THERE IS NO FREEDOM WITHOUT DIVERSITY.

WHERE WERE WE HEADING TO?

IN THE UPHEAVALS OF 1989/90 AND TODAY

WHERE ARE WE HEADING TO?

THERE IS NO JUSTICE WITHOUT SOLIDARITY.

THERE IS NO FREEDOM WITHOUT DIVERSITY.

EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AS ACTORS

CONFERENCE DOCUMENTATION BERLIN, 27–29 SEPTEMBER 2019
THERE WAS BLIND BELIEF IN THE INVISIBLE HANDS OF THE MARKET

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM CZECH REPUBLIC
THERE IS NO JUSTICE WITHOUT SOLIDARITY.

TODAY’S PROBLEMS ARE A RESULT OF THE FAILURE OF THE 90S

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM POLAND
THERE IS NO JUSTICE WITHOUT SOLIDARITY.

WE ARE A SMALL TOWN MOVEMENT.
WE USE EVERYDAY LANGUAGE.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM POLAND
THERE IS NO JUSTICE WITHOUT SOLIDARITY.

WOMEN’S INTERESTS WERE SEEN AS SECONDARY ISSUES

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM RUSSIA
WE NEED A DIFFERENT SYSTEM THAT TAKES CARE OF CREATION, OF DIGNITY, OF EQUALITY. THESE ARE FEMINIST STRUCTURES FOR ME.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM GERMANY
“THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF 89 TOUCHED ALL WOMEN. WOMEN CAME TOGETHER AND WERE WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME. FOR THE FIRST TIME, WE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO FIGHT. AND MEN WERE ON OUR SIDE. AT LEAST IN EAST BERLIN, THE WOMEN DEMONSTRATIONS HAD A LOT OF MALE PARTICIPANTS.” CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM GERMANY

Where were we heading to in 1989 and 1990? What has become of our visions and political goals 30 years after? The conference organized in Berlin-Pankow by OWEN in cooperation with Friedenskreis Pankow, Gender Studies Prague, Public Verdict Foundation and Foundation for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights “Don Women” offered the opportunity for dialogue between
different generations of women. It brought together women actors from Eastern Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and Russia who had played a decisive role in movements during the upheavals and transformations of 1989/90. Many of them founded civil society organizations and stayed active in their social and political commitments. These women were joined at the conference by women and men who today work actively for democratic and social changes in the societies of Germany, Russia, Poland and Czech Republic. Participants shared their views and experiences of activism.

The participants’ activism covered a wide range of political and social issues ranging from human rights, social and economic demands, ecological issues to questions of security and peace. In the period of the transformations, gender-specific issues and feminist claims were present to a lesser extent than in today’s women’s activism and they were strongly entangled with wider visions and hopes for changes in society.

During the three days, all participants were invited to become visionaries of the future. Common themes were identified, but also differences, across countries and generations, stood out. The conference thus created cross-border spaces for political reflection and action.

This documentation brings together the historical knowledge, personal experience, and visions gathered during the conference in the workshops and panel discussions. It also includes shortened versions of the presentations by Marina Grasse and Jennifer Ramme.

The first day of the event was dedicated to listening to different perspectives on 1989: who were the actors and what were their hopes and visions of social change? The second day was focused on today, on the status quo and on how activists encounter billings driven by right-conservative and nationalist movements. Visions for change in today’s societies and attempts to influence socio-political developments were shared. The final day was spent on “developing democratic anti-bodies”: on discussing how to act, create alliances, and find common grounds.

The four parallel workshops complementing and deepening the talks and panel discussions were dedicated to more specific topics. They dealt with Visions for Societies in Europe; Fundamental Rights, Constitution and Democracy; The Economic Transformation of Property and Labour and The Communication between State and Society: the Policy-Forming Processes and Representation of Interests.

Summing up the conference’s discussions, as a closing event on the last day, participants split up into country groups and produced slogans that would voice a common message. The task here was to find common messages that would mobilize others and that would allow for alliances with other groups in society.

This written documentation uses the final day’s slogans as headlines under which the discussions and outcomes of the conference are summarized. Thus this text does not necessarily refer to the exact meaning that the country groups had in mind in the closing session.

Words in quotation marks and italics are participants’ voices; they have often been shortened for brevity or amended for clarity. Our aim is to portray the diversity of voices, heard at the conference. To this end, we have gathered voices from all different events at the conference, and placed them side-by-side in this documentation.

To all participants, moderators and contributors: thank you for your efforts at making this gathering of women so successful by bringing in your knowledge and inspiration! We will continue to develop visions and creative answers to the great challenges that we are facing.

“What I think about when I think of 1989? Women did a lot of work and then stayed home to let the men take over.” Conference Participant from Poland.
The question of the anchoring of democracy was addressed in many different ways: “We missed out on discussing what democracy meant,” a participant from the Czech Republic commented.

And a participant from Russia underlined how this disconnect between top and bottom, between the people making political decisions and the citizens living with these decisions, is replayed at the level of NGOs: “What happened in the 90s in Russia: a moment of a European foundation that invested in democracy: it was a provider-consumer approach. Probably most of us can explain to foreign European donors that our work is important, but I am not sure if we can explain to everyone in a local village that our work is important. We need to build understanding among our own citizens: this allowed the state to destroy civil society so easily because we didn’t have the support of the people we were supporting. We were providing services for a European foundation rather than building civil society and building a foundation for our work.”

One example for how people empower themselves to successfully fight the lack of representation of their issues was the Women’s Strike Movement in Poland, a grassroots movement that has so far successfully fought back against the government’s attempt to ban abortions. The Women’s Strike Movement understands itself as a “small town movement”, with leaders that aim to support others to do what they find necessary. This was an answer to the question of how to link the political processes at the grassroots and local level to the level of institutionalized decision-making.

