

## **Agency, Biography, and Temporality:**

# **(Un)making Women's Biographies in the Wake of the Loss of the Socialist Project in Yugoslavia**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This essay seeks to deepen our understanding of women's agency in socialist societies. Focusing on socialist and post-socialist Slovenia, it explores the ways agency reveals itself in interviews with and biographical portraits of the socio-politically active women – or "political workers" (*politične delavke*), as they were called during Yugoslav socialism – Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer. In these texts, agency unfolds as a mosaic of multiple, naturally intertwined activities and engagements aimed at the common good and at improving the position of women and other socially marginalized groups. This kind of agency – understood as the ability to act and the meaningfulness of acting on several fronts – vanished in the wake of the

loss of the state socialist project, together with the term *politična delavka* that designated it. Furthermore, in the post-socialist refashioning of biographies of these women, the socialist state has increasingly been depicted as restricting rather than encouraging their activities in multiple fields. In addition, their biographies became fragmented by stressing only certain parts of their agency during socialism while omitting, marginalizing, or questioning others. This narrowing down of what counts as meaningful political work, the essay argues, contributes to delegitimizing, forgetting, and disabling modes of political and social engagement that were possible in the context of state socialism.

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## Socialist agency, post-socialist biography

In 2014, the American philosopher Nanette Funk initiated an intense debate involving feminist scholars on the nature and the very possibility of agency in state socialism.<sup>1</sup> This debate seems to have been prompted by systematic and in-depth research on the women's organizations in the societies of socialist Eastern and Southeastern Europe undertaken by scholars over the last several years (Bonfiglioli, 2012; De Haan, 2010; Ghit, 2011; Ghodsee, 2012), as well as by scholarly work highlighting transnational aspects of women's activism (Donert, 2013; Ilic, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Funk (2014) criticized "Revisionist Feminist Scholars" who were emphasizing women's agency in official state women's organizations, arguing "for a more nuanced account of that agency, claiming that organizations and their members both were and were not agents on behalf of women, at times even actively preventing women's agency" (p. 345) and stressed the priority of the communist party's interests over those of women in times of conflict (p. 347). Even without conflict of interest, Funk pointed out, we cannot speak of the agency of women—members of state women's organizations, because "promoting women's employment, if done only because of Party directives, makes one an instrument, not an agent or feminist" (p. 349).

The “revisionist scholars” singled out by Funk responded to her criticism. Kristen Ghodsee (2015) rejected Funk’s definition of the “very concept of ‘women’s agency,’” stressing that “it cannot require the freedom to act as one would have liked at all times and in all circumstances” (p. 2) and insisting on assessment of the agency of socialist women’s organization within transnational frameworks both synchronically and diachronically.<sup>3</sup> Chiara Bonfiglioli (2016a) also criticized Funk’s “distinction between proactive and reactive agency, or active and passive agency” as “a form of normative categorization that deprives women of the right to define their subjectivity *in their own terms*” (p. 148, emphasis in the original). Francisca De Haan (2016) outlined several problems in Funk’s interpretation: her failure to “recognize the partiality of her own perspective and instead assum[ing] that she can prescribe the right interpretation of the history of state socialist women’s organizations”; her understanding of communism and women as “necessarily separate and opposed entities” (p. 104); her disagreement with “the claim that communism and feminism are not necessarily opposites, or that some of the ideas and work of these women’s organizations and their leaders could be called (left) feminist” (p. 104). Furthermore, Krassimira Daskalova (2016) was critical of Funk’s oversimplification of “everyday social reality under state socialism, which was much more complex and nuanced than she is ready to accept, and far away from the black and white picture of women’s life and gender contracts in Eastern Europe” (pp. 121–122).

As is evident from these debates, the notions of socialist agency and activism are subject to contention and different, often opposing interpretations in the aftermath of socialism. Selective and simplified as it is, the above outline of the recent debate provides a glimpse of the arguments driving the contention. The perception of agency/activism and socialism as two mutually exclusive entities expressed

by Funk in this debate is not a solitary phenomenon; it fits the broader and dominant interpretational framework in which the political subject of state socialism(s) is placed. The role of activists in socialism is usually understood in ambiguous and oblique terms (Yurchak, 2006; Greenberg, 2014; Hemment, 2015; Razsa, 2015). As Kurtović and Sargsyan (2019) argue, this ambiguity is at least in part a result of the fact “that socialist political subjectivities were often caricatured and caught between two oppositional sets of narratives: the hyper-politicized promises of emancipation and compulsory modes of participation associated with the state, and liberal tropes of totalitarianism, ‘captive minds,’ complicit greengrocers and brave dissidents” (p. 3). Quite often, post-socialist agency is undermined by similar arguments, “stabilizing the shaken Eastern European, a figure whose past trauma casts into doubt his/her capacity to function effectively as a historical actor in the future” (Boyer, 2010, p. 19).

