leadership; because all these parties were very hierarchically organised, very much centred on – and they still are, unfortunately – one leader. So if the leader was not a feminist – and most of them were macho guys and many of them still are – it was very risky for women party activists to insist on the gender equality issue. This women's movement within the party was not accepted as a normal democratic process within the party but as something that is strange, that is odd, that is coming from the outside, from women who do not really understand what Central-Eastern or South-Eastern Europe is about. So it took a lot, a lot of time. And I wouldn't say that it is completely done. We are still fighting this elementary battle. Because we civilise one generation of party leaders, and then we have a change in leadership, and the whole thing starts over again from scratch. In the beginning we were really learning from the experiences and best practices of social democratic women in Nordic countries. We transferred the best experience from Swedish social democratic women, from Norway labour party women. We used and adapted their training manuals for our use, but later on we started to exchange our own experience within transition countries and to profit from this experience, maybe even more than profiting from the Nordic experience. Little by little we started to discover new ways and to build new tools for dealing with this issue that were not typical in Nordic countries. The most different approach on our side, I think, was that we were less connected with Trade Union

women but more connected to women in NGOs. This was one difference.

The second one was that very early on we discovered that even if we make our parties – social democratic parties – aware of this issue, this is not enough. If we do not build cross-party women's alliances we will never end up with anything serious with regard to gender equality mechanisms, with regard to quotas in the legislation, with regard to women's power in political parties. So this is the main innovation, I think. We came across it through work. And then we also discovered methods, which maybe were not so original, but we thought them through and applied them in a systematic way; for example, the sandwich strategy or the parallel electoral campaign strategy. We see them as innovations, but in fact we just put the name on these specific practices and we used them very systematically. And another thing – as a political network, a network of social democratic women, we were clever enough to understand that we cannot always be the only ones to bring about change and improvement in gender equality in our nations. We understood that it was important to share our experience as women in our political parties with women in other political parties. So, for example, in the Gender Task Force, whatever we learned in the social democratic parties was transferred to all the parties and to women in all the parties who wanted to learn. I think this is very different from what happened in traditional social democrat-led societies, where one had a very strong women's movement within the party, a very strong women's movement within the trade unions, and strong party-led or party-connected NGOs dealing together with gender equality issues. None of these was in place in our situation.

**IR:** Were you also addressing men?

**SL:** This was the third step. It is really interesting that you ask this question, because our first understanding of the problem was that there would be no proper progress if women didn't build themselves pressure groups in the parties and in society because the parties were not open, they did not listen, but they might eventually do so under pressure. And if women put pressure at the right moment, before the elections, for example, and if they organise this pressure cleverly enough, the parties will start to change. But who are the partners in the parties? First, these are women, and not all women in the parties are feminists and many never will be, and some of them will be the most horrible enemies of the women's movement because that is how they make their own personal political career. We knew all of these things. So it was difficult first to build this pressure group. But then, once women had become a pressure group, and once they had accumulated enough power to be accepted as negotiators, then they needed to learn to negotiate. And who are their counterparts? These are the male party leaders. And I think that we travelled a long way.

At the beginning it was a confrontation. Then there were tense and unpleasant negotiations. Now, I think, we already have, at least in some cases, mature and sincere partnership. There are very few parties where things grew to this stage. Most of our male party leaders do understand that they cannot joke with women anymore, and that their lip service won't do any more. But most of them are still far from becoming real and sincere partners.

**IR:** In your opinion, what were the most formative issues in gender politics in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist regime?

**SL:** In fact, at the moment of the fall, the only issue that became a mainstream political issue was the issue of abortion. And it was brought in by right-wing political parties. So we had an exercise in fighting for what had seemed already won. And in different countries with different results. I am very proud of the situation in the Balkan countries, where this fight was more or less won. And it was a very hard and difficult fight. But Central Europe was not so lucky. In many transition countries, abortion regulations became much less liberal; in some cases, like in Poland, there was even a ban on abortion. In some cases it became so expensive that it's a problem for poorer women.

