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Abstract

This article investigates the role of women's organizations and activists in the electoral breakthroughs in Serbia and Croatia in 2000. When, how, and to what effect, it asks, did women organize during transformational moments to promote their goals of political liberalization and gender equality? I argue that political opportunities—shaped by the domestic constellation of forces and international assistance programs—are essential to explaining political success. I identify what I call the insider/inclusionary strategy that characterizes women's organizing in Croatia and the outsider/oppositional strategy that characterizes women's organizing in Serbia. These strategies resulted in different immediate outcomes for women's political equality in the electoral breakthroughs in Croatia and Serbia.

A further conclusion of this study focuses on the impact of US assistance programs. The US government has funded women's organizations and gender equality activists to the tune of millions of dollars a year throughout the world. A main purpose of this article is to evaluate the impact of such assistance as part of the larger effort to assist democratic transformations in Croatia and Serbia. This study suggests that the overall purpose of democracy assistance programs during electoral breakthroughs produced favorable conditions for women's organizing on behalf of women's increased political participation. By focusing on building movements, rather than on funding NGOs for limited projects, which has been the operation mode of international assistance in such neighboring areas as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, these programs had the potential for strengthening women's organizing. This, in turn, appears to have had a larger impact on women's status through the legislative process in the months and years after the electoral breakthroughs.