Without any ambition to untangle this “very tangled knot” (Funk, 2014) that would lead to another “right” definition of agency, in this essay we want to move beyond the binary model of denying/confirming feminist agency in state socialism, asking about the nature of agency revealed in the biographies of socio-politically active women in socialism. We observe agency in close relation to women’s biographical trajectories from socialism to post-socialism. Our insights are based on the biographies of two women who were active and present in the public life of socialist Slovenia: Mara Rupe-na Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer. The material we analyze comes from printed media texts (interviews, biographical portraits) and biographical lexicons, published both during socialism and after it ended.

## Being a “political worker” in socialism

Mara Rupena Osolnik<sup>4</sup> was born in 1918 in Mirna Peč in Slovenia. She graduated from a school for teachers in Stari Futog near Novi Sad, nowadays Serbia. As a teacher, she worked in Gornje Olovo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Koroška Bela (Slovenia), where she joined the then illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia. During World War II, she was very active in the partisan resistance movement and was a member of several important bodies in the resistance organization on regional, constituent republic, and Yugoslav levels. She founded the first paper for women on liberated Slovenian territory in 1942. From 1943, she was the editor of *Naša žena*, a paper addressing women in Slovenia. After the war, she worked in several state bodies: the municipal board for agriculture in Novo Mesto, the republic ministry for agriculture, and the federal agency for work productivity. As a political worker in socialist Yugoslavia, Mara Rupena Osolnik was engaged in various fields of social policy and protection; she worked on improving the social position of peasant women, the education of adult women, and increasing the availability of clean water and appropriate nutrition in primary schools. She was married to a diplomat, Bogdan Osolnik. Mara Rupena Osolnik passed away in 2003 in Ljubljana.

Aleksandra Kornhauser (née Caleari) was born in 1926 near Škofja Loka in Slovenia. In 1942, she joined the partisan resistance movement, and, after World War II, she graduated from a school for teachers. After working as a teacher for several years, she studied chemistry at the University of Ljubljana and graduated in 1963. Later she earned her PhD from the same university. In the following decades, Aleksandra Kornhauser pursued a successful academic career in chemistry and worked as a professor at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Technology. Parallel to her academic work, she engaged in politics and was a member of the People’s Assembly of the

Socialist Republic of Slovenia and Vice President of the Slovenian government from 1972 to 74. On top of these activities, Aleksandra Kornhauser worked in the field of education policy and strove to improve science education. She was married to a renowned physician, Pavle Kornhauser. In 1991, she later married the British chemist and scholar Sir Malcom Frazer and added his surname.<sup>5</sup> She passed away in May 2020.

These short outlines of two women's biographies reveal an exceptional degree of diversity in their activities and engagement in various domains—in politics, education, and social policy—and on different levels, from local to regional, republic, federal, and international. The agency that encompassed such diverse public and professional engagement directed to a common good was linked to the term *politična delavka* (political worker) in socialism.

This article explores how this complexity of activities and involvements that made up the biographies of Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser was addressed in the biographical and media texts dedicated to them during socialism and post-socialism. Starting from the assumption that social and political changes during this time span also caused changes in the way the biographies of these two women and the meaningfulness of their actions have been negotiated, we trace the elements of their biographies that “survived” the change and those that were reframed, silenced, or first brought up after socialism ended. We believe that the focus on women's biographies and on their reframing can nuance the ways we think of individual agency, both in state socialism and in the context of socio-political change.

(Post-)socialist biographies and the (im)possibility of their articulation as meaningful and continuous life paths have been explored in depth in the field of post-socialist studies. Interest in these issues has emerged with the shift of focus from the institutional and

political aspects of the socialist regimes to the personal experiences and concrete subjectivities of those who possess lived experience of socialism (Todorova, Dimou, and Troebst, 2014). For example, a 2016 issue of the *Südosteuropa* journal was dedicated to “contingent biographies in post-socialist space” (Scarboro, 2016); moreover, from 2009 to 2012, the Bulgarian researchers Alexander Kiossev and Daniela Koleva have worked on a project “Patterns of Anxiety: Life Stories and Narrative Models of Socialist and Post-Socialist Societies” (see Kiossev and Koleva, 2017). We build our discussion on the insights from this body of research on (post)socialist biographies, adding two specific perspectives. First, as we primarily focus on the ways women were presented in interviews and print-media texts in Slovenia, the biographies outlined in these texts are a result of a complex intersection and interaction between self-presentation, on the one hand, and publicly accepted, normative, and socially expected narratives, on the other. And second, we are interested in women’s biographies as being closely related to temporality in a twofold manner—we analyze texts published in different periods and we are attentive to specific temporal anchors from which the biographies of these women are construed, connecting the past, the present, and the future.