So in the Balkans, even if we had all these pressures from nationalistic populist politics, freedom of choice mostly remained in the law. In Slovenia we kept it in the constitution. And this fight was absolutely incredible because we had to organise the demonstration in front of the parliament at the moment when the new constitution was accepted. And we won this battle, which was close to a miracle. In Croatia, the pressure on freedom of abortion was horrible, but the women's movement there was strong enough to push it back. It's not as good as it used to be, but it's not as bad as in Poland, or in some other countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina, that's a different question, because the country was so destroyed in the war that nothing really survived from the former welfare state, the former health care system. But ideologically mainstream politics couldn't openly pick a fight with freedom of abortion. They did so in their re-Catholisation, re-Islamisation, re-Orthodoxisation of their women and it partially worked. But all in all, there were too many women raped, displaced, too many in poverty. Post-war nationalistic politicians couldn't really harness women this way. And immediately after the war the women in Bosnia and Herzegovina stood up and said: "This is enough" and started a different approach to politics. Most of the good ideas started to come from Bosnia soon after the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995. Here is the birthplace of massive training for women in politics. And here is the first quota rules built into the law by pressure from women. So they brought a lot of their bitter experience and their bitter energy to this movement around other Southern European countries. And women in Serbia were also very good

at fighting against limitations on the right of freedom of abortion. In Macedonia nobody even ever dared raise this issue at all.

The issue of abortion was not something that women picked up. It just came upon us, and we had to fight against an attempt to outlaw it. So that was the first thing.

Then there was the issue of violence against women. This was mostly connected to war violence and the rape of women during the war. In the war-hit regions and countries women became organised before the conference in Beijing 1995 on this issue. And they put in a lot of effort, so that this conference accepted, for the first time ever, the international legal approach that rape in war is a crime against humanity. This was also because the women organised in NGOs in the region of the Balkans were so active in this process. So this was the second very important issue.

And then, I think, especially in transition countries, we had a lot of problems and no really well-organised defence to keep our economic and social rights, in particular child-care institutions. Slovenia again is an exception to the rule. Health care for women, you know, reproductive health care, it's not only the issue of abortion, but also prevention, contraception, and sexual education in the schools. Everything went to pieces practically everywhere except in Slovenia. Then you had this issue of the economic rights of single mothers and the social rights of single mothers – this has mostly changed. Then the economic rights of women as workers were also under question, not only because there was massive unemployment, but also because of the deregulation of the labour market. Because a lot of women moved from formal to less socially covered forms of work, and in these forms of work women's rights were not respected, even if they were written in law and collective agreements.

And I would say that there were in fact two periods in this transformation of former socialist countries. Ten years of shock therapies and the stupid neo-liberal ways of doing transition in most countries. And then the time came when these countries were headed towards the European Union. Then women got an opportunity to try to renew some of their already lost economic and social rights, if they were clever enough and organised enough to fight for them. And again, in Slovenia, we succeeded in some cases, but in most other transition countries, now new EU member states, women just got the minimum or they just got very broad and very unclear legislation, with no real mechanisms for implementation and control – which is partly true also in Slovenia. We have good legislation, but very bad implementation. And we know it, but nor the state, nor the political parties are concerned about it. Women are not organised enough to fight for their rights because they are very weak in their parties as well as in trade unions. In Slovenia, trade unions are good at fighting for women's family leave, for their pension rights, but they are not so good, for example, at fighting for equal pay. And many things are more on

paper. Sexual harassment at work: This is not an issue our trade unions are working on really seriously. Even if they should, they don't.

