

Reinstating International Women's Day in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Politics and the Specter of Communism

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On March 8th 2004, the Czech Republic recognized International Women's Day (*mezinárodní den žen* in Czech—commonly referred to as MDŽ for short) as a state-recognized holiday for the first time since before the Communist regime fell in 1989. Its recognition fell squarely in line with the norms of the United Nations and the European Union, the latter of which the Czech Republic would go on to join later that year. The day is approached by these supranational organizations, along with the many countries in which it is actively celebrated, as a time to bring attention to women's achievements and promote women's rights domestically and around the world. Its recognition passed the parliament as part of a bundle of commemorative holidays, so-called "meaningful days" (*významné dni*), which included a day honoring "victims of the Holocaust" and "victims of the Communist regime". However, it was MDŽ that captured the attention of the news media.

Throughout the debates in parliament over whether or not to reinstate it, and in the days leading up to its first official postsocialist celebration, national newspapers and tabloids ran a multitude of articles, editorials, opinion polls, and interviews on the topic. For example, on March 8th 2004, *Mladá fronta dnes*, one of the largest national papers, provided a forum for a number of commentators to weigh in on the issue under the heading "Should we celebrate International Women's Day?" In each case, the author chooses a side—either "yes" or "no" and goes on to elaborate their argument. The newspapers gave a forum for a variety of public figures—politicians, celebrities, women's NGO members—to weigh in on whether or not postsocialist Czech society should celebrate the holiday. In doing so, they shaped a widely circulated set of competing discourses about not only constructions of the Communist past, but also the gendered, national, regional, and supranational political imaginaries of the contemporary era. In this paper I analyze the debate that took place in the national newspapers between late 2003 and March 2004 about whether or not the Parliament of the Czech Republic should reinstate International Women's Day. I argue that this debate demonstrates the ways in which narratives of the socialist past continue to be employed in service of arguments about current social and political concerns in the postsocialist Czech Republic. I show that both proponents of and detractors of the reinstatement of International Women's Day as a state recognized holiday strategically narrate its origins and symbols in ways that reinforce their respective positions and downplay those aspects that detract from their persuasiveness.

The proposal to reinstate MDŽ was a flashpoint for debate and provided grounds upon which members of the major political parties, as well as feminist activists, could clarify their differences in perspective. The fact that a number of very different actors found MDŽ to be such a useful political tool signifies the richness of its meaning—not just for the past *per se*, but also for very present societal debates. The passage of the bill reinstating MDŽ took place only a few months before the Czech Republic's May 2004 entrance into the European Union. The bill passed with the support of pro-EU then-Prime Minister Vladimír Špidla and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), and was in line with many other initiatives related to the promotion of gender equality and harmonization with EU norms. Among its biggest detractors were members of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the main rivals of ČSSD and the party of self-proclaimed

“Euro-dissident” President Václav Klaus. From the very beginning, the debate over International Women’s Day was infused with the political concerns of the day.

The holiday has been recognized by the United Nations since 1975 and is supported by the European Union governing bodies as being in alignment with their larger program to promote gender equality within member states.¹ International Women’s Day is a small part of the larger agenda of these supranational governing bodies to promote gender equality worldwide. In a press release on March 5th 2004, for instance, the European Commission Vice President for Administrative Reform explained International Women’s Day as “a time to focus on the needs, opportunities, accomplishments and potential of women the majority of people in the World and in [sic] our continent and to renew commitment to the advance in equity that still needs to be achieved.”² Similarly, the United Nations envisions the day as a global celebration of women and their “struggle for equality”:

International Women’s Day (8 March) is an occasion marked by women’s groups around the world. This date is also commemorated at the United Nations and is designated in many countries as a national holiday. When women on all continents, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to celebrate their Day, they can look back to a tradition that represents at least nine decades of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development.... Increasingly, International Women’s Day is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of women’s rights.³