The question of how to organize movements was mirrored by the question of language: what language can civil society actors use, what discourses can movements appeal to, when it comes to mobilization, politicization and self-empowerment? Here, there was an emphasis on concrete language: “Our (Czech Republic) strategy for raising awareness for local issues is to find a common language. Use specific examples to illustrate large issues: for instance, there is less water, there is a drought. We should try to connect different actors from different sectors and backgrounds, so that different people get to talk to each other. We need to combine different strategies because they are all important: direct actions, lobbying, campaigns. A broad range of activities.” But there was also the awareness that language depends on context and that in some contexts an appeal to wider discourses is helpful. A participant from Russia stated: “reacting to communities’ demands and showing how these can be solved domestically: many times activists stand up for local problems without understanding that they are

These two slogans encapsulate a net of questions that surfaced in many ways at the conference: was the consolidation of democracy after the transition of 1989/90 sufficiently anchored in the population? And so does democracy have sufficient local support in order for the principle of representation to be effective, the principle we understand as a hallmark of representative democracy? And if this is not the case, then what can we do—or what is already being done by the many local activists that came together for the conference?
connected to more general issues; they do not have this human rights view, for example: they don’t understand that the fish is rotten from its head; we have to unite more general ideas and have to show that their problems are part of our problems; we have to react to newly arisen problems with our answers, not the government’s answers.” The Women’s Strike Movement provided yet another angle, on a language that highlights the validity of the experiences of women rather than outsourcing expertise to others:

“Our movement does not use the human rights argument; we are a small town movement. We use everyday language. ‘My old man hit me so hard, I thought he was going to kill me’ and not ‘I am a domestic violence survivor.’”

Strategies and approaches to activism for democratic change differed from one country to another and from one context to another. Yet there is a common analysis that since the transitions, democratization has been very problematic. Especially in Russia and Poland, activists have fought back against repression and a conservative backlash. But it also became obvious that these challenges were themselves rooted in the development of civil society and the social movements since 1989.

One of the focuses of this workshop was the new constitutions that were drafted and/or passed after the transitions of 1989/90. In this workshop, a lot of historical knowledge was gathered on the constitutional history of Germany, Poland, Russia, and the Czech Republic. The questions that crystallized thereby also emerged in many other discussions at the conference: what is the connection between rights and justice? What does it mean if rights are “fixed” by law, but not filled with life? What does it mean for our trust in a democracy to have laws to appeal to?

In the GDR (DDR), the central roundtable (Zentraler Runder Tisch) formed in 1989 gave itself the task of drafting a new constitution and formed a commission for that purpose. With reunification already under way, the aim of this new GDR constitution was to “describe new social relations and to fix them as rights”. For the civic movements at the round table, it was clear that a new constitution was necessary in order for the GDR to be organised as an independent state under the rule of law that could face the FRG (BRD) as an equal partner in the negotiations for reunification. Unlike the FRG constitution, the draft constitution made no reference to God, and it upheld both the equality of men and women and the protection of the environment, as well as an emphasis on basic social rights. These elements of the draft constitution thus integrated many of the demands of the social movements existing since the 1980s. However, the draft came to be seen as a barrier to reunification and was tabled by the first freely elected parliament of the GDR in April 1990.

This slogan formulated by the Polish country group expresses concerns about the balance between institutional rights and lived social reality. There is not only a need for rights to exist as something that people can appeal to, but also for a lived solidarity and diversity. This question between formal elements (rights fixed in a constitution) and social reality (lived society and diversity) was one of the main themes of Workshop 2 on Fundamental Rights, Constitution and Democracy.
When the discussion on the link between rights, constitution and revolutionary visions turned to the Czech Republic, two themes emerged: that activism initially remained at the level of the civil, with Vaclav Havel’s “apolitical politics.” And that the giving of laws was postponed and not a priority. As one participant stated, “it was privatize first, and then pass laws,” which resulted in the “casino capitalism” of the 1990s. As in Poland, the current constitution lacks social laws, and there is, for instance, a lack of affordable housing: the problem is that “social housing isn’t at all solved at the level of the law.”

As for the situation today, there was a sense that rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of media, which were fought for in the 1980s and 1990s, were again under threat today and had to be fought for once more—for instance, by appealing to the constitution. Democracy is again something we need to fight for. But there is also the phenomenon of rights being abused by right-conservative and nationalist movements—one example that participants saw here was the problem of “internet trolls” that seek to destabilize activist movements and that rely on both freedom of speech and freedom of media to evade any legal consequences. So with regards

“A new Polish constitution was passed narrowly in a referendum in 1997; very few people participated. “We missed out on the political euphoria of the early 90s,” someone from Poland put it. Into the new constitution, the Catholic Church, which had played a prominent role in the dissidence movement, was able to introduce its concerns such as the protection of marriage; “Poland was no longer a secular state,” one participant described. The sense was that with the new constitution, the erosion of women’s rights in today’s Poland began—such as the government’s recent attempt to ban abortions, which was successfully fought by thousands of Polish women and their supporters. “Today’s problems are a result of the failure of the 90s: the Church’s role in the dissident movement; now we pay for it with women’s rights.” And there was the discussion of what the new constitution failed to fix as rights. In the case of Poland, the lack of social rights was emphasized, and someone connected the rise of the right-wing political parties in Poland to this: “There are not enough clauses...about social provisions. People were acknowledged for the first time by populists.”

In Russia, the question was: we have a constitution, but it isn’t filled with life. There are rights, but what meaning do they have? A new constitution was passed in the early 1990s, but the sense was that little was known about the discussions of what should be included in this constitution. The “simple people were not involved,” only those higher up. When discussing the status of the constitution and its laws today and its importance for the work of socio-political actors, different voices emerged. One participant stated that “Today, in Russia, people demonstrate for the constitution to be upheld: we have to get back to the constitution.” But someone else said: “It doesn’t mean anything if something is in the constitution. In practice, in my work, we make as little reference to the constitution as possible.” And there was again the question of what the constitution fails to cover: in the case of Russia, for instance, a law against domestic violence does not yet exist and participants talked about a current court case against three sisters that killed their abusive father, which is being watched very closely by Russian activists.

“But they also need to be lived.” Conference Participant from Russia

Poland’s round table also led to the institution of new rights, which were an expression of the most important themes of the civic movements: “freedom first, then sovereignty of the state, and then democracy”, as a participant put it. The results of the round table negotiations included amongst others half-free elections, changes in parliamentary rights, the strengthening of the constitutional court, access to media and the reinstating of Solidarnosc as a union.
to rights, also new questions were asked such as: how far should certain rights go?