**IR:** What is the reason for that, in your opinion?

**SL:** I think there are two reasons. One is, as I told you, in political parties, women members of political parties did not join political parties because they were feminists but because they had other political issues to solve in mind. They didn't join the party to solve the gender equality issue. The same goes for trade unions. And because the trade unions have always been dominated by men there is no gender awareness. Trade unionists still perceive themselves – most of them, men and women alike – as sexless. They don't understand that gender is a trade union issue. Or they try to understand it little by little now with a lot of effort.

**IR:** What do you see as the most important issues now?

**SL:** You asked me what were the main issues before and I told you: abortion, violence, economic and social rights. But the issue of all issues was in fact, and still is: the political powerlessness of women, their exclusion from mainstream politics. Only now the situation is very different, because most of the former socialist transition countries are becoming European Union countries. And the problems that were pushed aside or services that were annihilated by the transition are now, all of a sudden, the issue inside the European Union. We are now talking about Barcelona targets, and we are talking about equal pay, and we are talking about the Lisbon strategy for the employment of women with young children and elderly women. So all of a sudden the problems that were unsolvable, unthinkable, not on anyone's agenda, are entering our mainstream political agenda – which is great. Unfortunately, they are entering the agenda very slowly; there isn't real pressure from the European Union. There is a lot of soft EU legislation talking about these issues, and this method of coordination, but nearly no hard-core, binding legislation.

Now our Network is no longer dealing with the questions of how to persuade left-wing parties to acknowledge the existence of gender equality issues and to make some real space for their women activists, but also how to develop policies that will be in accordance with European directives or recommendations. And how can social democrats even take over the initiative. The CEE Network of Gender Issues also started the idea of pan-European parity in the law campaign. The idea came from experience in the Balkans. We succeeded in five countries in South-Eastern Europe to enact quota rules: Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. But very quickly we understood that – mostly they are 30%, in Slovenia in one case a 40% quota – they are not enough: We want half; we want half the power. And for half the power we need to have parity in the law.



So we started an initiative to form a formal pan-European coalition on this issue. And the coalition should be trans-party, cross-party, cross-trade union, and cross-NGO. And we started to lobby for this coalition. The European Women's Lobby accepted to be the most important support for this coalition. We are negotiating with the Trade Union Confederation, the European ETUC confederation. The first step would be parity for the European elections, but the whole idea is parity everywhere, on all levels, in all bodies that accept decisions with political and social consequences. Our Network started as the little sister of a big social democratic women's movement. But now, I think, because of our experiences in the transition, because of the socialist experience, because of everything we were put through in these wars, because we are somehow in between two worlds – the very developed one and the very under-developed one – I think we can really play the role of catalyst in the new pan-European women's movement.

**IR:** You have been involved in the Joint European Women Campaign for the Enactment of Parity: what so far are the outcomes of the campaign and how do you see its future?

**SL:** I do not know what the outcome will be. The only outcome is that we started the idea. You know, it is very difficult to get to the European Women's Lobby as an NGO-network, as an organisation of NGOs, which are mostly very reluctant towards politicians, to prioritise the fight for parity in parties and in all decision-making bodies. This was the most difficult thing to do. And without women from transition countries it wouldn't have succeeded. But these women, from Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Cyprus, and elsewhere said: "Listen, friends, without women in politics we will never make it. We need many more women as partners in politics to be able to negotiate and lobby for our issues." And this is what helped. Because traditionally, Western women in the Women's Lobby would prefer to work on their own specialised issues – on violence, on migration, on workers rights of women, on abortion – as they are used to.

**IR:** You are a political activist as well as a researcher – how would you evaluate the role of political parties, both on the left and on the right, with regard to gender equality issues?