Most of the interviews and media portraits of Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer that we analyze here were published in “women’s magazines” (*Naša žena, Jana, Ona, Zarja*), magazines aimed at popular education (*Vzgoja in izobraževanje, Rast, Gea, Naša obramba*), or newspapers (*Delo, Gorenjski glas*), encompassing the time from the early 1970s to the late 2010s. Our focus on this corpus of texts is a result of our desire to “democratize” the way we think of feminist agency under socialism, by not viewing it as solely a top-down occurrence. In this issue, Dijana Jelača points to a need to problematize “the classist hierarchies of taste, within which politics (feminist and otherwise) are recognized as such only

when they are articulated in the upper echelons of cultural production.” Moreover, with our decision to focus largely on women whose biographies are not part of already delineated feminist Yugoslav genealogies, we join Kristen Ghodsee (2015) in her quest “to expand the definition of ‘feminism’ beyond the achievement of personal self-actualization. In the 21st century, feminist inquiry must make room for the notion that there exist multiple feminisms” (p. 252). However, as we aim to expose the patterns of negotiating and refashioning agency in the biographies of women who were socially and politically active and professionally successful during socialism in Slovenia, we also discuss, where appropriate, the mechanisms of self-presentation and media presentation of other women, such as Mateja Kožuh-Novak and Vida Tomšič.

In our analysis, we did not track differences between the presentation of these women in how they were portrayed by others in media texts, on the one hand, and their own self-representation in the interviews, on the other, since that would be “epistemologically irrelevant” for our research interest (Luthar and Trdina, 2011, p. 281). Both the media representation of the women and their self-portrayal are the result of the (temporal) discursive conventions that regulate the (gender) order in a society. The interviews in particular operate as a microsocial “interaction order” (Goffman, 1990) in which the responses of the interviewee address social norms and expectations articulated or implied by the interviewer’s questions. Interviews and other popular media formats, therefore, not only reproduce, but also help create the image of women acting in the public domain (Luthar and Trdina, 2011, p. 282). In the sections that follow, we offer a closer textual analysis of the aforementioned biographies vis-à-vis the question of women’s agency as it shifts across various historical and socio-political periods.

## Women's biography and temporality

Analyzing the ways the biographies of Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer were presented at different times in the decades from the 1970s to the 2010s, we want to highlight how these biographies have continuously been (re)framed from the standpoint of a specific temporality. We share the view that “analyses attuned to historical experience and imagination ... require careful work of interrogation that remains attentive to both the context of their emergence and their effects” (Kurtović and Sargsyan, 2019, p. 8).

The biographies of Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer have several similarities. Both women participated in the partisan liberation struggle in World War II as young (unmarried) women. Both of them lost their fathers early in life. After the War, the biographies of these two women were characterized by steep vertical mobility. They both started out as primary school teachers, but later developed remarkable careers: Mara Rupena first worked as an instructor for agriculture and later occupied many official positions and political functions on regional, republic, and national levels. She became Secretary of the Forestry Industry for the Dolenjska region, General Secretary of the Cooperatives Association of Slovenia (*Zadružna zveza Slovenije*), Secretary General and Vice President of the Red Cross of Yugoslavia, and Senior Counselor of the Executive Council of Yugoslavia (i.e., the federal government); and she worked in the Slovenian Parliament as a member of the Board for International Relations and later also as a counselor. She also had an important role in the international organization FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and in the programs designed to improve the position of women in agriculture and was the Yugoslav representative in the International Cooperatives Association. Similarly, Aleksandra Kornhauser studied chemistry while

working as a teacher, later becoming a university professor and a prolific and internationally recognized scientist in the field of chemistry. She was a delegate to the People's Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia and Vice President of its Committee on Culture and Education. In 1972-74, she was also a member and a Vice President of the Executive Council of Slovenia. Afterwards, she was the Director of the UNESCO International Center for Chemical Studies and worked as a consultant to the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. In the period of socialist Yugoslavia, both of these women had the chance to spend some time in the United States to improve their skills in their respective fields.