New constitutional grounds were laid in 1989, and these continue to exert great influence on systems and institutional orders today. Movements in different countries refer to the constitutions to a different degree. Still, it was an important part of the conference to discuss and gain further knowledge of very basic constitutional elements that shape our political contexts. This encouraged participants to reflect on the basic principles that used to matter to them and continue to do so.

One of the themes running through the conference was the economic transformations that ran parallel to the political transformations that occurred in 1989/1990 and the years to follow. There was the sense that today’s situation and today’s problems have just as much to do with the economic changes that occurred as with the political ones. But were these economic changes acknowledged, debated, and analysed in the same way as the political changes? Or are they often left out of the discussion when we reflect on the upheavals of 1989/90?

The economic discussions at the conference comprised many different themes such as changes on the labour market, privatization, and the question of the commons, and the question of climate justice. A concept of an alternative economic system was brought into the discussion by some of the participants, proposing a form of common-ism, neither returning all power to the state nor leaving all power to the private market.

When discussing changes on the labour market that occurred after the transitions, there was a sense that women were especially affected by the changes. Someone from Poland observed: “During the transformation, anti-women behaviour of new employers started: they wanted young pretty women and then it became obvious during the interview for getting the jobs. First of all, regarding your plan to have children, they would ask: what does your mum do? Can she take care of grandchildren?” And again an experience from Poland: “Suddenly, labour contracts were replaced by short-term contracts (one month, two months). So when I discussed with people, they said: I have never had a proper contract. Also, the government and outside forces such as the World Bank were pushing women to be businesswomen. The clear message to women was: if you are forty, you are too old to be an employee. The only way for you is to be self-employed. For instance, a teacher of foreign languages. And just like that, the previous culture of a stable situation disappeared.”
They think that the freeing of totalitarianism has to do with the liberalization of the market. When you start talking about the control of common and natural resources, they call you a Stalinist.” In the Czech Republic, “the public discourse is very similar to Russia: if someone talks about public control or community ownership of resources, it is shamed as socialist or communist.” But the vision of an alternative economic system was fuelled by very concrete suggestions that found a middle way between giving all power back to the state and leaving all power to the free market. For instance, there was the example of the Berlin water table, a democratically organised local network of activists fighting the privatization of water. What we need, a participant from Germany said, is “a real organization from below. A very practical solution without any great strategy. Like in 89, when people took matters into their own hand because there was an institutional vacuum. Suddenly, very normal people without any leading positions tried to basic-democratically organize a concrete process.” And a voice from the Czech Republic: “We are not discussing 1989 anymore, but I think the idea of self-realisation, not back to state ownership…but to build a bridge back to 1989, when there was a life-flash: good practical solutions for concrete problems.” And someone from Poland spoke of an important initiative at the local level: “for example, in Warsaw and many other cities, there is a participatory budget. People from the local community decide what they would like to have and submit their proposals,

This falling away of secure employment was closely tied to the privatizations that occurred and that were a big topic at the conference. One of the questions here was: how did privatization occur in the different countries? In the GDR, there was the Treuhand organization. In Russia, when it came to the privatization of state factories, “there was a voucher-system so that workers had a share in their factory, but these were immediately bought up by people in the know who accumulated shares and power.” When it came to the privatization of housing, things were similar: “in Russia, when privatization started, many parents sold their flats because they didn’t know about their rights. People became homeless: there were street children in the 90s. It affected the poor groups the most: women and children.” In the CSSR, the rule was “privatize first, and then pass laws.”

“There was blind belief in the invisible hands of the market.” “The economic transition was characterized by chaos, the old system so quickly destroyed without knowledge of how to build a new one.” The sense was that everyone was just “unprepared”: as someone from Russia puts it, “there was no discussion of the good or bad sides of the market economy,” and so people found themselves thrown into a very different and very difficult economic situation.

But though many people experienced chaos and deprivation during the 1990s, it took a long time for the neo-liberal model to be challenged. For instance, in the Czech Republic, “the question mark only came 10 years after 1989”: in 1998, when the social democratic party appeared and when people started to see the results and understood that the invisible hands of the market were not a solution, but the problem. “But by then, everything was already stolen...by the invisible hands!”

Discussions then turned to the question: what to do about this situation? For giving everything back to the state does not seem to be a solution either. Participants emphasized the continuous distrust in the state that prevails in their countries. “In Russia, people were so upset about the Soviet system that they ran all over to the private part: the belief is that things are managed much better by private companies; the private will manage resources much better, there is no corruption. So there is the risk that just everything will be privatized in Russia. From my experience, it is so difficult to challenge privatization: people mix the political with the economic. They think that the freeing of totalitarianism has to do with the liberalization of the market. When you start talking about the control of common and natural resources, they call you a Stalinist.” In the Czech Republic, “the public discourse is very similar to Russia: if someone talks about public control or community ownership of resources, it is shamed as socialist or communist.”
mixed reactions to Fridays for Future and the movement for climate justice mainly driven by the young generation in her country, the Czech Republic: “politicians say we are manipulated. We face a lot of hatred.” And someone from Russia concurred: the idea in Russia is “Greta is controlled by some evil West.” In this connection, the question arose whether women played a special role in the debate on climate justice. The participant from Fridays for Future underscored that it was very meaningful for the women in the movement that the movement itself was led and started by a young woman.

There was also the emphasis that the theme of the environment was already an important theme in the 1980s—examples include the “Prague Mothers”, who came together to fight for a better quality of air in their city. Groups of environmentalists in the GDR fought for the reduction of heavy industrial pollution, which led the committee on the draft of a new GDR constitution to include the right to a clean environment. Lastly, there was an awareness of how environmental ideas are being co-opted and abused by right-conservative groups, for instance, the Anastasia movement that a participant from the federal state of Brandenburg spoke about.