In both cases, the holiday is presented as part celebration, part call to renewed action on behalf of women’s rights worldwide, and is framed as the continuation of a century-long “tradition” of working to promote gender equality in countries throughout the world. These pronouncements present the holiday as a sign of broad consensus among diverse nations (and diverse women) that it is important to strive for gender equality. At the same time, these statements also offer a cautionary tale: women have contributed so much to society, but if societies do not continue to work together to improve their lot, their potential will be lost. March 8th provides a day on which policymakers can affirm their commitment to the promotion of gender equality, while also affirming their commitment to the supranational organizing or governance through entities such as the European Union or the United Nations. Implicit in this message, however, is the idea that there is also a broad consensus on the nature of gender equality and the means to achieve it. The controversy surrounding the reinstatement of MDŽ in the Czech Republic is indicative of the wider friction between supranational norms and the implementation of those norms on the ground as the European Union expands.

In the postsocialist Czech context, it is feminist activists who first began to commemorate International Women’s Day with an event called Global Women’s Strike in 2001 (Kapusta-Pofahl, Kolářová & Hašková 2005; Kolářová 2004). The activist group that first commemorated the day in the postsocialist era, named Feminist Group of March 8th, had close ties with both the burgeoning feminist nongovernmental organizational sphere and the anarchofeminist movement. Their program, which they publicized through fliers and tables set up in public places around Prague, was based on an intersectional critique of sexism, fascism, racism, and capitalism. The Global Women’s Strike, which was connected to an international activist campaign, took place

in the center of Prague, on *Náměstí míru* or Peace Square, and consisted of musical performances, a fire show, speeches, children's activities, and free vegetarian food.⁴ The event took place at a leisurely pace, from afternoon until well past dark, as attendees clustered in conversation or sat on the steps of the cathedral that is the centerpiece of the square. This celebration of International Women's Day was a far cry from those commonly experienced before 1989. The organizers of the event handed out informational brochures that detailed their position regarding women's rights throughout the world and made an argument about the ways in which capitalist systems perpetuate sexism: "We live in a system founded on inequality and exploitation. We refuse to scramble for profit, ruthless competition, social inequality, and the consumerist way of life. We demand a society founded on equality and social justice regardless of sex, age, ethnicity, nationality or sexual orientation" (2001). The specter of the Communist regime did not loom large in this first celebration. Rather, the movements and discourses informing MDŽ 2001 were very contemporary manifestations of the anti-fascist, feminist, and anti-globalization movements of the turn of the twenty-first century. Although they were not aligned with any sort of government, national or supranational, the sentiments that the organizers of the 2001 event expressed echoed the understanding of International Women's Day by the United Nations as a day for recognizing persisting inequalities facing women around the world. Like the UN, the Global Women's Strike called for worldwide solidarity among women. Unlike the UN, and especially the EU, however, the Feminist Group of March 8th wove a critique of capitalism into their commemoration.

Linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal argues that discursive narratives are not simply conveyors of static information, but rather are actively shaped by the political contexts in which they are circulated. According to Gal, "A central property of language is its ability to be chunked, disengaged from its current environment only to be quoted, parodied, alluded to, cited, ventriloquized, or in other ways reinserted elsewhere" (2004: 96). As a result of this flexibility, narratives about the meaning or origins of the ideas or events at stake are employed by the various sides in a debate such as the one surrounding International Women's Day in the Czech Republic through the filter of what Gal calls the "language ideologies" of the speakers. Gal further argues that discourses regarding social change are particularly sensitive to these recontextualizations. "In such cases," she writes, "proposing an 'origin' for a text—either temporally or spatially—is already a political act" (2004: 97). Throughout the debate leading up to, and including, the inaugural celebration of MDŽ on March 8th 2004, policymakers and feminist activists utilized the supranational discourse of International Women's Day as a holiday focused on drawing attention to and pushing for remedies to discrimination against women globally in their statements of support. However, they found themselves hindered by a widespread association of MDŽ with what are often called the "organized" or "obligatory" celebrations sanctioned by the Communist Party during the socialist era. This association appears in both the statements of detractor politicians and in those of celebrities and ordinary people alike. Although it is unclear whether those who participated in the debate were riffing off of popular sentiment or shaping it, it is clear that the debate became framed by narratives remembering past celebrations. In any case, the debate over the reinstatement of International Women's Day in the Czech Republic was firmly situated in reference to the socialist past.

