

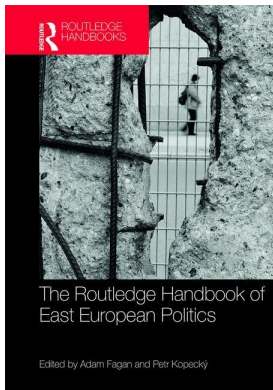
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THE REPRESENTATION OF
WOMEN*Frank C. Thames*

The end of communism in Eastern Europe created new opportunities for citizens to participate more widely in politics. For women, democratisation offered not only fresh prospects for political participation, but also for increasing gender equality in all spheres of life. The broader, comparative politics literature, however, points out that the extension of suffrage to women and the creation of participation rights do not, in and of themselves, guarantee gender equality, much less equality in representation. Even in countries with long democratic histories such as the US and the UK, women's legislative representation remains low.

Given that democracy does not guarantee equal representation of women in legislatures, what should we expect in Eastern Europe with its limited democratic history? Many scholars have attempted to explain the dynamics of women's representation in Eastern Europe. Much of this research tries to answer two questions. First, why did women's legislative representation drop so precipitously during the initial post-communist elections in Eastern European countries? Second, what caused women's representation to rebound in many countries after these initial losses? For answers to these questions, scholars borrowed heavily from the existing, broader literature on women's representation in comparative politics. Consequently, much of the research on women's representation in Eastern Europe tests arguments based on theories developed through the analysis of cases from across the globe. Specifically, scholars have pointed to the impacts of political culture, electoral systems, political parties, and party gender quotas on women's representation in Eastern Europe.

In 1988, East European Communist legislatures averaged over 25 per cent women (International Parliamentary Union, 2015). By 1994, the situation changed dramatically. The average percentage of female representation in the newly post-communist states had fallen to just over 9 per cent. (International Parliamentary Union, 2015). Existing research identifies several major factors to explain the significant decrease in women's representation – a common communist legacy of gender policies, a patriarchal political culture, the weakness of the women's movement, the electoral system, and the resistance of political parties.

Efforts to explain women's representation in Eastern Europe universally identify the impact of a unique communist legacy. Communist ideology espoused gender equality. Several communist-era policies did aid equality such as access to education, legal guarantees for equality, limits on religious rules that limited women's empowerment, child allowances, state-sponsored childcare, and mandatory maternity leave (LaFont, 2001; Verdery, 1994). The goal of many of these policies

was to encourage women to enter the labour force (Rueschemeyer and Wolchik, 2009a). Labour force participation has long been an indicator associated with women's representation. Access to work provides women with resources that make political participation more possible. In addition, work outside the home can raise consciousness about gender inequalities. Thus, women's labour force participation is thought to increase women's representation. Though communist regimes were committed to increasing women's labour force participation, in many cases the job opportunities offered to women were low-skill positions in low-tech sectors of the economy (LaFont, 2001; Titkov, 1998; Fodor, 1998; Chimiak, 2003). Moreover, without an open civil society in these regimes, women's access to the labour force did not lead to the development of an autonomous women's movement. Thus, it did not form the basis for feminist or other women's organisations. In addition, the closed nature of the regimes meant that women lacked the exposure to outside influences or ideas from Western democracies such as second-wave feminism (Miroiu, 2010).

While communism did provide opportunities for women in the economic sphere, the emphasis on work outside the home did not free women from domestic responsibilities. Communist ideology still emphasised women's traditional roles as mothers and homemakers (Chimiak, 2003). Thus, the party reinforced the "double" burden of women as both workers outside the home and the primary workers within the home (Fisher, 1998).

The educational and economic advantages enjoyed by East Europeans did not translate into political equality. As discussed earlier, the percentage of women in East European Communist legislatures was relatively high. This high level was achieved through quotas for women in national legislatures, created by the Communist Party to perpetuate the myth of women's equality (Kunovich, 2003). Of course, the real power in communist systems remained within the higher organs of the party. Women were underrepresented in the party hierarchies. Without power in the party, women would remain largely outside of policymaking decisions in East European Communist states.