The focus on the economic changes that occurred as part of the transitions of 89/90 thus allowed for another angle on the upheavals and their aftermath and the situation today. It also showed the importance of thinking economic changes in tandem with political changes, and of the mutual impact between politics and economics. And it made room for a vision of profound change, and for many examples of how change can occur from the bottom up.
the big changes, we immediately forget feminist issues. This happened in the 60s: the big problem was the problem of power. In upheavals, one doesn’t consider the feminist position because other questions of power come to the foreground: the relations between black and white, poor and rich, but not man and woman. There is always a competition between the different structures of power.”

“I WOULD BE HAPPY TO JOIN THE GENDER ISSUE, BUT I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT NOW TO FIGHT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT.” CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM CZECH REPUBLIC

The gender discussion at the conference embraced many different topics. Here, the focus will be on the following three: the discussion of women’s lives under Communism, the discussion of what happened to women after the transitions, and the discussion of what is going on today.

What was the position of women under Communism? This question led to many different perspectives. There was the observation that in the CSSR, “women were proud that socialism helped them go out of the victim position; they could study, work. That was told to us by these old women who were interviewed. Socialism gave more to women than to men.” Someone added: “in the GDR, women had a lot: childcare, work. There was even the legal preferential treatment of women: in the case of divorce or separation, the kids and apartment would go to the women.” And: “In the GDR, I worked in science. I needed only to say: I’m ready and they would give me work. After ‘89, I would be told that I had a husband and a home. I learned to deal with it.”

But there was also the theme of a disconnect between a “proclaimed equality between men and women” and a reality, in which women were shouldering the double burden of paid work and unpaid care-work. There was a lack of discussion of who did the care-work. The idea of women as the “avantgarde of the East”, someone else stated, served to romanticize what was often a very difficult life. “My mother had no time to sleep,” someone from the Czech Republic described. And there was also the recognition that there was a lack of support for “alternative lifestyles”: “the single mom position was much more difficult,” someone from the Czech Republic stated. And someone from the GDR: “what did not find any consideration were other kinds of living: women without children, lesbian women, a woman who had fallen in love with a man from Armenia; this diversity wasn’t at all considered.”

This slogan embraces a tendency prevalent throughout the conference: to think across topics and to create alliances not only between countries, but also between actors working in different fields. It also highlights a question that came up at various times: “should specific women’s questions be discussed separately or as part of a wider group of challenges in a time of great socio-political changes?” And there were many different answers to this question. On the one hand, there was the worry that women’s issues get side-lined in times of transitions: “during
Another focus was on the discussion of the role of women during and after the transition. Did women have a specific role in the processes of change and did they manage to retain it? “In CSSR, after the transition, women did not have a specific role. Everyone thought that freedom and democracy would be enough. During socialism, women had a role in the group: there were intellectual women, workers,... so no, the question of women was not very important during the transition.” Someone from Russia concurred: “Women’s interests were seen as secondary issues. Even today, nobody thinks that it’s part of the democratic process to talk about women’s issues.” “In Russia, after the ‘90, the strategy is to be a mother.” And someone from Poland stated: “In Poland, we tried everything for the benefit of women: bills on gender equality and so on. They all failed. What made a difference was Poland’s joining the EU.”

There was a strong sense that women who had been previously active during the transitions retreated from the public sphere. Why was this so? There were two sets of answers: first, “women were tired.” “When I look back 30 years ago, I was tired for this struggle of power in the New Forum.” “In Poland, after ‘89: women left politics. Why? They had achieved their goals and wanted to leave space for colleagues. They also said they didn’t want to go against the Church and their fellow dissenters.” But there was also another explanation: that there were systemic reasons for women’s withdrawal from the public sphere: “It was a consequence of reunification. In the GDR women’s factories were closed and women’s infrastructure was organised through work. When work fell away, isolation happened. The structures to resist and to communicate broke away. It took a while for new structures to form. Without work, there was no childcare...all this was understood as personal failure.” In the Czech Republic, “the government had the idea: we will hide the unemployment if we give maternity leave of up to 4 years.” And also from the Czech Republic: “conservative men entered politics and declared ‘the freedom to be a housewife.’ Many institutions such as childcare closed.” And someone from Poland mentions the situation today: “Now I am very worried that women are given money for children; now they will withdraw from the labour market. But I also understand: a lot of work is not exciting. I understand this decision, but it will have consequences in the future.”

The way in which after the transition, patriarchal structures solidified and conservative forces took root was an important theme. And the question: what can we do about it? Many suggestions were small-scale solutions: for instance, the idea of job sharing that would make it easier for women to assume positions of power. The importance of childcare was emphasized and the importance of examples of women that hold high positions in society. But there was also another debate on whether if women were to hold positions of power, they’d do things differently. And here, one conclusion was that the structures of power would not make it possible for women to act differently. As one participant put it, “it’s not the case that women are any better humans. There are a lot of women on the right. Margaret Thatcher cut down on all social benefits. When we talk about ‘women power,’ we have to distinguish it from patriarchal structures. There are a lot of women that have found a very cosy place within patriarchy and that benefit from it enormously. So we as women have to think about what kind of structures we want, what kind of work, what kind of economics, ... We need a different system that takes care of creation, of dignity, of equality. These are feminist structures for me.”

The discussion of gender thus wove together past (the situation of women before and during the transition) and present and offered a very complex picture of what happened back then and what is happening today. It also championed the importance of individual voices and individual experiences and highlighted how different these experiences can be – between countries and between generations, but also within countries and generations.
Participants observed the special difficulties of being an activist in Russia: “it is such a big country and groups are isolated: we need to create more networks for mutual support, not to feel alone and to understand that there are people who stand up for you. We have to do permanent work with those young people most vulnerable to propaganda: most young people get their information from state-influenced sources.” But activists also emphasized how much work was already being done: how “in Russia, young people vote with their feet!” by protesting out on the streets or leaving the country. And how despite outside repression, there is still space to act: “We need to work with peers: many women in Russia are afraid to be active and even though they share our values, they wouldn’t join the protests: so we need to show them that yes, there are things to be afraid of, but there is a lot of us and we can all work together. Don’t be afraid and stay active.”