The most common argument made by detractors was that the goals of the holiday may be laudable in foreign contexts, but it has been irreparably "profaned" or "deformed" by the Communist Party in the Czech context. For many, strong evidence for this position lies in the ways in which the holiday had been celebrated in the past. These narratives describe an absurd

obligatory celebration in which men gave women flowers and thanked them for their work, then went out to get drunk. Having been thanked, the women continued on with their double burdens of employment and domestic responsibilities and nothing changed. One author of such a piece put it particularly succinctly: “During the Communist Regime women got soap and men got drunk. Meanwhile, it was officially argued that women’s wages were a mere supplement to men’s; therefore they logically must be lower”. She goes on to say that MDŽ is “a holiday where once a year the superior bow to the inferior” (*Lidové noviny*, March 8, 2004). The flowers are symbols of the emptiness of the regime’s gestures toward the “emancipation” of women. The problematic nature of this “emancipation,” well enumerated in scholarship and literature on the double and triple burdens borne by women during the socialist era, is here represented by the giving of gifts instead of any meaningful assistance or redress, or even recognition, of the inequalities that existed between women and men in socialist Czechoslovak society. When detractors assert that the holiday is hopelessly “profaned” by the Communist Party, they are tapping into a well-recognized discourse of Party double-speak—pomp and circumstance but no substance. From this perspective, MDŽ is a hollow gesture that is useless for making any real change in society. Therefore, its detractors argue, there is no reason to reinstate it as a state holiday since it has been irreparably tainted by the actions of the Cold War era Communist leadership.

For their part, the politicians and feminist activists that support MDŽ propose to reframe the meaning of the day away from carnations and soap and toward political messages about the need for continued attention to gender inequalities at home and around the world. In an early response to criticisms of the push to reinstate the holiday, the then-director of the most well-known feminist NGO in the country explains the affiliation of the day this way: “It is a joke—perhaps sad—that International Women’s Day is not a communist holiday, it was only misused by them” (*Mladá fronta dnes* November 4 2003). She does not contest the idea put forth by detractors that International Women’s Day had been profaned by the Communist regime. Instead, she and other proponents make the argument that the meaning of the holiday is much more profound than flowers and praise. For instance, the (male) then-Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, a member of the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), says: “It [MDŽ] is a reminder that equality for women still does not exist. We are trying to remedy that. For instance, we are giving space to fathers so that they can participate more in the raising of children” (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 8 2004). Another politician explained, “MDŽ isn’t about women getting flowers. It is a holiday of solidarity with the situation of women in countries where their rights are suppressed” (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 8 2004). In an editorial in *Mladá fronta dnes*, a feminist sociologist asserts this position more forcefully:

Let’s not celebrate MDŽ traditionally where the man brings home to the woman a flower and praises her for bringing him his slippers so well. This holiday means a celebration of the fact that women can vote in elections or be entrepreneurs. This holiday should be celebrated by the same women whose holiday it is. Along with this, they should remind [people] that their discrimination still exists and the fight for equal rights is not yet won. [*Mladá fronta dnes* March 9 2004]

International Women’s Day does not have to be chained to the socialist past, she suggests. Instead of continuing with past practices, the day should be used to emphasize women’s achievements and remain attentive to their continuing struggles. Another proponent points out in

an editorial that the argument about the day having been irrevocably profaned by the previous regime is a red herring. After all, she argues, the 1st of May remains a state recognized holiday. She writes, “During totalitarianism in our country Labor Day was profaned far more than MDŽ. However, we don’t work on May 1st and we are not going to let them take that comfort away” (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 8 2004). Arguments such as these in support of the day stress that, despite the ways in which it was celebrated in communist Czechoslovakia, the holiday has deep roots in laudable goals such as the fight for voting rights and better working conditions for women at the turn of the 20th century.