For women in newly democratised Eastern Europe, the legacy of communist gender relations complicated the expansion of women's representation. The desire to increase the number of women in the workforce did give women access to education and job opportunities that could have created a foundation for women's representation. In the East European cases, the limitations on autonomous political organisations, however, restricted women's opportunities to organise and push for greater equality. In addition, the party's goal to push women into the economy was coupled with another goal that reinforced women's roles in the home and as mothers. This solidified typical gender stereotypes in Eastern Europe.

The end of communism in Eastern Europe replaced the centrally planned economy with a new, fledgling market economy. The costs of the transition to the market disproportionately fell on women. Unemployment particularly hurt women, who were often locked into low-skill jobs (Titkov, 1998; Wolchik, 1998). The reduction of state support in terms of child care and other subsidised public goods also undermined the economic position of women, still burdened by the inequality in family responsibilities (Fodor, 1998). As women's economic position weakened, the ability to form women's organisations and act politically also weakened.

One of the main explanations for the decline in women's representation after the end of communism was Eastern Europe's patriarchal political culture. Survey data suggested that even after the transition political culture remained highly patriarchal (Matland, 2003; Titkov, 1998; Montgomery and Ilonszki, 2003; Ristova, 2003; Saxonberg, 2003). Among the population, voters and elites embraced the view that politics was a "man's" world (Wilcox et al., 2003). In addition, in some cases there was a lack of recognition by men and women that gender equality was necessary (Chimiak, 2003). In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, for example, women appeared less interested in politics and gender equality than in family, health, and welfare issues (Wolchik, 1998).

Thus, women's groups often championed economic issues at the expense of gender equality. For some, gender equality was part and parcel of the discredited communist ideology (Rueschemeyer and Wolchik, 2009a). A focus on gender equality was a communist ideal that did not have a place in the new post-communist Eastern Europe.

This patriarchal attitude was, in some cases, reinforced by important political actors. In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church reinforced traditional, conservative roles for women that emphasised home and family (Titkov, 1998). In many cases, new political actors arose who did not embrace gender equality. The rise of conservative and nationalist parties opposed to greater gender equality in many East European states undermined support for greater women's representation (Verdery, 1994; Wolchik, 1998; LaFont, 2001; Chiva, 2005).

One of the main findings of existing research is that autonomous women's organisations were weak during the initial period after communism. Strong women's movements can push political actors to adopt policies that aid gender equality. They can help create an environment to elect more women to political office. Certainly, the communist legacy of weak civil society certainly complicated matters. In many cases, women did play important roles in the democratic transitions; however, this did not translate into an autonomous, organised women's movement (Wolchik, 1998; Chiva, 2005). One issue that consistently arose in studies was the lack of reliable support for Western feminism among the groups that did exist (Matland and Montgomery, 2003). In Bulgaria, for example, women's political mobilisation was undermined by a hostility towards Western feminism and negative attitudes about women's affirmative action (Rashkova and Zankina, 2013). More broadly, this created tension in women's organisations between those who wanted to support home and hearth versus Western feminist conceptions of gender equality (Sloat, 2005; Matland and Montgomery, 2003).

Another major area of focus was the impact of the electoral system. The general conclusion of the gender literature on electoral systems is that proportional representation systems create greater incentives for party leaders to nominate women increase women's representation. While the drop in women's representation occurred in many states, early evidence suggested that proportional representation systems elected, on average, more women than did other systems (Matland, 2003; Kunovich, 2003). Though, in some cases like Hungary, the incentives to balance tickets was limited by the ability to place candidates on multiple lists, low district magnitudes on some tiers, and the difficulty of predicting the competitiveness of different slots on lists (Montgomery and Ilonszki, 2003).