The theme of Russia and its position vis-à-vis other countries and Europe was another thread running through the discussions. In particular, there was the sense of a double isolation that activists in Russia face: within their own country and within Europe. Spaces for activism are shrinking within Russia, for instance, with the government’s taking control of financial resources and expecting “to be paid with loyalty.” And this is aggravated by the threat of the general isolation of Russia within Europe, another important topic of discussion. And yet activists stake a claim: we also belong, we will not leave.

The focus was not only on the isolation within Russia, but also on Russia’s situation within Europe and here, a very complicated picture emerged. There was the sense that relations changed significantly after the transitions, breaking isolation and making contacts to other countries possible for the first time. At the same time someone from Germany remarks: “I had the impression that during reunification, people were so busy with themselves: everything was suddenly cut off, also relations to other countries which were so important before. Suddenly, it was ‘off to new shores’ and we were no longer interested in the political development of former neighbour countries, for instance, Russia. But we had such similar political developments and we should acknowledge these as the basis for a peaceful coexistence.” Participants emphasized the importance of being connected to fellow activists from outside of Russia. When asked to give feedback on the conference, someone stated: “I had some different visions of Europe and it was very important and interesting to hear about the experience of Socialist collapse. It came later in the Soviet Union, so it was very important to me to hear these earlier stories. To me, the main result is that we could build connections that are directed to the future, because really: the problems we are dealing with are very similar, but we all use different tools. And how did you all achieve your success – because your success is tremendous: comparing what you have done to what we have done.”
Many people commented on the uneasy relationship between Russia and their own country today, and also on their own uneasiness vis-à-vis Russia. “I am not proud of this, but I have to realize how far from my mindset Russia is,” someone from Germany admitted. There was also concern about Russia’s situation today. As someone from Germany said: “I deeply regret that after the transitions, the Soviet Union/Russia was pushed out of Europe. It was clear to us how much we had the Soviet Union to be thankful for. There was so much that was undignified: the way the Soviet Army was treated, for instance. All the things that happened in the 90s: the Eastern expansion of NATO. Even Putin was initially very open to Europe. But then Russia was pushed farther and farther, and so, as a result, Russia isolated herself. And so the bogeyman of Russia became again the new bogeyman. Back then we missed out on a huge opportunity to rebuild the common house Europe together with Russia.” And someone from Russia spoke about the difficult relations between Russia and other countries in the following way: “Concerning the relationship between Russia and Europe, there are a lot of mixed feelings having to do with history. Russia is a very aggressive colonial empire and that should be clear especially when we talk about Eastern Europe as a symbol of hope or as examples of how things could be done differently. But when we speak of international solidarity, we shouldn’t just say: this is evil Russia, evil Putin, but think about how on the individual level, we tend to reproduce the same hierarchies and dynamics.”

During some moments of the conference, the relations became very visible between actors from different historical contexts. Thus the conference provided a good opportunity to uncover the different perspectives as well as some of the blind spots and mutual ignorance—all of which are an incentive for further work and collaboration.
and social consequences of the transitions of 1989/90 and environmental issues. The perceived similarity of the problems faced by women at the conference was seen as a base for solidarity and as a bridge to overcome the isolation felt by actors, especially those from Russia within their own country and within Europe.

Solidarity was also discussed as a vision for creating solidary communities, by way of changing existing social and power relations in response to people’s basic needs that are also anchored locally. Here we encountered feminist approaches to searching for ways of changing patriarchal power structures. Some conference participants found a common vision of a necessary deep-rooted system change; others emphasized the necessity to widen the scopes of action for women within existing power structures in order to take on an active role in the transitions happening right now.

“I AM ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL FOR THE CONNECTION TO RUSSIA—IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, I’VE NEVER HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET TO KNOW RUSSIAN ACTIVISTS.”
CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM CZECH REPUBLIC

When asked what they were leaving with, participants emphasized the feeling of solidarity created through the encounters at the conference: between countries, within countries, and between different activist groups. For some, the end of Communism had also meant the end of solidarity and interest amongst the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Others felt that the end of Communism meant the creation of new relations—for instance, new connections between OWEN and its partner organizations in the 1990s. The conference gave women a chance to take up both old and new threads of connection. Content-wise, more connections were discovered than expected. For instance, the Polish experience of fighting for women’s rights such as the right to abortion was seen as crucial for all women in all countries because in all countries, the threat of a conservative or right-wing turn was perceived. However, other broader political topics also emerged as common themes. Those included the economic

“I AM SO HAPPY TO BE HERE BECAUSE AS AN ACTIVIST, I FEEL ISOLATION. THE REST OF EUROPE FEELS FEAR OF RUSSIA AND WE INSIDE RUSSIA DO NOT FEEL THE SUPPORT OF OTHER PEOPLE IN EUROPE. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO FEEL SOLIDARITY BECAUSE IT IS ALSO ABOUT FEELING THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE AND MAYBE THAT WAY WE CAN DO SOMETHING.”
CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM RUSSIA
The emigration movement
By signing the CSCE Final Act in 1975, the GDR had committed itself to respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. This also included freedom of travel and emigration. From 1977 onwards, GDR citizens were able to apply for an emigration permit. Between 1961 and 1988, more than 380,000 people officially left the GDR, about 222,000 people left the GDR by routes of escape, prisoner trade or not returning to the GDR from an approved visit to the West. The waves of emigration had dramatic consequences, especially through the devastating loss of well-trained skilled workers and academics. Although felt by everyone throughout the entire GDR, these consequences were neither publicly mentioned nor discussed.

Actor groups in the 1980s
Despite, or perhaps because of, the relatively high standard of living compared to other Eastern Bloc countries, the dissatisfaction of the people in the GDR grew in the 1980s. Their lack of individual liberty, freedom of the press, democratic basic rights, as well as the progress of socialism constantly heralded by party and state leadership had increased the distance to the state to the point of estrangement for many people. The party and state leadership feared that reforms could get out of hand and ultimately challenge the party’s single predominance.