Proponents and detractors alike draw the origins of the day into their larger arguments as they make their case. Those who do so emphasize particular aspects of the history of International Women’s Day and minimize others, while the widely accepted history of International Women’s Day combines elements of them all.⁵ As Susan Gal points out, “Origins are multiple and the version activated in any instance is constructed within already exiting political debates” (2003: 117). In their framings of the origins of the holiday, proponents use a couple of strategies. One is to explain the holiday’s origins in terms of the West and the United States, rather than its socialist roots. Another is to stress its relationship to women’s rights, such as voting rights, instead of its ties to the socialist labor movement. For instance, when asked about her opinion on MDŽ, a 58 year old retiree explained: “I definitely don’t consider MDŽ to be a communist holiday, because it was not founded here [u nás], but in America” (MFD March 8th 2004). For this reader, the fact that the day was established in the United States removes it from the context that is widely defined as problematic by proponents and detractors alike; if it had originated in the United States—the polar opposite in the Cold War to the Communist Soviet Bloc—the day gains the benefit of the doubt from its association with the capitalist West.

In an editorial piece, one senator from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) went beyond the argument that the day has been profaned by the Communist Party to argue that the day is inherently Communist. He goes on to argue that the holiday was never anything other than propaganda for the Communist Party. He says that the date of March 8th was not chosen until after the 1917 Russian Revolution and therefore, “Who established the date? Lenin? Krupskaja [Krupskaja]? The Supreme Soviet? I’m not going to dig into it. But it is certain that MDŽ has always been a Bolshevik holiday”. He goes on to acknowledge that the holiday is celebrated in other parts of the world, ostensibly despite its problematic origins, but asserts that he is not swayed by the argument that the holiday is celebrated in democratic countries, because they did not have 40 years of a “monstrous Communist regime [whose] totalitarian power... was such that a holiday that is thought well of in the free world was completely discredited in our country” (*Mladá fronta dnes*, March 8, 2004).

The day was founded in the United States, but by socialists. It was promoted by women’s rights activists, but also embraced by Lenin. The day was founded to assert women’s right to suffrage and better working conditions in Europe and the United States, but is also said to be one of the protests that ignited the Russian revolution. According to feminist historian Temma Kaplan, the precursor to International Women’s Day was first established in New York City in 1909 as National Woman’s Day. The day was organized by the US Socialist Party on the heels of several years of demonstrations in favor of woman suffrage by the socialists (Kaplan 1985). In some of the Czech newspaper coverage of the history of the day, a garment workers’ strike is mentioned as the impetus for the establishment of the day. According to this article in a major national newspaper, MDŽ originated when “in March 1908 a large strike started in New York” when “about fifteen thousand garment workers went out into the streets” (LN March 6th

2004). However, Kaplan argues that the story of a garment workers' strike had been in circulation among feminists in Europe for years, but that there is no evidence that it actually took place. Despite this, the story of the garment workers' strike provides the day with an origin rooted in indignity against brutality against female workers who were struggling for their rights: "Allegedly a brutally repressed New York strike of female textile workers on March 8, 1857, had led to a rally in commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary in 1907. Neither event seems to have taken place, but many Europeans think March 8, 1907, inaugurated International Women's Day" (Kaplan 1985: 164-165). However, perhaps ironically, International Women's Day events are in fact associated with the start of the Russian Revolution.

Another point at which the story of the origin of International Women's Day is translated as mostly feminist rather than socialist is during the negotiations in Europe over when to instate the holiday. In the Czech media debate, the director of a high-profile feminist NGO explains the context of the establishment of IWD in Europe as a decision made among feminist activists at an "International Women's Conference in Copenhagen in 1910" (*Mladá fronta dnes* November 4 2003). "In 1911," the feminist NGO director goes on to explain, "the celebration was carried out in Germany, Denmark, Austria, and Switzerland in the spirit of demands for voting rights for women". However, in his telling of the origin story, the ODS senator explains this meeting by emphasizing "the close links between the founders of International Women's Day and the socialist Second International", which he says "was the cradle of Leninism... The conference of socialist women was the offshoot of the large Copenhagen congress, which had to cover up its real purpose for meeting, ergo the destruction of Capitalism". In her telling of the history of the holiday, the feminist NGO director frames it as primarily a feminist, rather than socialist, endeavor, while the senator draws upon the history of the holiday to emphasize its socialist connections and downplay its feminist ones. In fact, both commentators are referring to what Kaplan describes as "the International Socialist Women's Meeting that preceded the general meeting of the Second International in Copenhagen in August 1910" (1985:166) at which the establishment of an International Woman's Day was proposed. In fact, two years before, in 1907, the Second International had "passed a resolution declaring that all socialist parties fight for women's rights" and created the International Women's Secretariat with Clara Zetkin at the helm (Wood 1997). On March 18th 1911, the first official International Woman's Day was celebrated in Vienna in support of woman suffrage.

