



Slavenka Drakulić is a Croatian author, whose articles, essays, and books have been translated into many languages. She has touched on a variety of topics, such as dealing with illness and fear of death in *Holograms of Fear* (1993); the cruelty of war and the suffering of rape victims in *S.: A Novel about the Balkans* (2001), a fictionalised life of Frida Kahlo and Mileva Einstein. In non-fiction, Drakulić's main interests include the situation in post-communist countries, war crimes (*They Would Never Hurt A Fly: War Criminals on Trial in The Hague*, 2004), nationalism and feminist issues.

Photographer: Anto Magzan

Are Women Free to Choose in New Europe?

Decades after the collapse of communism, there is still an East-West difference in defending women's rights. One of the bitter lessons is that the right to abortion could be revoked at any time.

SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ

A few years ago in Croatia, Mirela Č. was diagnosed with a life-threatening pregnancy that required termination. Even though she was 26 weeks pregnant, Mirela did not expect any problems coming from the health system. Not in her case: the foetus had a growing malign tumour of the brain. Abortion was legal beyond 22 weeks if there were medical reasons. In Croatia, the law on abortion had been inherited from the previous socialist state. What happened next, however, forced her to turn to the media and make her case public: Mirela was denied abortion in no less than four hospitals in Zagreb, essentially prevented from exercising her right to freedom

FREEDOM IS ...

... living without fear.

of choice. This right was sabotaged by the health system itself. Having no time to wait for the resolution of her complaint from the Ministry of Health, Mirela went to a neighbouring country, Slovenia, and got the help she needed there.

The public debate accompanying this case revealed the weak spots of the public health system: above all, the responsibility rests with the medical staff. Post-1989, in the new state created after the wars in Yugoslavia (1990-1995), the Catholic Church gained considerable influence in

politics. To somehow please the Church and at the same time not displease the 78 per cent majority of its citizens who were in favour of the right to abortion, the government put off a new law that, presumably, would have explicitly reduced women's freedom of choice, i.e. limit the right to abortion. Instead, as a half-measure, the so-called conscientious objection for gynaecologists was introduced. However, in the case that in one clinic all doctors objected, the clinic would be legally obliged to provide the medical service by bringing in help from outside this particular hospital. Now, research on the availability of abortion in Croatia in 2023 looking at 22 authorised hospitals employing a total of 310 gynaecologists, found that no less than 163 of them, or 52.6 per cent, appealed to their conscience and refused to perform abortions. In such cases, women are forced to go from one clinic to the next, even outside their hometowns, to look for help, unless they choose to do it privately.

So, even if it is formally legal, the right to abortion has been made difficult to exercise. According to various women's organisations, this is being done systematically and on purpose. The dominant ideology of Croatian nationalism simply demands that women have more children.

This is just one example of the difference between words and acts, proclamations and reality, and promises and lies, in just one country. And if Croatia were unique, women elsewhere might not

need to worry. But this is not the case. On the contrary, it points to a much bigger picture of a new and dramatically changing Europe. This change doesn't affect only women, but usually women tend to fare worse than men, be it the loss of rights, of jobs, or of social support. Therefore, to look at what happens to women, or what threatens them, is a good way to paint the picture of what awaits all of us.

DEMOGRAPHIC PANIC. In the last decade, Europe has been characterised by three important processes: mass immigration, depopulation and the growth of right-wing populist parties.

The so-called big wave of immigration in 2015–2016 brought well over two million non-European immigrants and refugees to the EU. In a very short time, Europe went from shock, via a brief period characterised by a welcoming attitude, to fear and the rejection of immigrants and the closing of borders.

It was immigration, or rather its instrumentalisation, that instilled a feeling of insecurity and fear in people. Since none of the big political parties or active governments dared to address such feelings, it became the main propaganda tool of the then still relatively marginal right-wing populist parties, such as Sverigedemokraterna in Sweden, the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands, Lega Nord in Italy, the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Rassemblement National in France, Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark, the FPÖ in Austria and the AfD in Germany.

