



brooding women of the West - not to the bluestockings of communism. Ignoring problems was communism's way of solving them. Thus, there was no official unemployment in the lands of socialism - or drugs, or AIDS, or unhappy women. To borrow from psychodynamic theories, Communism never developed "problem constancy". To many, women included, communism was about the perversion of the "natural order". Men and women were catapulted out of their pre-ordained social orbits into an experiment in dystopy. When it ended, post communism became a throwback to the 19th century: its values, mores and petite bourgeois aspirations. In the exegesis of transition, communism was interpreted as an aberration, an interruption in an otherwise linear progress. It was cast as a regrettable historical accident or, worse, a criminal endeavour to be vehemently disowned and reversed. Yet again women proved to be the prime victims of historical processes, this time of transition. They saw their jobs consumed by male-dominated privatization and male-biased technological modernization. Men in the CEE are 3 times more likely to find a job, 60-80% of all women's jobs were lost (for instance in the textile and clothing industries) and the highest rates of unemployment are among middle aged and older women ("unemployment with a female face" as it is called in Ukraine). Women constitute 50-70% of the unemployed. And women's unemployment is probably under-reported. Most unrecorded workers (omitted from the official statistics) are women. Where retraining is available (a rarity), women are trained to do computer jobs, mostly clerical and low skilled. Men, on the other hand, are assigned to assimilate new and promising technologies. In many countries, women are asked to waive their rights under the law, or even to produce proof of sterilization before they get a job. The only ray of light is higher education, where women's participation actually increased in certain countries. But this blessing is confined to "feminine" (low pay and low status) professions. Vocational and technical schools have either closed down entirely or closed their gates to women. Even in feminized professions (such as university teaching), women make less than 20% of the upper rungs (e.g., full professorships). The tidal wave of the rising cost of education threatens to drown this trend of women's education. Studies have shown that, with rising costs, women's educational opportunities decline. Families prefer to invest - and rationally so - in their males. Women witnessed the resurgence of nostalgic nationalism, neo traditionalism and religious revival - social forces which sought to confine them to home, hearth, spouse and children and to "liberate" them from the "forced labour" of communism. Negative demographic trends (declining life expectancy and birth rate, numerous abortions, late marriage, a high divorce rate, increasing suicide rate) conspired to provoke a "we are a dying nation" outcry and the inevitable re-emphasis of the woman's reproductive functions. Fierce debates about the morality of abortion erupted in bastions of Catholic fundamentalism (such as Poland and, to a lesser degree, Lithuania) as well as in citadels of rational agnosticism, such as the Czech Republic. Curiously, prostitution and women trafficking were accepted as inevitable. Perhaps because they catered to masculine needs. Indeed, in feminist lore and theory, both nationalism and capitalism are "patriarchal". Nationalism allocates distinct and mutually exclusive roles to men and women. The latter are supposed to act as homemakers and have babies. Capitalism encourages the formation of impregnable male elites, disseminates new technologies mainly to male monopolies, eliminates menial and low skilled (women's) jobs and puts emphasis on masculine traits such as aggression and competitiveness. No wonder female political representation in parliaments and governments diminished dramatically since 1989. When powerless, under communism, CEE parliaments were stacked with women. Now that they are more potent elected bodies, they are almost nowhere to be seen. The few that infiltrated these august institutions are relegated to "soft" committees (social issues, usually) devoid of budgets and of influence. It is very much like under communism when the decision making party echelons were predominantly male. The only influential women then were dissidents but they seem to have rejected the fruit of their labour, democracy, in favour of tranquility and peace of mind - or to have been usurped by an emerging male establishment. Despite an education in economics, they are under-represented among business executives, the owners of privatized enterprises and the beneficiaries of favourable pay regulations and tax systems. This erosion of their economic base coupled with the drastic decreases in child benefits, in the length of maternal leave, in the number of public and, thus, affordable child care facilities and in other support networks led to a swift deterioration in the social status and leverage of women. With their only effective contraceptive - abortion - restricted, maternal mortality exploded. So did teenage pregnancy - a result of the curtailing or absence of sex education. The rate of sexually transmitted diseases went through the roof. Violence against women - rape, spousal abuse, date rape - became epidemic. So did skyrocketing street prostitution. Widowed women - an ever more common phenomenon in CEE - are destitute and reduced to begging as the pensions of the lucky ones are ground to nil by a rising cost of living and IMF prodded stinginess. There are also more quotidian problems (often neglected by the media hungry and soundbite craving feminists) like pitiful divorce maintenance payments or decrepit maternity wards in crumbling hospitals. Yet, women's reaction to all this was notable in its absence. After decades of forced activism and imposed altruism, the imported Western individualism mutated in CEE to malignant egotism. A sliver of the female population did well in local government and as entrepreneurs. The rest (especially the old, the rural, the less educated) stayed at home and seemed to fancy this novel experience of dependence. A generational divide emerged. Younger women discovered the joys of conspicuous consumption and mind numbing pop "culture". They constituted the masses of career opportunists, the new managerial class, shareholders and professionals - a pale imitation of the yuppies of America. Older women retreated - heaving a sigh of relief - into home and family, seeking refuge from the intrusion of tedious public matters. Economic realities still forced them to seek a job and steady income (often in a family business or in the informal economy, with no job security or regulated labour conditions) but their activism vanished into newfound and demonstrative reclusiveness. Yet, even the young entrepreneurs often fare badly. They lack the necessary business skills, the knowledge, the supportive infrastructure, or the access to credit. The older women cannot work long hours, lack skills and, when officially employed, are expensive, due to the burden of the still effective social benefits. Thus, women can be mostly found in services, light industry and agriculture - the most non lucrative sectors of the dilapidated economies of CEE. And speaking of the social benefits not yet axed - their quality has deteriorated, access to them has been restricted and supplies are often short. The costs of public goods (mainly health and education) have been transferred from

state to households either officially (a result of the commercialization of services) or surreptitiously and insidiously (e.g., patients required to purchase their own food, bed sheets and medication when hospitalized). To blame it all on a botched transition is now in vogue. Yet, many of the problems facing the wretched women of CEE were evident as early as 30 years ago. The feminization of poverty is not a new phenomenon, nor is the feminization of certain professions and the attendant decline in both their status and their pay. Under communism, women felt as exhausted and as guilt-ridden as they feel today. They were considered unreliable workers (which they were, what with a lifetime average of 10 abortions and 2 children). Their offspring endured an alienated childhood in the brutal and faceless gulag of day care centres maintained by indifferent bureaucrats. Juvenile delinquency, a high divorce rate, single motherhood and parasitic fathers were all swept under the ideological carpet by communism. Even communism's only achievement - the inclusionary workforce - was an elaborately crafted illusion for consumption by wide-eyed Western intellectuals. In the agrarian societies which preceded communism, women worked no less. And women were not allowed to work night time or shifts or in certain jobs, nor were they paid as much as men in equal functions. Job advertising is sex-specific and sexist to this very day (in stark violation of dead letter Constitutions). Discarding the baby with the leaking bathtub has been a hallmark of transition. Communism has done a lot for women (one of its very rare achievements). Some of these foundations were sound and durable and should have been preserved to build upon. Yet the apathy of women and the zeal of power hungry men converged to yield an old new world: patriarchal, discriminatory and iniquitous. The day of CEE feminism will come. But first, CEE has to become more Westernized.

### About the Author

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited" and "After the Rain - How the West Lost the East". He is a columnist in "Central Europe Review" and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory, Suite101, Go.com and searcheurope.com. He is the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia. His web site:

<http://www.geocities.com/vaksam/>

Source: <http://www.serverforever.com>