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Political Participation of Central & Eastern European female migrants living in London (Mayoral Election 2012)

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DRAFT (not to be quoted)

The actual act of registration for voting and voting itself in the local and European elections may be the most concrete and most easily measurable element of political participation amongst migrant groups, however the low figures in these two, what I would call, the end result involvements do not always accurately reflect and measure the engagement of migrants in other; non-electoral political activities (Barreto, Munoz, 2003) such as volunteering, attending meetings or donating to a political cause (The Electoral Commission, 2004) . As a result such measurements and the perceived (and even actual) lack of engagement in the voting process amongst migrant communities do not directly translate into low level or no civic and political engagement of migrants in the host society.

This sample study looks at Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants living in London and the paper is deliberating gender specific behaviours and attitudes related to the political participation, namely views and level of engagement of immigrant women in the recent London Mayoral election (May 2012). This is with the aim to provide a qualitative insight into trends and issues important to this group of women when considering their political alignment in their adopted country (city) and link to their 'former' political identity they brought from their country of origin. In addition it compares and contrasts views and attitudes of their male counterparts as well as maps it onto some existing contextual frameworks such as the assimilation theory and the concept of the 'myth of return'. The research employs a small sample from two focus groups of Czech and Slovak nationals, but also placing it into the greater community of the CEE migrant groups in London (Polish and Lithuanian nationals) by using some additional secondary data from focus groups of Polish and Lithuanians as well (Driver and Garapich, 2012). The contextual framework serves as a mapping device for questioning some of the assumption behind the normative assimilation theory (Alba, Nee, 1997 & 2003), but also the notion of the 'myth of return' (Reynolds, 2008) as a potential hindrance to the civic and political involvement and the difference it seems to show when applying these theories to men and women.

Some of the previous studies on migrants' political participation included Latino communities (primarily Mexican nationals) in the US, but also Cubans and other nationalities from Latin America

(Massey et al, 1986). More specifically dealing with inequalities in female political participation of various immigrant groups in Canada has recently been addressed by Bilodeau (2011), but also more generally global issues and challenges related to women's political involvement had been spoken of by Bari (2005) and many others. The particular attention by these scholars had been paid to females emigrating from considerably more patriarchal societies than the ones they have settled in and therefore the ideas of transferring these inequalities or attempts to iron them out had been discussed. Others (Mackay, 2004; Randall, 1987; Russell et al 2002) who debate the British political landscape with relation to the gender and political participation often commentate on the ethnicity as the most decisive and influential variable in explaining that despite continuous reduction in the overall voting gap between men and women, the reported turnout to the last UK general election still suggested that women from ethnic minorities were significantly less likely to vote than their male counterparts (The Electoral Commission, 2011). The white female migrants are rarely discussed as a separate unit; this may be due to an assumption (which many would contest) that their voting/political participatory behaviour does not vary great deal from those of British female nationals.

The post 2004 CEE migration to the UK has been plentifully debated on numerous platforms; however as the permanency of this migration wave is yet to be established so is the political cultures and gender specific trends in their political behaviour in the UK. Are the CEE women more likely to vote in the Mayoral elections (in comparison to their male counterparts and also in comparison to other female migrant groups as well as in comparison to the native British population)? Does the lack of engagement mean the lack of interest in politics in general or do they participate in different forms of civic engagement? Does the migrant profile (age, independent/single status) have a direct link to their level of engagement and what how does their political affiliation in the country of origin marry with their new political identity? Can this study verify or discredit the earlier claims (Zajacova, 2008) that CEE female migrants assimilate more easily into the British society than do the CEE males? These claims have been supported by some branches of the assimilation theory and it is something that is informally talked about amongst the migrants themselves despite the only anecdotal evidence pointing to this direction at this point.

Findings:

Out of 30 participants, just under the half were females and the great majority of CEE citizens that took part in the focus groups were not actively planning to vote in the upcoming mayoral elections. The reasons behind this was not the lack of interest in the process, but rather more practical reasons

of not being able to find enough time (due to extensive working hours which would be in line with now some relatively well established generalisations of the CEE migrants work ethic).