Women as actors in the upheavals of 1989/90
Presentation by Marina Grasse
(shortened version)

There were many women who entered the political stage during the period of upheaval of the GDR (the German Democratic Republic) in 1989/90 and who helped to set into motion the “revolution from below”. The majority of these actors had already become politically active in various opposition groups in the 1980s and were co-founders of the civic movements set up in the fall of 1989.

The peace, human rights, and environmental movement critical of the state
Another counter-movement that was important for the upheavals and changes of 1989 emerged in the early 1980s with the peace, human rights and environmental groups that were critical of the system and independent of the state. Many women and men emerging from these groups founded civic movements and new parties from autumn 1989 onwards.

Similar to the Federal Republic, the GDR also saw the emergence of a peace movement independent of the state, which opposed any form of rearmament and militarization. In particular, the Protestant Church and its congregations played a key role in its emergence, work and development.
The first peace groups in Berlin were formed in the parish of Alt-Pankow (with Pastor Ruth Misselwitz) and the Samaritan parish (with Pastor Reiner Eppelmann). Further peace groups were established in the early 1980s in other cities of the GDR such as Halle, Erfurt, Jena, Dresden and Leipzig.

After the failure of the peace movement and the beginning of the stationing of modernized medium-range missiles in both German states, new groups were formed from 1983 onwards. They linked the issue of peace more closely with human rights and environmental problems, referring above all to the Final Act of the CSCE. The issue of human rights, which was extremely sensitive for the party and state leadership, increasingly directed the vigilance and destructive efforts of the state security organs towards those human rights groups that they considered to be particularly “negative and hostile”. In Berlin, these groups included the “Frieden und Menschenrechte” (“Peace and Human Rights”) initiative, the group “Gegenstimmen” (“Countervoices”), the “Kirche von unten” (“Church from Below”), the Berliner Umweltbibliothek (Berlin Environmental Library), the group “Absage an Praxis und Prinzip der Ausgrenzung” (“Rejection of the Practice and Principle of Exclusion”) and the Friedenskreis (Peace Circle) of the Samaritan Community.

The majority of peace, human rights and environmental groups were “mixed-gender”, as was the case with the group “Pankower Friedenskreis” (Pankow Peace Circle). An exception was the women’s group “Frauen für den Frieden” (“Women for Peace”) which was organized in October 1982 as a reaction to the new GDR military service law. The law stipulated that women could be drafted into military service in case of mobilization. The “Frauen für den Frieden” formed a nationwide network and opposed the militarization of society with letters of protest and other actions. The groups were in contact with each other and with women’s peace groups in Western Europe. From the mid-1980s onwards, feminist groups and lesbian groups increasingly took part in the networking meetings. This expansion led to conflicts between women from feminist groups and those who saw themselves primarily as “political” groups. For some, women’s issues and the criticism of patriarchy were central. For others, criticism of the system was central; they saw themselves first as part of the peace movement and only then as a women’s group. The diversity of the women’s backgrounds and motives led to conflicts, but also made it possible to establish links with other peace, human rights, environmental, feminist and lesbian groups.

There were also comrades within the SED who, as academics, worked on concepts for the opening and democratization of socialist society, such as the project group “Moderner Sozialismus” (“Modern Socialism”) at the Humboldt University of Berlin. However, there was virtually no contact between these “reform groups” and the peace, human rights and environmental groups, and if so, only on a personal level.

Many actors had learned to debate in the opposition groups. They had learned to defend their political convictions even against resistance. Many were able to overcome the feeling of political and social isolation and became simply “braver”. Nevertheless, in 1989, when events came thick and fast, no one was prepared to suddenly step into the spotlight of the public at large and assume political power and responsibility for the future of the GDR.

Groups of actors in 1989 and 1990

In 1989, the political systems in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the GDR collapse. In the GDR, the protest against SED policies and the power apparatus spreads from the private sphere and semi-public sphere to the whole of society. New political actors and groups of actors emerge. Representatives of the old bloc parties, such as CDU, LDP, NDPD, who supported the previous policy, reorient and reposition themselves and enter into new alliances. The party and state leadership are disempowered, and new power structures emerge in favor of the old bloc parties.

The developments are coming in a rapid succession at this state. In what follows, I will outline them in several stages.
A new start between May and August 1989
Local elections are held in the GDR on 7 May. For the first time, an alliance of peace, human rights and environmental groups succeeds in proving the falsification of the election results and making it public. There are growing and continuing protests nationwide. Security forces take massive action against the expanding demonstrations, which provokes further protest. Outrage grows when the SED leadership publicly supports the suppression of the protests on Tiananmen Square in Beijing in June 1989 as an act against counterrevolution. After the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria, from summer onwards many thousands of emigrants and refugees turn their backs on the GDR. This emigration movement can no longer be stopped.

A radical change in the revolutionary phase from September to December 1989
From September to the beginning of December 1989, new political actors come together and new forms of action emerge.

In September, the “Neues Forum” (“New Forum”) publishes its founding proclamation. This is followed by the formation of other civic movements, such as “Demokratie Jetzt” (Democracy Now”), “Demokratischer Aufbruch” (“New Democratic Beginning”), “Vereinigte Linke” (“United Left”). The initiators and first signatories come largely from the peace, human rights and environmental groups that emerged in the 1980s. Their common goal is to achieve social dialogue and to persuade the GDR leadership to undertake fundamental social reforms. They want democracy NOW, political pluralism, free elections and thus the end of the SED’s sole claim to power and monopoly of power. However, at least in this phase there is not (yet) any talk of the “abolition of socialism” and the unification of the two German states.

The “Neues Forum” is particularly popular. Its founding proclamation begins with the sentence “In our country, the communication between state and society is obviously disturbed.” The “Neues Forum” aims to be a “political platform” for broad democratic dialogue. It is concerned with building a democratic, ecologically sustainable society that allows for competition but not for unchecked growth, social injustice and exploitation of economically weaker countries. The proclamation touches the nerve of many people. As of the beginning of October, 10,000 people have already signed it. The proportion of women in “Neues Forum” has been very high from the outset, in contrast to other new civic movements such as “Demokratie Jetzt” and “Demokratischer Aufbruch.” Not having been involved with any opposition group before 1989, the physicist Angela Merkel joins “Demokratischer Aufbruch,” which merges with the block party CDU in August 1990.