In recent years, they have grown based on this platform, advocating the policing of borders, expelling immigrants, and leaving the EU. Xenophobia bred nationalism, which flourished. A whole set of frustrations followed, including unemployment, poverty and the feeling of being “second-class citizens,” especially in the East, where a strong wave of privatisation created a previously unknown economic inequality. All this has fed the populist parties, which have formed alliances across Europe and become ever more influential.

The political vocabulary has changed since Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán first came out as the “Black Sheep” of the European

Union, saying openly that immigrants are dangerous because they are destroying our European culture and way of life. By now, this is not only tolerated but repeated by more and more political leaders, and not only in Eastern Europe. These “Orbánists” are specialised in spreading demographic panic.

According to UN projections, Bulgaria, Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine, Croatia, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia, Poland, and Hungary are estimated to see their population shrink by 15 per cent or more by 2050. These are scary numbers, and considering this, fear is not uncalled for. However, the demographic panic has an ideological component and, as so often, it is women's rights and freedoms that are imperilled.

There are several parallel demographic changes in the EU happening at the same time. For quite some time, the EU population has been ageing, creating economic and social problems. The fertility rate is low. Nowhere in the EU do women have 2.1 children, the necessary minimum to renew a population or a nation. At the same time, a post-1989 phenomenon is going on: the surge of “EU migrants,” defined as people living in an EU country who were born in or are nationals of another EU country. This group contributes to the depopulation of countries in Eastern Europe especially. It is mostly young people who follow the opportunity of better-paying jobs in the West. According to Eurostat, the number of intra-EU migrants amounted to 17.5 million in 2020, about a third of the EU's foreign-born population.

Economic migration is not a new phenomenon. In the mid-20th century, millions of people, then called *Gastarbeiter*, from Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia and Turkey went to work in Germany, Sweden and Austria. They were mostly manual labourers. Now, however, the situation is quite different, as a big part of the EU migrants coming from the former socialist part of Europe are educated young people. This means that, for the first time in history, Eastern Europe is facing the problem of a real “brain drain.” The best and brightest are leaving. Certain professions are already deficient, like medical doctors and nurses in Romania. Romanians are the largest group living in

other EU countries, followed by Poles. Croatia, a small country of meanwhile 3.9 million inhabitants, has lost about half a million people to inner migration in the last decade. There are villages in the east that are empty. Schools are closing, as there are fewer children every year, and no one is available to work in fields or on farms.

Demographic crisis and depopulation are hitting the former socialist states the hardest, leaving their governments to resort to desperate promises, laws, and measures to alleviate the problem. Not much is likely to change, though, as habitually, state budgets are considered a self-service to enrich bureaucrats. If there is a single plague that both stops reforming these societies *and* drives away young people it is corruption.

TURNING TO CONSERVATIVE VALUES. But how are these countries trying to stop people from leaving and to come to grips with the demographic crises? Well, it is safe to say that women are at the centre here as well. The Croatian government's latest measures against depopulation, the so-called "revitalisation package" of 685 million euros, are intended mostly for support of parenthood: from higher allowances for women on maternal leave and longer leave for fathers to one-time cash payments for children, stimulating families to have more than two children. These measures are to be combined with support for employment, bank loans, cheaper lodging, and better childcare. This all could work – if money wouldn't dry up after a short while and if one could rely on the state in this matter. But every new commission for depopulation issues suggests measures that soon dry up. No wonder that public trust in the longevity of such measures dwindles. Even with the strong pressure of the Catholic Church, it is far from evident that young women would be willing to stay at home for up to two or more years after giving birth even on generous paid leave like in the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, or three years with full pay, like in

**No country . . . ,
no matter how
democratic,
wants to
completely give
up the right to
control a
woman's body.**

Hungary. Especially in a country where more women than men have a university diploma, like in Croatia. Furthermore, such measures put women in a worse situation than men in the job market. Which company will employ a woman who could soon take out years of parental leave? Such incentives might look like some form of social support. But in this context, these measures could rather be considered as an anti-equality programme.