Both women worked on many fronts, also dedicating an important part of their time to activities seeking to improve life and society. Mara Rupena Osolnik was engaged in raising the quality of life of village women. Aleksandra Kornhauser invested a lot of effort in improving the quality of education. Both saw all the activities that exceeded their narrowly defined professional obligations as a “necessary social engagement” aimed at the common good: “Apart from my professional work, I have always been active in society (*družbeno delovala*). I liked to deploy my work and knowledge toward identifying solutions for the larger social issues,” stated Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer in 1999 (*Ona*, October 1999, p. 13). Mara Rupena Osolnik similarly emphasized that she “was always advocating education, especially for village women and youth,” because she “firmly believed that this is a foundation of progress” (*Rast*, October 1997, p. 364).

The involvement of these two women in a number of fields and on multiple levels – from local, to republic, national, and international—is what made them exceptional, and also “worthy” of being portrayed in women’s magazines and other media in socialism. This is also how their agency was presented and understood—as a mosa-

ic of multiple, naturally intertwined activities and engagements: “A narrow view of all the functions I fulfill may lead to the conclusion that a different person is required for each one. However, the knowledge and experience that I gain in one area—for instance in the field of education—is useful in another area, even in my professional field of chemistry teaching. Engagement in several fields opens horizons and makes it easier to assess certain phenomena. A one-sided approach would only do damage to my work,” stated Aleksandra Kornhauser in an interview (*Dnevnik*, 7 March 1970, p. 6). Echoing a similar sentiment, another well-known and socially engaged woman and high-ranking Yugoslav politician in Slovenia, Vida Tomšič, described her involvement in many fields in similar terms: “In my long life, I had many functions and very often I performed many of them simultaneously. But I always felt a stronger commitment to revolutionary work than to concrete functions (...) I cannot prioritize among all the functions that I’ve had—it is closely intertwined work” (*Prešernov koledar*, 1984, p. 63). This multitude of creative, political, and activist outlets that make a biography provide a more complex and nuanced view of women’s agency during socialism than some views expressed in the aforementioned debates allow for.

### Pervasive tensions: Politically, socially, and professionally engaged mothers

This kind of agency marked by multiplicity was an object of admiration in media texts both in socialism and in its aftermath, but its gendered positioning has also always created an implicit tension with another role that these women had: that of mothers and family women. An interview with Kornhauser from 1970 discusses at length the ways she sought to reconcile her family and professional life. She defended her choice to have both a family and a professional career, stressing that employed mothers, those “who know more

than the four walls of their apartment, can contribute much more to raising children and their progress at school and in life.” She also pointed out: “I advocate for those women who stand firmly with both feet [on the ground] in life and actively contribute to life’s pulse” (*Dnevnik*, 7 March 1970, p. 6).

Print media targeting female readership, such as *Naša žena* [Our Woman], a Slovenian magazine that remarkably both preceded and outlived the socialist period, presented being a working mother (and wife) as a norm.<sup>6</sup> The figure of woman represented by the magazine “was not [one of] a housewife, but [rather of] someone working for a better-quality life for all family members,” while “women’s participation in the public sphere was presented as women’s emancipation in socialism” (Kamin and Vezovnik, 2017, p. 93). Nevertheless, writing in the pages of *Naša žena* always reflected an awareness that “the patriarchal system was still deeply rooted in the day-to-day private lives of women” (p. 92) and offered practical suggestions on how to navigate between family and professional lives and duties.

The tension between professional and family life is an issue that transcends the period of socialism. In the wake of the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia and only a few months after Slovenia proclaimed its independence, *Naša žena* published in its October 1991 issue an interview with Mateja Kožuh-Novak, a gynecologist, head of the Slovenian Institute for Public Health,<sup>7</sup> and (unsuccessful) candidate on the female-only nonpartisan list (*Lista neodvisnih*) in the first multi-party elections of April 1990. She pointed out, “Slovenian women tend to take on too much burden on their shoulders. Our professional success is always, at least implicitly, followed by feeling guilty if everything is not perfect at home, while men never feel this way” (*Naša žena*, October 1991, p. 13). She added that she was not a good housewife and that she noticed “that her home is a