On 4 September, the big Monday demonstrations in Leipzig begin. For the first time, banners are carried with the demand for an “open country with free people”, freedom of assembly and association. In other cities of the country, too, thousands take to the streets to demonstrate for democratic reforms and free elections.

On 7 October, the SED celebrates the 40th anniversary of the Republic in Berlin with great pomp. High-ranking guests of state are invited – including Michael Gorbachev. On the fringes of the official celebrations, there are parallel demonstrations with calls such as “We are the people”, “No violence”, “Gorbi help us”, and “Neues Forum”. After the departure of the state guests, police and security forces proceed with brutal and random attacks. At the Monday demonstration in Leipzig on 9 October, 70,000 people demonstrate for political reforms, shouting “We are the people”. The situation is extremely tense, but the protesters remain peaceful. From that day on, security forces are no longer deployed against the demonstrators, and the events come thick and fast.
For the first time, the Politburo of the SED declares its willingness to engage in dialogue and announces proposals for a broad discussion on “attractive socialism”. Erich Honecker resigns, with Egon Krenz becoming his successor as Secretary General of the SED and Chairman of the State Council and announcing the beginning of a “turnaround”. The population, however, no longer believes in a “turnaround from above” but has set out to bring about a “turnaround from below” with the motto “We are the people”.

On November 4, the largest – approved – mass demonstration in the history of the GDR takes place on Berlin’s Alexanderplatz, initiated and organized by theater artists of the Deutsches Theater and members of the “Neues Forum.” Hundreds of thousands demand reforms, free elections and freedom of expression.

Even after the resignation of the entire GDR government and the opening of the Wall on 9 November 1989, demonstrations continue throughout the country. Thousands of GDR citizens continue to leave the country. At the end of the month, first in Plauen, then in Leipzig, the call for “Germany United Fatherland” grows louder.

The entire government resigns before the end of November. Hans Modrow is elected as the new Prime Minister and forms a new government, which agrees to convene a round table with the representatives of the opposition, following the Polish model. Representatives of the two Christian churches are to take over the moderation.

On 3 December, the entire Politburo and Central Committee of the SED step down from their functions. The same evening, hundreds of women gather at the Berliner Volksbühne. The national “Unabhängiger Frauenverband” or UFV (“Independent Women’s Association”) is founded at the initiative of the “Lila Offensive”, which was founded in October, among other new women’s initiatives. A manifesto has already been prepared with the title: “Without women there can be no state”. Behind this slogan is the fear that women’s political interests will not be taken into account in the political changes underway. In the calls and programs of the new movements “Neues Forum”, “Demokratie Jetzt” and “Demokratischer Aufbruch”, as well as in the program of the Social Democratic Party founded on 7 October, women’s political interests were not mentioned.

The approach of the UFV is political. Paramount is the creation of a modern socialism in the GDR in a “common European House”. This involves the ecological reorganisation of the economy, democracy, an open multicultural society and coexistence in solidarity. In distinction to most other new movements, the majority of the initiators come from the SED or SED-related environment and the “reform wing” within the party. The UFV brings together very different actors from different women’s groups. It wants to be a collective movement, platform and action alliance, but at the same time aims at being a direct political AND feminist actor. To combine both in this time of tumultuous events is an enormous strategic challenge that holds a lot of potential for conflict.

In order to be able to participate in the elections to the GDR’s People’s Chamber, the UFV is officially founded as a political association in February 1990 and enters into an alliance with the Green Party.
At the beginning of February, the Modrow government presents a concept entitled “Für Deutschland einig Vaterland” (“For Germany, United Fatherland”), including a step-by-step plan for the road to “German Unity”. The plan calls for a contractual community, then a confederation and then the transfer of sovereign rights to the confederation. Modrow travels to Bonn with a government delegation and asks the Kohl government for an immediate loan. Chancellor Kohl rejects any immediate aid and instead promises economic aid after the People’s Chamber elections and the formation of a new GDR government.

At its final meeting on March 12th, the Round Table rejects the achievement of German unity through accession to the jurisdiction of the Constitution (“Grundgesetz”) according to Article 23. The results of the People’s Chamber elections on 18 March 1990 are a clear vote for the fast track to German unity intended by Chancellor Kohl and propagated and massively supported in the run-up to the elections. The conservative electoral alliance “Allianz für Deutschland” (“Alliance for Germany”), consisting of the former bloc party CDU, the newly founded DSU and the “Demokratischer Aufbruch” receives just under 41% of the vote, while the newly founded social democratic party receives just under 21%. The alliance of civic opposition movements suffers a bitter defeat with 2.9% of the vote. The electoral alliance of Greens and UFV receives 2%.

From the beginning of 1990, the governments of the FRG and of the Western Allies increasingly influence the progress and the enormous acceleration of further developments. The United States in particular has a strong interest in accelerating and shortening the path to German unification because of a fear that Gorbachev’s domestic power is under threat. In particular, the intention is to move the Soviet leadership to give up its resistance to unified Germany’s membership of NATO, the Western military alliance. In July 1990, that time comes. At a meeting with Chancellor Kohl in the Caucasus, Gorbachev gives his consent to unified Germany’s independent decision on its alliance membership status. At this meeting, Kohl pledges to the Soviet leadership economic aid and a loan in the double-digit billion range.

At the end of 1989, the economic situation in the GDR becomes extremely difficult. The GDR economy is about to collapse. The migration of 2,000 GDR citizens to the West every day exacerbates the situation from day to day. The calls on the streets for “United Fatherland” and soon also for the D-Mark are getting louder and louder. There are first mass strikes. The tone of the Monday demonstrations that continue to take place changes as the motto “We are the people” gives way to the call for reunification: “We are one people”.

In January, the government and the Round Table agree to bring forward the elections to the People’s Chamber to 18 March. After the CDU leaves the government, Modrow forms a new government of national responsibility, which includes eight representatives of the opposition groups and new parties. 