**SL:** I was lucky to have the opportunity to work in a systematic way with practically all the parliamentary parties in the ten South Eastern European countries in the period of the last eight years. Some years ago, social democratic and democratic liberal parties were practically the only ones to deal with gender equality issues, they were the first to establish women's organisations, and social democratic parties were the first to introduce quotas in their statutes. Now, more and more parties from the centre and the right are following suit. In some cases, right-wing parties were crucial to the enactment of quotas, like in Serbia or in

Slovenia, where they are even better at giving important power positions within their parties and when in governance to women members than the left wing ones are. So the differences are diminishing. Women's organisations from left-wing parties are better rooted within their party leaderships, better connected to the state gender equality mechanisms, and more open to the women's organisations of other parties and NGOs, while right-wing and centre women's party organisations are, surprisingly enough, more open to trade unions and experts. But most important is not what is different but what is the same: only one out of 64 parliamentary parties has a budget line for the work of their women's organisation, and only one has a full-time organiser working for the women's organisation. Not one of them really respects their quota rules in the statutes. Women from these 64 parliamentary parties in 2006 led only 15 advocacy campaigns! My conclusion is that parties still do not take gender equality issues and women voters seriously. The parties, left, centre and right, are the main obstacle for the decisive change for the political empowerment of women, and we have to find a way to really empower women within political parties.

**IR:** Is there anything that CEE political parties still have to learn from their west European counterparts in regard to gender politics?

**SL:** Our male party leaders can learn from Prime Minister Zapatero and his Socialist Party in Spain. In his campaign for his first term in office, he spoke with passion against the "machismo criminal" – and his first law was a strong law against violence against women. His government enacted quotas for all elected positions, it enacted very liberal legislation on the rights of homosexuals, it separated the state from the church, it legalised nearly half a million immigrants, and he won a second term in office! Now he has 60% women ministers in his second cabinet and his government is working on very strong gender equality legislation. We can also learn from the Norwegian Labour Party. Their government was not afraid to enact the obligation of a minimum of 40% of men and women in the executive boards of all companies, even private ones, and it succeeded at getting it done!

**IR:** And is there anything Western European countries can learn from the CEE-countries?

**SL:** I don't think that they can really learn, because what we can really do, and what it is necessary to do, is to become real partners. The differences concern not only differences in the development sense. You know, the GDP of Sweden is still three times as high as the GDP of Slovenia. These are not economically comparable situations. Not to mention Bosnia, or Macedonia, or Moldova; it's absolutely absurd that we can say we will transfer Sweden

into our countries. It is not workable. It is not about that; it is about taking things from two different sides and trying to solve both problems. For example, when you speak about migration in the European Union everybody thinks about immigration. But in fact, what is immigration in Sweden, what is immigration in Italy, what is immigration in Germany, is emigration in Poland, in Romania, in Bulgaria. So how can you deal with the problem if you just see one side? You have to see both sides. And you have to solve the problem having both sides in mind as equally important. This is what we have to learn and this is what we both have to learn. We have to understand the differences of the West and more developed countries. But more developed countries have to learn that it is in their own interest to really understand what is going on and what the needs of the new European countries are. If not, we will have this separation on new and old Europe. And the old Europe will lose its welfare state because the new Europe will sell them American neo-liberal stupidities. And we don't need that. And I think that women are very important in that because women are mostly hurt by the Americanisation of the transition countries. They are really hurt by that. And they have the same interests as women in Western European countries not to accept this trend, not to buy this trend and to internalise it. And if we come together to fight against it then we have a good chance. And especially with parity; because if we combine the parity and this coordination between Southern and Northern or Western and Eastern countries, all of a sudden the agenda of European politics will change and it will change in a very good direction.

**IR:** Do you have a specific understanding of gender politics?

**SL:** Absolutely! I think this is transformative politics. It is politics that is centred on people, on human needs. In fact, it is something very revolutionary, because it tackles the set of political values, because if now profit is on top, and then you put a person, a human being, on top, it is a totally different approach. And then if you change the ranking of values in the value system, immediately you have to change the priorities in politics. You have to deal with different priorities. And then when you change the priorities, you have to change the methods with which politics deals with them, the way it works, even the way it selects leadership and how the parties work. It's a real revolution. It's a slow revolution. It's a hidden revolution. It's not in the heads of all women activists; they don't even understand because many of them still just want to join this male-dominated game. One by one, women can join, but women as a group of distinct stakeholders, as a distinct political subject, cannot join. Mainstream politics as it is now is un-joinable for them. Women as a group, we will have to change the very notion of political power and its use, or we won't have it at all.