mess only when guests arrive ... If a woman chose both family and career, this unquestionable braveness is judged by many and she gets labeled a suffragette, a feminist, and an unhealthily ambitious careerist, only because she chose to be successful outside her home as well” (*Naša žena*, October 1991, p. 13). In a long retrospective interview from 1997, Mara Rupena Osolnik also presented herself as a mother whose family had to pay a heavy price because of her political career. This is how she recalled the challenges she faced as a politically active mother: “Because of our professional obligations, my husband and I had to move house fifteen times, four times far away from home—to Belgrade, Munich, Bonn, Moscow. The children changed places and schools, and many times we could not take them with us, because, at least early on, we did not have proper housing. Anyone who has had to separate from their children understands how difficult it is for the parents, and particularly for the mother. The children’s letters, written by hands that were barely able to hold a pen, show how difficult it was for them. And the sparkle in their little eyes when we would meet after a long time, only to be separated soon again. But such were the times” (*Rast*, October 1997, p. 363). In a 1999 interview, a journalist asked Aleksandra Kornhauser, “How did you manage to squeeze your family into your overbooked daily schedule?” She answered that her family had always been most important for her and that although she probably had not been the ideal mother according to the usual standards, since she had had time for her daughter only in the early mornings or late evenings, she believed that the quality of time spent together mattered more than the length of that time (*Ona*, 26 October 1999, pp. 13–14).

From the perspective of how women have been balancing private and professional lives, the end of the socialist era was not a watershed moment in itself. The pages of *Naša žena* reflected this ongoing struggle, though its prescribed solutions changed over time.

After a relatively short, early post-World War II period when the magazine avoided challenging the patriarchal order and regarded the “women’s question” as part of the larger class struggle (Vodopivec, 1999), from the 1950s on, *Naša žena* started providing instructions on how to “correctly” perform *and balance* roles of a worker, mother, wife, and housekeeper *all at once*. While the magazine promoted public services (e.g. day care for children) as the main solution to the issue of balancing women’s multiple roles in the 1960s, from the 1970s on, *Naša žena* started proposing more individualized solutions to how women should deal with the “double burden” by providing practical suggestions on how to navigate everyday life (Kamin and Vezovnik, 2017). The ideal of a woman who pursues her professional career path and is ultimately fulfilled as a mother was promoted in the pages of *Naša žena* during the 1990s, as well (Vidmar, 2002).

Admiration for socially and professionally active women has, therefore, always been accompanied by public anxiety over their proper fulfilment of the roles of mother and wife. Another issue that created tensions stemming from the gendered nature of these women’s agency both during socialism and post-socialism is that of abortion rights. Striving for women’s reproductive rights often placed these women in an ambiguous position vis-a-vis the political structures they were part of. In socialist Yugoslavia, abortion was first decriminalized in gradual steps and finally allowed with no constraints (till the tenth week of pregnancy) by the federal Constitution of 1974 (Antić, 1991, p. 152). In a 1984 interview, Vida Tomšič outlines the battle to decriminalize women who terminated their pregnancies that was fought within socialist society, often against physicians and conservative political elites who saw abortion and birth control as “genocide against the Slovenian nation” (*Prešernov kalendar*, 1984, pp. 63–64). However, in the autumn of 1989, during the debates preceding first multi-party elections in Slovenia, the in-

creasingly vocal clerical and conservative political forces started galvanizing moral panic over low birth rates, questioning the legitimacy of termination of pregnancy and even contraception. The debate culminated in the proposal to include a clause about the “sanctity of life” in the preamble to the new Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia that was eventually adopted in December 1991 (see Bahovec, 1991; Bahovec, 1992). The proposal met with fierce opposition from many politically and socially active women across the political spectrum, in a rare instance of solidarity across political divisions (Jalušič, 2002, pp. 78–80). The problematic clause was not included in the new constitution, and instead the article guaranteeing the freedom to decide about the birth of children was adopted from the old constitution. In her 1991 interview, Mateja Kožuh-Novak addressed this backlash that came with Slovenian independence and spoke very critically of the newly established democracy in Slovenia when it came to women’s reproductive rights: “What is happening now is far from democracy. If the new authorities want to take away from women the right to decide about their own lives, including the right to abortion, that cannot be a democracy” (*Naša žena*, October 1991, p. 14). Despite the “victory” or rather successful defense of the already achieved standard of human rights protection, the politicization of abortion and reproductive rights has remained a recurring topic till today.

The proliferation of pervasive traditionalist, patriarchal, and conservative views of women and their role in society would inevitably position politically and socially engaged women against “the system,” both in socialism and post-socialism, despite their engagement in multiple social and political public domains. Their engagement within “the system” by no means prevented them from engaging in the fight for women’s rights, even when this was seen as opposing the political mainstream of the time.

## Refashioning biographies

The agency of women like Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer was not questioned in media texts published about them during socialism, nor in texts and interviews published in post-socialist independent Slovenia. These women were a subject of interest precisely because of their professional and social engagement and successful work.

