WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE COLD WAR

Case study of senior Communist official Elena Lagadinova reveals unexpected aspects of superpower confrontation

by Kristen Ghodsee; all photographs courtesy of the author

One of the great ironies of the Cold War is that the two superpowers often championed issues that they cared little about in practice. The East bloc defended the social rights of the world's workers while treating their own citizens like indentured servants. The United States campaigned for political freedoms abroad while brutally oppressing or marginalising their own African-American and Native American populations at home. Any rhetoric that could be deployed against the enemy became a weapon in the wider ideological battle.

Today, historians and social scientists are studying the international legacies of these Cold War rivalries over social and political rights. Whether it is labor conventions at the International Labor Organisation, political self-determination for previously colonised countries, or the end to state-sanctioned racial discrimination in the United States or in apartheid-era South Africa, the general scholarly consensus is that ordinary people – whether in the capitalist, Communist, or developing worlds – benefitted from superpower competition. An unintended consequence of American and Soviet grandstanding was often real social progress.

1 Elena "The Amazon" Lagadinova, in 1945

2 With Valentina Tereshkova

3 Delivering a speech in 1970

4 With the US activist, Angela Davis, in 1972

5 Hosting a school for African women leaders in Sofia, in 1982

6 Lagadinova (left) with an young Irina Bokova (right) at the Third UN Conference on Women in Nairobi, in 1985

7 In Razlog, with Kristen Ghodsee, in 2013

An excellent example of this is the international women's movement. From the beginning, the Communist world claimed to uphold women's rights and lambasted the West for its inattention to sexual inequality. Most Western democracies did not grant women the vote until after the Russian Revolution in 1917, with the last Western country, Switzerland, not granting women suffrage until 1971.

Effective propaganda campaigns from the Communist countries eventually attracted the attention of Western women starting in the late 1960s. As women demanded greater political and economic rights in the West, Communist countries expanded their efforts to champion state socialism as the remedy to sex-based inequality. In response, Western countries aimed to convince women that free markets and open societies would better serve their needs as workers and citizens, igniting a new Cold War front over women's rights.

Beginning with the first UN World Conference on Women in 1975, Bulgaria played a key role. Throughout the UN International Decade for Women (1975-1985), the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement spearheaded efforts to improve women's rights on the global stage. This international activism grew out of the committee's early domestic successes.

Elena Lagadinova was the president of the Women's Committee at this time. Lagadinova was born in 1930, and at the age of 14 became the youngest female guerrilla fighting against the Nazi-allied Bulgarian monarchy in the Second World War. After the war, Lagadinova moved to the Soviet Union to pursue a PhD in agrobiology. Lagadinova spent a year doing research in Sweden and England before returning to Sofia to work at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She passed the better part of 13 years manipulating wheat seeds. For her work in plant genetics, and her successful breeding of the hybrid Triticale, Lagadinova was awarded the Order of Cyril and Methodius in 1959.

As her stature as a researcher grew, Lagadinova became increasingly critical of the politics surrounding science in the Communist world. In May 1967, Lagadinova penned a passionate letter to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, a letter that might have landed her in a labor camp when it was intercepted by the Bulgarian government.

"One day, they sent a car for me while I was at the academy. I was in my lab coat in the middle of an experiment. I told them to wait but they told me to come immediately. I thought I was being arrested," Lagadinova told me in 2011. "Instead, I learned that they were making me the First Secretary of the Fatherland Front and the president of the Women's Committee."

At that time, Communist countries faced a demographic crisis. Women's education and their full incorporation into the formal labor force resulted in a birth slump. As women concentrated on work, they increasingly controlled their fertility through abortion, which was legal and freely available. In 1967, Romania instituted a severe ban on abortion, and the Bulgarian Politburo was considering a similar step to increase the domestic birth rate.

Bulgaria's leaders appointed Lagadinova as president of the Women's Committee because she was a scientist, and they hoped for a scientific solution to the demographic crisis. Between 1968 and 1973, Lagadinova led the effort to protect Bulgarian women's reproductive freedoms while drastically expanding state supports for women and families. In 1969, Lagadinova and the editorial collective of *The Woman Today* magazine conducted a survey with over 16,000 respondents. They found that most Bulgarian women wanted more children, but had a difficult time combining work and motherhood.

Few Bulgarians today are aware of the intense internal debate that took place between the male-dominated Politburo and the leaders of the Women's Committee. Since 2010, I have been working in the archives of this committee in the Central State Archives in Sofia. The evidence demonstrates that Lagadinova fiercely defended women's reproductive rights and proposed instead that the government drastically expand child allowances, maternity leaves, and the availability of kindergartens and crèches. The Women's Committee proposal would be costly – drawing much needed funds from the state budget. Bulgaria's political leaders considered the ban on abortion a much

cheaper option, even if it contradicted their own Communist principles.

Ultimately, Bulgaria's leaders agreed to pay child allowances and to give working women a generous maternity leave, up to three years for each child, with a guarantee that a woman's job would be held in her absence. All maternity leave was counted as labor service toward retirement, and applied equally to urban and rural women, including women in agriculture. The state also promised to build new childcare facilities so that every workingwoman had access to a kindergarten.

In return, the committee accepted a limited ban on abortion for married Bulgarian women under 40 with fewer than two children in their care (even if those children were not biologically their own). All single, divorced, widowed, or foreign women had free access to abortion, as did married women over 40 with only one child or pregnant married women with complicating health issues.

Although the committee continued to agitate for total reproductive freedom, the compromise was set down in a special 1973 Politburo decision regarding women's rights. By the time of the UN First World Conference of Women in 1975, Bulgaria had an advanced social system in place for working women, not only compared to the capitalist and the developing worlds, but also compared to other Socialist countries.

During the UN Decade for Women, Elena Lagadinova crisscrossed the globe forging bilateral relationships with over 100 women's organisations, sharing the Bulgarian experience. The Women's Committee's success on the international stage translated into greater power at home, and Lagadinova used the committee's growing international clout to advocate for changes in the Bulgarian Family and Labor Codes.

Although she was part of the Communist establishment, Lagadinova made many enemies by criticising Communist leaders over their own laws and the international conventions they signed. The Women's Committee antagonised Bulgarian enterprises that refused to grant pregnant women their legal rights, and pestered state planners for not producing the consumer goods that women needed.

Internationally, Lagadinova formed networks with women in African and Asian countries, providing both material and logistical support for new women's committees and movements across the developing world. By the third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, the world's women elected Lagadinova as their general rapporteur. Between 1985 and 1988, she was a member of the board of trustees of the UN Institute for Training Women. Even today, activists from Lusaka to Los Angeles testify that Lagadinova navigated Cold War tensions to promote women's rights around the globe. For instance, all of the world's countries legally guarantee some form of paid maternity leave, with the four exceptions of Papua New Guinea, Suriname, Liberia, and the United States.

In 1991, the Claremont Graduate School in California awarded Elena Lagadinova their Presidential Medal of Outstanding Achievement. "Long before a new world order emerged, you envisioned one," read the president's speech. "You acted as if it already existed, and through your actions you contributed to its emergence. You reached beyond the narrow confines of party and nationality to create an international network of scholars and policymakers devoted to the improvement of women's lives. Through your work with the United Nations, you have influenced women's lives throughout the world, and through them the destinies of their families."

Although the expansion of women's rights, both within Bulgaria and internationally, was an incidental result of Cold War rivalry, the activism of Elena Lagadinova and the Bulgarian Women's Committee did improve the lives of millions of women. This is a little known history, but it is a history which illustrates that nothing was black-and-white even in the black-and-white reality of the Cold War.