**IR:** How would you evaluate the effect of the EU on gender issues in Central and Eastern Europe?

**SL:** It's a perfect paradox. In socialist times the gender issue was understood as a part of the class issue. The practice of the politics of Communist parties in fact reduced a woman to a mother and a sexless worker, and her liberation was seen as a part of the industrialisation and modernisation of societies. So it had something to do with development and it had something to do with a better economy and the quicker modernisation of these quite backward countries. And now in the European Union, in fact, if you read the Barcelona targets or if you read the Lisbon Strategy, gender equality is again instrumentalised. For what?

For more profit, less immigration, a better balance of generations. A woman again is reduced to the much-needed workforce! So EU gender equality politics has nothing really to do with women's human rights, or does in a very indirect way, so very much like it was in our socialist times, but in a different context. I think it's really a paradoxical thing. We just escaped one instrumentalisation to jump into another one. But in socialist times this instrumentalisation was a springboard to ask for women's human rights. Here it is the same: It is a springboard. But it depends: Do we know how to use it? Or will we just let ourselves be tamed, and be harnessed, and be sucked into this neo-liberal, capitalist way of doing things, which is very dangerous and can happen very quickly.

**IR:** And how would you evaluate the influence of SEE and CEE countries on the EU in gender issues?

**SL:** I have a lot of contacts with women from the social democratic parties in developed, Western countries. There are very few women politicians – men don't have the slightest clue, this is a rule – but even women politicians, they don't know a lot about women in Southern Europe or women in Central Europe. They don't even know elementary data. When you go there and say: "In my country we have one year paid family leave and we have 14 days paid-only-father's-leave and our childcare is still in place and it is quite good". They look at you and don't really know what to do with that. On the other side, they do know a lot about the scandalous anti-abortionist politics in Poland. But if you ask them: "Ok, do you have any clue how the women in Moldova, for example, got 21% women MPs into their parliament – how did they make it?" No clue. But us, SD women from the CEE and SEE, we know about their fights and their ways of striving for gender equality. This is one difference. Another: when they would come and learn about our work for the political empowerment of women, for example, they would say: "Oh, this isn't possible. How did you do it? In our country we need the same things!" So they feel that our energy, our experiences and methodologies, could be very useful for them, too.

From the other side, they are absolutely shocked, and very rightly so, when they see how much backwardness there still is in our women's movements. For example, the non-acceptance of lesbians and homosexuals is widespread in the SEE and in the CEE, even in social democratic parties. You can very easily find a South-Eastern feminist who would say: "I'm a normal woman, I'm not a lesbian". And then in the West, women will much more quickly say: "I'm a feminist", than us. In the CEE and in South-Eastern Europe a woman activist will say: "I'm not a feminist, but..."; and then she will make her case like any hard-core Western feminist. But if you call her a feminist, she will say: "No way! I don't want to have anything to do with feminism!"

So there are differences. And I think that this osmosis between the two parts of Europe, also between women, will not be easy. It will be difficult because everybody has to learn so much, and in general we aren't too keen to learn. It is easier not to know. The media do not inform much on our issues either. This information is not under your nose everyday. So we have to do a lot to improve our connections, communications, coordination and cooperation.