There are, however, two important differences in the ways their agency was framed in these two periods. The first difference concerns the relationship between these women as subjects and “the system,” understood as a social regulator that has extensive impact on a subject’s life. During socialism, this working of the system was not overtly articulated as a force that governed these women’s agency or restricted it in any way. There was no dividing line drawn between their actions and the system. On the other hand, in domains that concerned women’s rights and position in society, such as balancing professional and family life, reproductive rights, and the right to abortion, these women’s agency was frequently in friction with generally accepted norms and positions, both in politics and in the wider society. Still, generally speaking, their work was described as meaningful, contributing to overall progress and the well-being of many, and integrated into a broader effort to improve society.

After the end of socialism, however, media representations have tended to stress the tensions between the subject’s efforts and abilities, on the one hand, and “the system,” on the other. “The system,” or the socialist state, has increasingly been depicted as restricting rather than encouraging the right or desirable kinds of action. For instance, the tremendous effort Aleksandra Kornhauser had to invest to be able to simultaneously provide for her family after her father’s death and to study chemistry and pursue a career was praised in an interview with her in the *Dnevnik* daily in 1970. However, her

rebellious streak—her strong will and courage to not always follow instructions and orders—has been particularly praised and highlighted in texts published after socialism ended. In an interview published in the women’s magazine *Ona* [She] in 1999 on the occasion of the prestigious Honda award, she described her path from primary school teacher to chemistry student in the following way: “Then they sent me to teach at a primary school in Dob near Domžale. They moved me soon to Kamnik, and I opposed it, since I got along very well with the locals in Dob. These locals even went to protest [against my departure] at the county committee, which was something extraordinary then. But it was all in vain—these were times of decrees (...) At that time, you had to obtain permission to study. I was refused this permission and told that it was time to work, not to study. So, I started my studies illegally [without permission]. Luckily for me, no one checked for permission” (*Ona*, 26 October 1999, pp. 12-13). In a very similar way, Mara Rupena Osolnik, who worked as a teacher in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before World War II, describes the way she was assigned posts by decrees from the Ministry of Education, first to Gornje Olovo in Bosnia in 1938 and later to Koroška Bela in Slovenia in 1939 (*Dolenjski list*, 12 June 2003). Although state authorities assigning teachers to posts regardless of their own will and wishes was a mechanism of sociopolitical ordering not specific to socialism, in the post-1991 media texts on these women it became firmly linked to it.

Media portraits of the gynecologist, public health activist, and politician<sup>8</sup> Mateja Kožuh-Novak published after socialism ended start with the description of severe challenges that she had to face to become a successful woman. These challenges resulted from the fact that her father, a physician, was murdered by partisans in World War II because he was providing members of the Slovene Home Guard (who collaborated with the fascists) medical help and was openly anticommunist (*Naša žena*, October 1991; *Teorija in praksa*, 23 July

1990). As in the case of Aleksandra Kornhauser, her success against the odds is presented as resulting from her personal engagement, bravery, and endurance. However, she herself stressed that what she achieved was not entirely despite “the system”: “despite being a second-class citizen of a kind, I was able to study for free. I even managed, mostly thanks to my [female] mentor Dr. Andolšek, to complete my M.A. in Public Health in the USA as a fellow of the World Health Organization” (*Naša žena*, October 1991, p. 12).

The second change in framing these women’s biographies after socialism concerns the ways their agency in multiple fields is addressed. Certain activities become prioritized over others. Mara Rupena Osolnik’s activities in the local context are particularly highlighted, while her work in the international arena and in the wider Yugoslav context is only briefly mentioned or completely omitted. Since 1991, there have been attempts to disentangle her political engagement and the many institutional functions she performed, as something “inauthentic” and imposed, from her “genuine care for people,” thereby looking to decouple her work within “the (socialist) system” from her social activism. In her biographical portrait of Rupena Osolnik, the feminist sociologist Tanja Rener (2007) writes: “Whatever she became because of official duty (*po službeni dolžnosti*),” listing many functions Rupena Osolnik performed, “village women were her primary subject of concern”; and in the next paragraph: “although she was always loyal to the socialist political authorities, she preserved a subtle attention to the everyday living conditions and the difficulties of ordinary people, particularly village women and children” (p. 569).