The founders of International Women's Day were both fighters for women's rights and devoted socialists. One woman who had a great influence on the historical trajectory of International Women's Day was Clara Zetkin, a German Social Democrat and women's rights supporter. Zetkin plays a crucial role in the establishment of International Women's Day, from early meetings of the Socialist Second International to the 1920s where she worked to convince Lenin to establish International Women's Day as an official Communist holiday, which he did in 1922 (Kaplan 1985; Wood 1997). In Russia, Aleksandra Kollontai had been active in integrating feminist concerns into the socialist movement. According to Wood, Kollontai was inspired by Zetkin's work in 1907 and was motivated to intensify the promotion of women's rights within the Bolshevik movement (1997). In 1917, Kollontai was instrumental in organizing an International Woman's Day demonstration protesting sharp increases in the price of basic foodstuffs. Kaplan writes:

Taking the occasion of International Woman's Day (March 8th in the West, but February 23d on the Gregorian calendar), women led a demonstration from the

factories and the breadlines.... Thus began the February revolution in Russia. By March 12 (Gregorian February 27), Czar Nicholas II had been forced to abdicate. The provisional government formed to rule until the election of a constituent assembly became the first government of a major power to grant women the right to vote. [1985: 169-170]

The protest sparked military reprisal and was one of the key events in the Russian Revolution.

The historical contexts surrounding the origins of International Women's Day differ from country to country. In the United States, the day was associated with the first wave of the feminist movement as a time to push for women's voting and other civil rights. As the twentieth century progressed, feminists in the US moved away from International Women's Day as a platform for expressing their demands, while in Europe and Russia the day gained momentum.⁶ Further, whereas in the US the day had been taken up by the feminist movement, in Russia and later in the Soviet sphere of influence, as the day was embraced by Lenin and the Bolshevik movement and carried on by Soviet leaders, it was promoted as a socialist day instead. As many scholars have pointed out, the relationship of Marxism-Leninism to feminism has always been strained (Sayer 1998, Wood 1997). Although the Soviet socialist movement embraced the idea of women's "emancipation" from the chains of the domestic sphere, it did not embrace a feminism that distinguished itself from the cause of the proletariat. With its origins in the bourgeoisie of Europe and the United States, feminism as such did not necessarily have a Marxist perspective on "what was to be done." As a result, Soviet socialists, and later the Communist Parties of Eastern Europe, disavowed feminism but stressed the commitment to women's emancipation for the good of socialist society.

The difficulty for proponents is that the history of International Women's Day is both feminist and socialist, American and Soviet. This poses some complications for those in postsocialist countries such as the Czech Republic whose discourse of the past has included widespread discursive vilification of not only the Communist regime and Marxism-Leninism, but anything related to Marx or socialism more broadly (Rosenberg 1996). Although there is growing support for the contemporary Communist Party in the Czech Republic, there remains a prevalent view of the Party of the past that emphasizes its absurdity and its Orwellian nature. One of the legacies of the Cold War is the notion of the polar East-West binary. International Women's Day challenges that binary and as such is illustrative of many larger unresolved tensions. This problem is exacerbated by the commonly shared perception that the Czech Republic had been suspended in time during the socialist era, only to be brought back into the present after 1989. The history of International Women's Day challenges this perspective by drawing connections and continuities between the socialist movements of the pre-Cold War United States and the aims and approaches of the post-Cold War "integrated" Europe.