Power sharing between government and opposition from December 1989 to March 1990

This phase begins with the convening of the Central Round Table on 7 December 1989, with the “new forces” of the opposition and the civic movements on one side and the “old forces” with the bloc parties represented in the People’s Chamber on the other. At its very first meeting, the Round Table mandates a working group to draft a new constitution to be submitted to the People’s Chamber after the first free elections for the People’s Chamber set for 6 May 1990.
Conclusion

Many women entered the political stage during the phase of revolutionary upheaval in autumn 1989 in the GDR. They were founders and co-founders of civic opposition movements and new parties. However, they did not succeed in asserting women- and gender-specific interests in the newly constituted patriarchal-conservative power relations, which were dominated by a majority of men. “No state can be made without women” was the motto of the Independent Women’s Association. However, the events of the upheaval of power and of the system in the GDR in 1989/90 (unfortunately) suggest otherwise. It is up to us women to learn from this history for present and future attempts at fundamental social renewal for the wellbeing of present and future generations.
The biggest change since 1989 has taken place in the fields of culture, art, media and also language. The presence of women and feminist perspectives, the use of feminine forms, as in the designation of professions, were still unusual in the 1990s and androcentrism was the invisible and self-evident norm. In this respect, both language and consciousness of the people have changed. And it has become more natural that women act as subjects and represent their perspectives.

As a result of the upheavals in the late 1980s and after 1989, many different grassroots movements mobilized with the belief that they could make a difference.

When I compare the situation back then with the situation today, while things have gotten worse (e.g. the destruction of nature, the rise of the far right, the dismantling of structures of social care or the restriction of reproductive rights), I also find that a lot has changed for the better over the past 30 years. These changes have by no means come about naturally or by themselves, but are the results of many years of work by various actors. For example, violence against women and sexualized violence in general have long ceased to be a taboo subject. Much has been done in the health sector and thanks so campaigns such as “Birthing Human(e)ly” (Rodzić po Ludzku), the care of pregnant women has improved. EU labour law has changed the legal basis and gender mainstreaming has been implemented at various levels and in practice by institutions and various non-governmental organizations, or at the least gender perspectives have been increasingly taken into account. However, a major problem remains the lack of implementation and enforcement of the principles of equality.

Democratic upheavals in Poland
30 years after 1989: a feminist perspective
Presentation by Jennifer Ramme
(shortened version)

When I began to become active as a feminist in around 1993, I was part of an alternative movement in Poland. In this movement, we believed that we were living in a significant time in which it was possible to reshape society, to actualize utopias and to organize new forms of living together, which would embody both an alternative to neoliberal capitalism and to authoritarian state socialism. From today’s perspective, some of these ambitions and desires sound naive; at the same time, the need for these alternatives has become more urgent than ever.
The women’s movement, including the Polish women’s strike, expresses solidarity not only with these struggles, but also with many others such as the movement of people with disabilities and their caretakers, the movement for the protection of democracy and the movements against environmental destruction.

The central motif in the rhetoric of the Right is the demand for a change of elites and the moral renewal in the spirit of national-Catholicism. The family and the female body are transformed into a border regime where the morality and the reproduction of the nation are guarded. Many of you who are active in other contexts may now notice the resemblance to right-wing rhetoric in your own country. In fact, this pattern is also present in other countries according to which those who advocate gender democracy are portrayed as extraterritorial power threatening the “authentic” or “ordinary” people. The Europe-wide campaigns against so-called “gender ideology,” fuelled amongst others by the Vatican, are examples of the transfer of strategies and discourses, but also of the transnational character of the anti-feminist and anti-democratic backlash. In some countries, including Poland, such rhetoric and right-wing national circles have become rampant. However, not only governments and parties are behind this change; there are a large number of even more radical non-state actors. At the same time, solidarity with LGBTQ* people is growing in Poland.

Politically speaking, there were three major backlashes in which the national-Catholic side and with it the Catholic Church gained considerable political power in the elections: 1989, 2005 to 2007, and 2015 up to today. These backlashes were accompanied by attempts to restrict women and LGBTQ* rights; each coincided with the periods in which the national-Catholic faction of the political party spectrum came to power. Currently we are in the phase of the third backlash, which is threatening to become a long-term condition. When in 2005 the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power as part of a coalition, it proclaimed the so-called “IVth Polish Republic” (IV Rzeczpospolita), while claiming that there had been no political change after 1989 since “Communist elites” had continued to rule the country, which had formed an alliance with neoliberal forces.


2 See in more detail the contribution by Ramme, Jennifer (op. cit., expected 2020).

Many of the achievements of the gender-democratic milieu, which involved years of work, have been scaled back or limited in their impact since 2015. With a view to our meeting and the gathering of different generations of feminist activists, one thing is especially important to mention, however, and that is the attempt in 2016 further to tighten the abortion law of 1993, which was already restrictive. Paradoxically, this drastic bill of the ultra-right and Christian fundamentalist organization Ordo Iuris was also a gift because (as most of us here know) in October 2016, it caused hundreds of thousands of women to go to the barricades. Among the population, support for the women’s strike (OSK) was enormous. This was followed by the emergence of a new broad women’s political movement and the mobilization of new actors*, also in small towns and rural areas. Even for many Catholic women, the bill went too far. The internet and social media made possible a very broad mobilization and networking of individuals. New alliances and forms of organizations emerged. At the protests, emotions play a major role and feminist politics is once again increasingly linked to personal experience. This is sometimes the biggest difference to the past. The internationalization of the movements followed, for the problems present in Poland are also present elsewhere. That’s why it’s a matter of joining forces and practicing solidarity across national boarders. Each of these struggles, be it local, national, or across borders, is enormously important because it is only in the plurality and diversity of these efforts in different areas that comprehensive social change can be achieved.

4 See the study on the Polish Women’s Strike by Ramme, Jennifer and Snochowska-Gonzalez, Claudia (2018): “Solidarity despite and because of diversity. Activists of the Polish Women’s Strike”, Praktyka Teoretyczna 4(30)/2018.
An event organised by OWEN e.V. in collaboration with Friedenskreis Pankow, Gender Studies Prague, Public Verdict Foundation and Foundation for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights “Don Women”