On the other hand, Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer’s international success as a chemist is the central theme in post-1991 media portraits. Although this may seem to contradict the strategies of re-fashioning Rupena Osolnik’s biography, the rationale remains the

same: omitting political engagement and the complexity in which that engagement worked together with other domains in which these women were active and successful. Significant attention is also paid to Kornhauser's connections with many globally well-known and influential people in politics and public life, including the British royal family (*Jana*, 22 October 1996). Her important activities in the field of chemistry teachers' education and science education in Slovenia are usually omitted, while her political career is mentioned as a curiosity or even a deviation from her career (*Gorenjski glas*, 14 December 1999). She herself, for example, speaks of her three-year membership in the Slovenian government in the 1970s as something "damaging" to her academic career. "Luckily, I got international recognition for my work—without it, those who pronounce themselves victims of the communist regime today (although they were university professors and directors of institutes under that regime) would diminish my achievements as result of political connections" (*Ona*, 26 October 1999, p. 13).

The fact that both these women took an active part in the People's Liberation Struggle in World War II has also been given significant attention since 1991. This is particularly true for Mara Rupena, who helped organize the resistance movement and performed numerous important functions within it during World War II (among other things, as a secretary of the regional committee of the Liberation Front, a member of the central committee of the Yugoslav Antifascist Front of Women (AFŽ), and a member of the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ)). In several entries in bibliographical lexicons and encyclopedias, this part of her biography is allotted more lines than the more than five decades of her social and political work in socialist Yugoslavia (see *Slovenski biografski leksikon*; *Dolenjski biografski leksikon*). Such positive evaluation of Rupena Osolnik's activities in the partisan movement during World War II, but marginalization of what she did in

the liberated socialist country, is a recognizable pattern that characterizes not only nationalist-leaning revisionist discourses, but also leftist politics and practices in the former Yugoslavia in post-socialist times (Burcar 2015). Many young leftist theoreticians, artists, activists, and members of political movements and parties that have emerged during the last decade in the post-Yugoslav space (for an overview, see Štiks, 2015) return to the Yugoslav past with the aim of discovering something new there, something to be used to articulate present and future alternatives. However, these returns usually go back only to the “pure essence” of the revolutionary moment in World War II and its values. They tend to erase the complex, messy, and contested experiences of actual Yugoslavs who both fought for socialism and later lived in it. Furthermore, such re-evoking of the Yugoslav past also demands “purifying” it of all “ideological” layers that are seen as compromising that revolutionary moment. For example, the all-female activist choir *Kombinat* from Ljubljana performs exclusively partisan, anti-fascist songs that were written during World War II by members of the partisan movement. In their opinion, only these songs, “untainted” by the subsequent state ideology of socialist Yugoslavia, are capable of reflecting the “pure” revolutionary values of resistance and solidarity. Those written during Yugoslav socialism cannot be the holders of revolutionary potential, as they are perceived as having been corrupted by their ideological use at the hands of the socialist regime (Hofman, 2015). Similarly, many theoreticians turn to “genuine” partisan art and its messages, to the “pure” aesthetic value of the modernist monuments dedicated to the anti-fascist struggle, etc. In such leftist endeavors, there is no space for the socialist agency of women such as Rupena Osolnik or Kornhauser in multiple fields and for the common good. The rejection of that agency as “ideological” makes the new generation of post-Yugoslav leftists’ rediscovering socialism without Yugoslav

men and women disturbingly reminiscent of the historical revisionism of post-Yugoslav nationalists and liberal political elites (see Petrović, 2016).

## Conclusion: Socialist agency after utopia

As a starting hypothesis of her project researching the biographies of the first socialist generation in Bulgaria, Daniela Koleva states, “After the total destruction of the ideological language of communism, and in the absence of a broad consensus about the socialist past in Bulgarian society, the representatives of this generation would have difficulty producing coherent meanings out of their fractured life trajectories (...) Having to experience the total loss of previous living conditions, they would not be able to come to terms with the difficult legacies of socialism and their personal experiences of ‘living a lie’ during that period (to quote Václav Havel)” (Koleva, 2016, p. 345). The researchers working on this project have also expected a “semantic crisis” among members of this generation who were attempting to make “sense of identities straddling two different epochs separated from each other by a major historical, political, social and semantic break” (pp. 347–348).

The public biographies of women active in multiple fields in socialist Slovenia not only confirm what Koleva and her colleagues themselves had realized in the course of their project (that no “semantic crisis” or “discursive chaos” characterizes the biographic narratives after socialism), they also show that the break between the two epochs was not as radical and the loss of everything that comprised life during socialism was not as total as is frequently believed, or wished, to be.