Even the symbolism of giving flowers to women on MDŽ is more complex than it seems at first glance. An undercurrent of the debate over International Women's Day in 2004 was coverage of the country's florists and cut flower industry. From this perspective, the reinstatement of International Women's Day is seen as a welcome opportunity to make a profit on flower sales. Although people are accustomed to buying flowers for a variety of occasions, "...even Valentine's day and Mothers' Day together do not bring in what International Women's Day did," states a representative of the Union of Florists and Flower Shop Owners (*Mladá fronta dnes* May 22 2003). International Women's Day was particularly good for business, explains a florist who would like to see the return of the holiday, because "women would come to it who

are not mothers.” In “Flower Shops Look Forward to MDŽ, Expect a Surge of Customers,” an article printed a couple of days before the first celebration of the rehabilitated MDŽ, a florist explains that “We don’t have MDŽ orders for whole companies like we did during communism, but it is slowly returning.” According to the flower industry, MDŽ is good for business.

Whether they are arguing that International Women’s Day has been profaned by the policies and practices of the leadership of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, or that the day has its roots in Soviet socialist ideology, detractors who make these arguments use the power of the negative image of communist ideology as their weapon to dissuade the public from supporting it. Unlike the debates in the 1990s that took place in postsocialist countries about the role of women in society, this debate does not feature prominent arguments for women to “return” to the domestic sphere (Fuszara 2000; Pine 2002). Like them, however, they suggest that the Communist leadership got it wrong about women and that their approaches were flawed at their core. Often, detractors simply relied on the force of the anti-Communist argument to make their case. The irony of this is, perhaps, that at the same time as detractors imply that women were neither truly equal—nor treated fairly—during the socialist era, they refuse to affirm the view that women are in need of remediation in rights and opportunities in Czech society today. The implication of this argument is that Czech society does not need to celebrate International Women’s Day because the problems related to women’s inequalities were caused by the Communists. The Communist Party is no longer in power. Therefore, these detractors suggest, the issues it was preoccupied with are no longer relevant.

While most detractors focus on the ways in which MDŽ was celebrated as a hollow obligatory holiday during the Communist regime, some suggest that International Women’s Day is simply the wrong holiday to celebrate, and propose an alternative—Mothers’ Day. In their letters to the editor or answers in polls, some detractors suggested that Czechs would be better off celebrating Mothers’ Day instead of International Women’s Day. Supporters of Mother’s Day stress the fact that recognition of the day was outlawed by the Communist regime, implying that therefore this would be a more appropriate postsocialist holiday. Further, those who suggest the celebration of Mother’s Day offer up a conservative understanding of the role of women in society. For example, in response to being asked whether she will celebrate the reinstated International Women’s Day, a (female) member of parliament from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) states:

I celebrate Mothers’ Day. When my husband remembers, I get flowers. I don’t celebrate MDŽ; it’s a relic of the communist era. The way I understand the fact that the president signed it into law is that he probably didn’t want to fight with the government over something so unimportant. [*Blesk* March 8 2004]

Although this politician describes celebrating Mothers’ Day in the same manner as International Women’s Day had been celebrated, it appears that she does not view recognition of her status as a mother as inherently problematic and finds Mothers’ Day acceptable because it is not tainted by association with the Communist regime. This view was voiced by others as well. In the words of one 40 year old woman in a letter to the editor, “Mother’s Day is a much more pleasant holiday, which has been a tradition here [*u nás*] since the 1990s. I consider a woman to be a mother and a being who preserves the lineage and who takes care of the family” (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 8 2004). The act of celebrating women as mothers is in contrast to the approach of the feminist and socialist movements to acknowledge women as people—whether as a distinct

class deserving of rights or as a subset of the larger working class that should not be exploited. Since women are often closely associated with the nation and the reproduction of tradition, it is no surprise that Mothers' Day could be embraced by those with more conservative leanings. In socialist societies, the question of how to conceptualize women as (potential) mothers as well as workers caused a great deal of political consternation (Gal & Kligman 2000; Goven 2000; Kligman 1998; Wood 1997). In this thread of discourse, the idea of celebrating woman as mother is offered up as an "untainted" alternative to the rhetorical women as political collective that were the subject of emancipation efforts during the socialist regime. Accordingly, while MDŽ celebrates women as women, Mother's Day celebrates women's reproductive contributions to society. The focus is taken off of gender inequalities or women's achievements in non-reproductive spheres and transferred to the subgroup of women who become mothers. Further, Mothers' Day does not offer the opportunities for political action of the scope that has been advocated by proponents of International Women's Day.