Research also suggests that the behaviour of political parties and their leaders undermined women's representation after the end of communism. Several studies point out that parties simply failed to nominate a significant number of women for election across many different cases (Kostadinova, 2003; Saxonberg, 2003; Kunovich, 2003; Wolchik, 1998). Communist policies that offered women access to higher education and opened the labour force to them created a significant number of well-educated women with resources. This should have created a strong pool of candidates for elective office. Yet, in the majority of post-communist Eastern European countries parties did not exploit this resource and, instead, nominated few women for office (Matland and Montgomery, 2003). Why did parties fail to nominate women? Part of the explanation may be cultural – party leaders simply viewed politics as a “man's” game and women were not suitable candidates (Gaber, 1999). In some cases, Poland for example, party leaders saw female candidates as “riskier” than male candidates (Siemienska, 2003). In addition, the weakness of women's organisations within and outside parties meant little pressure on party leaders to nominate women (Saxonberg, 2003; Matland and Montgomery, 2003; Montgomery and Ilonszki, 2003). Parties often had weak, poorly institutionalised nominations procedures that worked against female nominations (Saxonberg, 2000). Party ideology did appear to matter. Even

during this early period, left parties were more likely to nominate women than were other parties (Montgomery and Ilonszki, 2003; Siemienska, 2003; Chiva, 2005).

While the overall level of women's representation fell during the initial post-communist elections, the situation changed over time. By 2014, the level of women's representation on average reached 22 per cent (International Parliamentary Union, 2015). This level is lower than that of Western Europe; however, it does represent a significant increase in women's representation. What explains this turnaround in women's representation? To answer this question, gender scholars again used arguments well-grounded in the broader comparative literature on women's representation.

One of the factors noted for the low level of women's representation previously was the existence of a political culture that did not support women's entrance into the political sphere. More recent evidence from some countries suggests changing attitudes towards the participation of women in politics (Siemienska, 2009). More actors and voters appear to have accepted women as political actors. As acceptance for women in politics grew, the perceived costs of nominating women fell. In Poland, party leaders responded to voters who increased the list positions of women by increasing the number and rankings of women (Kunovich, 2012). In one study of the Czech Republic, a significant number of female candidates report being approached by parties to run for office (Wolchik, 2009). The encouragement of women to run for office by parties is a significant step forward for women's representation. Yet, the changes in political culture do not appear uniform; moreover, there remained popular attitudes that discouraged gender equity in some countries (Rashkova and Zankina, 2013). In Estonia, for example, public opinion was solidly against the creation of legislative quotas for women in 2004 (Laas, 2005).

More recent research also highlights the important role played by electoral institutions. One study of mixed-member systems found that women fared better in proportional representation systems, but that mixed-member systems outperformed majoritarian systems (Kostadinova, 2007). In Bulgaria, women found much more success in the proportional representation lists than in individual nominations (Ghodsee, 2009). A 2001 reform in Poland that increased party magnitude by reducing the number of constituencies and increasing district magnitude successfully increased women's representation (Siemienska, 2005). There are contrasting findings on the impact of open-list proportional representation systems. One study of Bosnia and Herzegovina found that the move to open lists reduced women's representation (Borić, 2005); however, it did not impact women's representation in Poland (Kunovich, 2012). Another study finds that the success of women in populist parties in Poland and Bulgaria is due to their centralised structures that reduced the power of party gatekeepers and the importance of loyalty over other factors (Kostadinova and Mikulska, 2015).

The early decline in women's representation was blamed, in part, on the weakness of the women's movement in many Eastern European states. More recent research finds that improvements in the organisation and strength of the women's movement has led to increases in women's representation (Rueschemeyer and Wolchik, 2009b). In some cases, improvements were made due to the efforts of women's organisations within political parties. In Slovenia, for example, the demand by women's organisations in political parties led to more nominations for female candidates (Gaber, 1999).