The texts we analyze in this essay point to several continuities between socialism and post-socialism. Continuities—for good and

for bad—are particularly present in those fields that directly concern women—ever-present moralizing about their choices for both career and family, public health issues, or abortion rights. The central women’s magazine in Slovenia, *Naša žena*, several of whose texts are analyzed here, is another telling example of these continuities. Not only did it not disappear once socialism ended, it also kept a recognizable format of presentation of women and, even after socialism was over, continued featuring texts on women who belong to the first Yugoslav/Slovenian socialist generation.

There are, on the other hand, significant changes in the ways the biographies of these women are framed, as discussed in the previous section. The most important change concerns the fragmentation of the biographies of women by stressing only certain aspects of their engagement during socialism while omitting, marginalizing, or questioning others. Once socialism ended, Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer could no longer be described in terms that would typically be used to describe this kind of women previously: as political workers or societal workers (Slovenian: *politična delavka*, *družbena delavka*; Serbo-Croatian: *politička radnica*, *društvena radnica*)—that is, as women doing (paid and unpaid) work with the principal aim of benefitting the common good. While the term (female) politician (*političarka*) has been used in socialist and post-socialist times to refer to women occupying successive public offices (such as Vida Tomšič and Sonja Lokar), the much wider term of political worker (*politična delavka*) ceased to be used when socialism ceased to exist. This is no coincidence. The post-socialist “transition” to multi-party democracy, or rather the “transition” to a new understanding of politics and the political, was imbued with processes of the “depoliticization” of everyday life and of the “professionalization” of the political sphere (Jalušič, 1998, p. 85). Politics came to be “perceived as a dirty and corrupted enterprise” from which non-politicians wanted to distance themselves,

which significantly narrowed the understanding of the “political” (Jalušić and Antić, 2001, p. 11) and what counts as political work. It was narrowed down to what politicians do, thus excluding, forgetting, and disabling types of political and social engagements that were possible within the socialist setting.

While it may be tempting to explain these absences with concepts such as “semantic crisis” and the impossibility of negotiating the meaningfulness of the biographies of those who “lived a lie” (which is Havel’s, but also a common anti-socialist way of referring to the socialist period), we believe it is necessary to understand them from a specific temporal vantage point: from the moment in the wake of the loss of “the humanist and modernist horizons that shaped politics and social life in what was once known as the ‘Second World’—and a type of political hope that had underwritten many state socialist projects” (see Razsa, 2015, p. 6). This impossibility unfolds from what David Scott (2014) calls “the temporal disjunctures involved in living on in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of post-socialist and postcolonial futures past” (p. 2). Such a perspective suggests that it was not the language that was lost and became impossible, but rather the utopia and a vision of the future that characterized the life world of lived socialism. It also invites us to step away from normative views and the “ideological straitjacket” of the narrative of totalitarianism that significantly defines interpretations and evaluations of the socialist experience in Europe (see Ghodsee, 2014, 2015; Todorova, 2002).

This perspective also sheds important light on the agency of the women whose biographies are the focus of this essay, suggesting the viability of understanding agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but [rather] as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001, p. 203). While the uneasy coexistence of the

three domains of acting and being—those of the worker, the mother, and the public persona—characterize the biographies of Mara Rupena Osolnik and Aleksandra Kornhauser Frazer, it is the ability to act and the meaningfulness of acting on several fronts—traversing the boundaries of being inside and outside the state socialist “system” or dismantling these boundaries altogether—and for the common good that defines their agency. This kind of agency vanished in the wake of the loss of the state socialist project. What is more, the very possibility of such agency—and the capacity to think it and to name it—were lost, together with the loss of the possibility of imagining a socialist utopia and of the hope for an alternative future.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> The intensity of research in these fields did not subside in the years since this discussion was initiated – see Bonfiglioli 2016a, 2016b; Ghodsee 2015, 2018; and Lorand 2018.

- <sup>3</sup> For Funk's response to Ghodsee (2015), see Funk, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> During socialism, her second surname was sometimes given in genitive form as *Osolnikova*, which was not uncommon at the time, but would be considered a mark of patriarchy nowadays.
- <sup>5</sup> When referring to her life during socialism, we will use the surname she used at the time.
- <sup>6</sup> From 1941 on, the magazine was published as a newsletter of the Slovenian Antifascist Women's Front; after World War II, it became the leading monthly magazine for women. It ceased to exist in 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> At the time, it was named the University Institute for Health Care and Social Protection.
- <sup>8</sup> She was a member of parliament from 1992 to 1996 as a member of the Social Democratic Renewal party, later renamed the United List of Social Democrats.