'...London is a busy busy place, I am constantly rushing to and from work and the last thing on my mind s to go actively out of my way to seek out relevant information in order to have some political knowledge....' (Slovak female)

The other factor that played an important role in not planning to vote was the lack of knowledge about the process of registering for the election, although some candidates admitted that they were made aware of the registration albeit this was more linked to the improvement of their credit ratings rather than for the actual intention to vote. As stated by Delli Carpini and Keeter in Bilodeau (2001) 'the knowledge and/or cultural barriers are the key elements in establishing immigrants' political opinion as 'acquiring a factual knowledge about the political system (or in this case about the actual candidates) is a central step in developing opinions' (:3). The female participants in particular expressed their potential intention to vote, but having had the lack of knowledge of the candidate's personality, which appeared more important to them than the policies or party they represented was one of the reasons why they did not feel they were in the position to take part in the voting process.

'...Not sure who would I go for and why.... not that I don't only know about their policies, but I don't actually know much about who they are...' (Czech female)

However, it was evident that more women than men knew how to register and were generally better informed about the bureaucracy involved in this process and although the majority of both genders were not going to vote, the women were more vocal about wanting to do so. Furthermore, both men and women viewed their primary purpose of their residence in London as economically calculated decision, the male participants were much more verbal about their role of a traditional 'breadwinner' and therefore primarily concentrating on maximising their income rather than being overly worried about other societal issues (that could have acted as incentives for getting involved in the mayoral debates). These were not much of their concern. In contrast, although all women were also actively participating in the British labour market and they have also arrived as independent migrants (not part of a family unit), they appeared to view themselves more as active citizens within the adopted society (Londoners) albeit not necessarily that their actual plans to stay were more permanent or more specific than that those of their male counterparts. The absence of the sense of permanency, which can be viewed through the 'myth of return' lens, was much more prevalent in mens' comments:

'...At the back of my mind I am thinking that I would not be based here long term'(Author's comment: He has been living in the UK – London for past 9 years) '.....and that is why I think that these things don't really matter to me; which perhaps is not the right attitude?!...'(Czech male)

Women in both groups seemed to find it completely essential to integrate into the British society in order to successfully participate in all aspects of private and public life in London and this was irrespective of how permanent or temporary were their migration plans. As a result of this attitude, the issues represented by each mayoral candidate seemed more of a concern to women than they did to men, who have also expressed some degree of interest in integration process (into the British society), however were much more negative about the actual probability of succeeding. Women on the other hand in general claimed relative overall satisfaction with the quality of their lives in London and hence saw no need to vote and change things. This was contrasted with the level of apathy often voiced by men that appear to have developed from not feeling included in the inner circle.

'.... to be honest, I am not thinking of voting as I live in London happily. Things work okay for me and because of that I have no desire to change anything...'(Slovak female)

As mentioned previously women little more, but men also were drawn to the candidates' personalities and as expected those more promoted by media and those given more media platform like Johnson and also to some extent Livingstone were lot better known to participants than the rest. The affiliation to the political left or right was not something either men or women felt particularly strongly about, but it was rather the personality of the candidate that seemed to be the determining factor in their decision making process (if they were to go to cast their vote). It is particularly interesting that although they have not affiliated themselves with either Labour, Lib Dems or Conservatives in the UK, when asked about their political affiliation in their home country, they have placed themselves quite clearly on the political spectrum line back home. This may go back to the idea of knowledge that: 'individuals must know what something is (political system) before they can say how they feel about it or whether they like it' (Cook in Biladeau, 2011: 3) and rather than having to know about the party politics and political system in the UK, they were basing their decision on charisma or sense of humour of candidates. The CEE nationals found particularly different and intriguing the idea of 'celebrity' in politics (that was how they viewed Johnson) from the types of political personalities they experienced in their home countries. The instrumentalist argument that pushes for the greater participation on the essentialist grounds that men and women are different based on the assumption that women have different vision and concepts of politics owing to their sex and their gender roles as mothers (Bari, 2005) was not evident. Women did not bring the