Some supporters of the holiday also view it as an occasion to honor or please the women in their lives for working within the status quo. For instance, according to an article about a man who supports the recognition of MDŽ, "Women have earned a holiday, they have more work" (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 9 2004). In fact, for all of the commentary about the emptiness of the gesture of giving women flowers, when the day came, that is exactly what many people did. As one newspaper reported on March 9th 2004, "Even those who did not agree with its rehabilitation celebrated the newly re-established meaningful day" (*Mladá fronta dnes*). This headline was followed by a report from Northern Bohemia, where, "Yesterday [the regional mayor] bought more than 300 roses and gave them out to every female employee of the regional office, personally wishing them well on MDŽ. He was far from alone. In many flower shops, they were surprised by how large the response was to old-new holiday among men" (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 9th 2004). One local politician explains the reason that he handed out flowers to his female staff in a March 9th article this way: "I wanted to thank all of the women for what they do for us and what they sacrifice for us" (*Mladá fronta dnes* March 9 2004).

Several years after International Women's Day was reinstated as an officially recognized meaningful day, newspapers reported some significant changes in people's attitudes toward the day. On March 8th 2010, the weekly periodical *Týden* reported that a recent survey had found that although only a fourth of Czechs actively celebrate International Women's Day, two-thirds of Czechs think that it "makes sense" to celebrate it. Of those who celebrate the day, 18% chose to celebrate it as a chance to "do something nice for their loved ones" and 13% felt that "that day is rewarding women for raising children and care of the home." Further, "eleven percent sees it as a reminder of emancipation and the fight for equal rights" (*Týden* March 8th 2010). Of those who do not celebrate MDŽ, according to the survey, six percent would rather celebrate Mother's Day and four percent would only celebrate MDŽ if it were accompanied by an International Men's Day. There is evidence that despite its freedom from association with the Communist regime, Mothers' Day has not taken off as a major holiday in the Czech Republic in the years since the debates over International Women's Day. In fact, on May 10th 2008 *Lidové noviny* ran articles and interviews asking "Why don't we Celebrate Mothers' Day?" It appears that by 2010, the discourse around MDŽ has lost much of its rancor. After surviving an attempt by some senators to remove it from the calendar in 2007, there are indications that MDŽ is becoming something other than what it had been. Or rather, there are indications that space seems to be opening up in the meaning of the holiday for women's activists and gender equality-minded policymakers to use it as a forum to discuss issues affecting women both at home and abroad.

The debate over the reinstatement of International Women's Day published in the Czech newspapers is one case that demonstrates that the question of what it means to identify women as a social group, as a political collective, as symbols or ideals, is contingent on the negotiation and representation of present realities, past experiences, and future aims. The various interpretations of the relevance of the legacy of "actually existing socialism" continue to play a significant role within both political and politicized debates about the symbols that the state employs.

¹ For further information on supranational approaches to the promotion of gender equality, referred to as "gender mainstreaming", see Schmidt 2005 and Squires 2007.

² <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/04/305&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> accessed October 15th 2011.

³ <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm>

⁴ <http://www.globalwomenstrike.net/whoweare>

⁵ <http://www.internationalwomensday.com/about.asp>,
http://www.rferl.org/content/womens_day_feature_soviet_socialist_origins_100th_anniversary/2330712.html

⁶ <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/international-womens-day-a-centenary-to-celebrate/>

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Acknowledgements:

Research funding was provided by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunity Fellowship, and a David L. Boren Graduate Fellowship.