The Ukraine war adds to the volatile situation. Since Russia's full-scale invasion started in 2022, some six million refugees have entered the EU from Ukraine. All this contributes to further fuel fear and results in many people and societies turning to conservative values – which reflect directly upon women. When facing unknown and uncertain situations, societies tend to close down, and people turn inward and go back to old and known habits. Xenophobia and nationalism, which cause such reactions, are just the opposite of what the European integration project stands

for. The latest example is the recent proposal in Germany by the CDU/CSU fraction in the Bundestag to tighten the country's migration policy, which includes the introduction of permanent border controls, backed by the AfD. It was rejected, but the tendency is clear. As it is in the countries where the far right is in power or close to it, in Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Slovakia and Finland. Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) won the recent elections and in the Czech Republic, the right wing could win, too. The Swedish and French governments are under their strong influence.

All these changes contribute to the reinforcing of conservative practices for women all over the EU. The new rhetoric is directly connecting the threat of immigrants to the procreation role of women, as in Orbán's *we need Hungarian (Croatian, European) children* (not just any children).

Some women are more threatened than others. Decades after the collapse of communism, there is still an East-West difference. This is par-

ticularly obvious in the case of freedom of choice and emancipation. Emancipation from above was the main characteristic of women's lives under communism. It was part of the communist legal system, guaranteeing to women all the basic rights from voting rights to property and ownership rights, from education to divorce, from equal pay for equal work to the right to control their bodies. However, this emancipation from above deprived them of the experience of organising themselves and fighting for their rights at the ground or grass-root level, which resulted in a dangerous passivity and disorientation when faced with the new, post-socialist reality.

CONSTANT THREAT. More dangerous for women than the threat of losing already-won rights is not being aware of this danger – not understanding that the threat is constant because the need for society to control reproduction is constant, too. Now even more so than it was yesterday.

Women tend to believe that their rights are guaranteed forever. It is a hard lesson to learn that they are not. Women's rights could be revoked at any time, regardless of the ruling political regime. The Polish example perhaps illustrates the danger best. Poland, like other socialist states, had freedom of choice for women. Yet, already the very first post-1989 government reduced this freedom radically and since May 1993, the Polish legislation on abortion is one of the most restrictive in Europe. One could say that this all developed under the influence of the Catholic Church, which played a major role in the early stages of political change in Poland. But despite the majority of citizens being pro-choice and millions taking part in protests, women did not gain back their freedom of choice, or not yet.

These changes in the EU and the end of the federal constitutional right to abortion in the USA in 2022 prompted an extraordinary move to protect women's rights in France last year. At a time when a political turn to the right is expected in elections forthcoming in many EU states – and conservative and rightist parties have abortion bans on the top of their agendas – France was the first state to include the right to freedom of choice

for women into the constitution. “We are sending a message to all women,” said the then-prime minister, Gabriel Attal afterward: “Your body belongs to you, no one has the right to control it on your behalf.”

But do women's bodies really belong to women only? If so, why the battle of women with governments over decades, even centuries? The survival of every society, community, group, tribe, ethnicity or nation is in the hands of women. No country, state or regime, no matter how democratic, wants to completely give up the right to control a woman's body. The authorities lay claim to the female body because women have the ability to give birth not only to their children but also to members of society, subjects or citizens, soldiers, voters, and members of an ethnic group or nation. Therefore, women have enormous power, which (patriarchal) society wants to control. The abortion law seems to be the most efficient means to do so.

The French addition to the constitution is an example to follow for all, East and West alike. It is no coincidence that Sweden, which used to be a beacon of liberal democracy and gender equality, is already en route to making similar changes. The Swedish Constitutional Committee suggested that the right to abortion should be included in the country's Basic Laws. The question remains: Will “New Europe” follow track?

Drakulić recommends:

Martha Gellhorn: *The Face of War* (Granta Books, 1998). Gellhorn (1908–1998) was an American journalist and writer, one of the greatest war correspondents. This is a collection of her reports from Spain in 1937 to Panama in 1990 and from almost every war in between. Gellhorn's characteristic approach of writing about the suffering of ordinary people is the best-ever description of the human cost of war wherever it happens.