discussion to policies related to what is often referred as 'female values' such as caring focus, child care or social support (this was in fact more strongly voiced by men when discussing migration and social support in general). There may be a number of reasons behind this lack of interest in such issues, one of them being the age group and the type of female migrant (independent/single) that this group contained of. Males in the group on the other hand were more vocal and sensitive about their 'male' role in the host society as they perceived some elements of loss of their male identity by the act of migration. Would this again strengthen the argument that migration process is often more beneficial to women especially if they are experiencing some elements of emancipation from the patriarchal society, whereas for men moving away from patriarchal structures this could translate into relatively significant loss of status and societal prestige?

The mayoral candidates were viewed as figures that participants either personally identified themselves with or not and interestingly for citizens of former socialist regimes they viewed Boris Johnson as 'one of us type of guy', someone who is funny, charismatic, and just like us.

'...Boris is such a funny guy, sporty as well as I think he even cycles to work...., he is just like one of us...' (Czech male).

Women in the group generally agreed with this statement and also saw Johnson as funny and well known, but some of them mentioned that he is also not always known for right reasons or at least not for politically related reasons and that behind all that entertaining personality it is sometimes hard to detect what policies does he promote. Overall, when those in the group who were more familiar with Johnson described him to the others in the group (who were less knowledgeable of Johnson) they described him as someone:

'...people are keen on him and like him because he is a real, normal, average person who has good image, who is streetwise and also a family man...'

The multiplicities of political identities were obvious in the sense that their political allegiances from back home have not directly translated into an equivalent political party support in the UK. The gender question was something that participants felt was never discussed back at home whereas a number of women in the group felt that here it is an important question here, yet they felt that the gender equality was no longer an issue in the UK. However, there was an element of contradiction as they also thought that the family unit and family values were lot more supported and in place in the CEE countries than they were in the UK. They saw two political systems so different (worlds apart) that there was a real difficulty in even just trying to compare them. They instead saw themselves as two separate political personalities, one in the UK and often quite different one back

at home. This was a result of the context in which both political systems operated and according to the participants they required dual political identity. The argument was coming again back to the idea of knowledge, which was much greater of the Czech and/or Slovak politics and therefore people were much more likely to actively participate in their electoral process despite not residing in the country for some years. Men tended to talk about 'their' politics back at home. They often stressed that although they did not agreed with it, they were ready to politically participate in the system more familiar to them. Women were ready to embrace the political participation in Britain although they have not yet done so and it is interesting to notice that this would have been the case for people (men and women) with generally similar migration plans in terms of permanency or temporary settlement and the amount of years having lived in the UK.

In conclusion, one of the preliminary findings about the CEE migrants' attitudes towards political participation suggests that although the settlement may not be intended as permanent for either gender groups, females are more readily prepared to participate in civic and political activities in the UK. The general uptake of the voting rights granted to them as EU citizens (in local and European elections) is still very low, which is due to the lack of knowledge of how to proceed, but also in men's case as a result of an unsuccessful attempt (in their opinion) to socially integrate into the host society. The notion of the 'myth of return' is also prevalent in this group of migrants, however women appear to feel that it is still worth trying to participate even if they might not settle here permanently. Although both males and females are independent, economic migrants mostly in the full time employment, women are more vocal about their other (not only professional) identity and societal/civic responsibilities in the adopted country and its importance however temporary the migration plans may be. There was no evidence that women were seeking female specific political agenda from the candidates for the Mayor of London, but rather based their preferences on the candidates' strong personality and their ability to identify themselves with the politician. There was a general feeling that they did not consider gender as an issue in the UK, but rather felt empowered and emancipated due to their position in the labour market.

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