**IR:** But I think there has already been progress in this cooperation between Western and Eastern countries?

**SL:** There is a lot of cooperation, but when it comes to the people who cooperate you can see that in each political party there are maybe two, three women from the biggest parties who know what's going on with women in the South of Europe, or in Central Europe. Because women there are not frontbenchers either; in most political parties they sit in the back, they don't travel, they don't live a full political life. And without this, and again without the parity, we are doomed. We need more women; we need more women in different places. In many cases women in Southern and Central Europe were better educated than men so they knew more languages. And many times they have the position of Secretary for External Affairs in their parties. But their counterparts in Western countries are mostly men who are not very aware of gender equality issues. So the only thing that has really helped us was these separate women's organisations, which are now organised in all political parties on both sides in Europe. And this cooperation, as sporadic as it still is, is really a valuable thing. And this is why our Network is so important, because it brings together social democratic women activists on both sides for more than 14 years!

**IR:** The Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues is part of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity. How do you see the impact of networking at the European level on the local position of women with regard to political representation and participation and women's organisations?

**SL:** This is true. And now we are also an associated member of PES-Women. This networking can not be successful if there is no support for really organised work, which will connect and coordinate the efforts on the EU and the national level. We need a pan-European campaign for parity in the law at all levels of decision-making. For such a campaign, we need a big, cross-cutting, formal coalition of women in political parties, trade unions, NGOs, academia and the media and serious support from the European Commission. Up to now the Commission has been reluctant, but I hope it will improve. I remember when I first talked at a big meeting where the European Commission people from Špidla's department were present, saying that it should be the task of the European Commission to really help women to take over their half of political power. Their answers were very sceptical and negative. They were saying that this is not the task of the European Commission, they had nothing to do with it; that we had to deal with this on the national level and that political parties would never let the European Commission deal with quotas or parity. This was the first reaction, two years ago. Now the European Commission is setting up an expert group to deal with women in politics, and I was invited to join! This means that the European Commission heard our requests, even if my impression was that it was deaf and blind and negative. After two years... But I was really a pest. At every meeting, to more people, more loudly I said: "We need it! Don't tell me this is impossible! Trafficking and violence against women were non-issues for the European Commission, too. Then Anita Gradin made it an issue as Commissioner some 15 years ago. Before, this wasn't something that the European Commission would have to deal with because it was not written in any of the EU programmes or agenda or whatever. It was the task of the member states themselves. And then the European Commission did it. It created a Daphne project; it put 5 million euros every year into this work. And look, there are results. So where is the problem? So little, by little, like water dropping on a stone – it makes a hole, but very slowly.

**IR:** What is your opinion about gender quotas – both the legal ones and on the level of political parties?

**SL:** We need anything that works. And I am for parity; not for the quotas. But one cannot start with parity. In the Balkans, we started with a gentleman's agreement with the party leaders. After the first elections we proved that the agreement was almost not respected, as there were not enough gentlemen. So we campaigned for a quota in the party statutes. After the second elections, we had proof that party quotas were not respected. So we had an argument as to why we needed the quota in the law. And after the third elections we had the proof that legal quotas, without rules, were not effective so we campaigned for putting rules into the laws. And then, after the fourth elections, we could say: 30% of women in decision-making bodies is fine, but we are

more than 50% of the population, we want parity. So I see it as a process. And second, I don't think that we need half the women in politics without the movement that will get them there. Because if they get there, out of the blue sky, they will be hand-picked by the male leaders, and then we will have beauty queens and we will have popular singers and very good sportswomen, which is fine, but this has very little to do with real political work. And I don't want to see women do politics the same way men do it, because they do it badly and we have to change this.

**IR:** And do you think that women could do it better?

**SL:** Not because they are women, but because they became politicians through the women's movement, which

is aware of the changes that are needed in politics in general. Because a revolution in politics is really needed. It is completely stuck. It is useless. It is harmful. It is deadly, it kills us. We need something really different. And I believe that if we bring in women in big numbers with a clear perception of this necessary change, that change is possible. And we should not go alone. We should take along with us young people, all excluded people. Because we and they – we don't feel well in these politics. There is no place for us in these politics. And you make space through your activities, through your vision, through your perception of what is right, and you fight for it.

**IR:** Well, it sounds like a promising vision for the future. Thank you for the interview.