One area where the power of women's organisations mattered the most was in the adoption of quotas for female candidates. Pressure by female activists was essential to the adoption of party quotas in countries such as Poland (Siemienska, 2009; Siemienska, 2005), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Borić, 2005), and Croatia (Leakovi, 2005). Organised women's groups pushed for both party and national quotas in Macedonia (Dimitrievska, 2005). In Hungary, women's organisations in left parties worked with left-wing non-governmental organisations for more women in

leadership positions as well as quotas (Bonifert and Gurmai, 2005). In Bulgaria, women's groups saw quotas as the only way to increase women's representation given the significant obstacles to gender equality in the country (Rashkova and Zankina, 2013).

The increased presence of women in Eastern European legislatures begs the question of whether this increased presence led to changes in government policy. On the whole, there is little research on women's substantive representation in Eastern Europe. The general conclusion of most of the existing studies is that women, as a group, have not been able to impact policy significantly, and remain relatively weak forces in the legislature. Several studies of legislative committees reveals that female legislators rarely serve in leadership positions and often sit on committees dealing with stereotypically women's issues and not on more powerful committees (Siemienska, 2009; Gaber, 2009; Rueschemeyer and Wolchik, 2009b). In addition, the sense among many is that women have not successfully achieved a "critical mass" sufficient to influence policy (Gaber, 2009; Wolchik, 2009; Ghodsee, 2009).

On the whole, the research on women's representation has produced a number of important studies that add much to our understanding of gender equality in Eastern Europe and, to an extent, more broadly. The record, however, is not without its weaknesses. Much of the research concentrates specifically on legislatures. More work needs to be done on other representative institutions, such as the executive, judiciary, and bureaucracy. In one recent study of cabinets, the percentage of women in ministerial posts was found to be associated with the number of women with higher education degrees (Bego, 2013). While there are, perhaps, few women with such posts, we do see variation across the region in the number of female executives. Given the importance of executives in policymaking, we need to understand those factors that explain female representation in the executive in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the dynamics of female executive representation might give us insights on the role of women within East European political parties.

Much of the existing research relies on case studies or studies of a small number of cases. Such work provides us with important information about the dynamics of women's representation at particular times and in particular places. However, such approaches make it difficult to isolate those factors that explain variation across the region. Matland (2003) points out that studies of the region often cite a common, patriarchal culture that undermines women's representation; however, given that we see variation in women's representation, a common, cross-national culture cannot explain this variation. Many studies, for example, elucidate how parties, at times, discourage women and electoral systems vary in their impact on women's representation. There are few, however, large-*N* studies of electoral or party system effects in the region. Kostadinova (2007), which analyses the impact of mixed-member systems, is a notable exception.

Many of the theoretical approaches used to study women's representation are based on the broader comparative literature on women's representation. This is a very helpful strategy, since it allows us to understand the Eastern European cases in a larger frame of reference. Yet, there are few if any empirical comparisons of Eastern Europe with Western Europe or other regions. Thus, it is often difficult to determine how "different" these cases are from others. Given the significant literature on the communist legacy, one wonders whether this legacy created important differences between Eastern Europe and other cases. This seems plausible; however, it is difficult to isolate the effects of this legacy without comparing East European cases to ones that did not experience this communist legacy. Much can be learned by comparing East European cases with those outside the region. In one prominent example, Jacquette and Wolchik (1998) compares the experiences of women in newly democratising Latin American with the experience of women in the newly democratising Eastern Europe. It concluded that after the transition, the women's movements in Eastern Europe did not mobilise around gender issues because women lacked

experience organising, of concerns among East European women about the goals of Western feminism, and the association of women's equality with the communist agenda. By comparing the East European experience to broader contexts, we can better understand those factors that determine the level of women's representation in Eastern Europe.

Another potentially critical factor that remains under-investigated is the impact of European Union (EU) membership on East European member nations. Entrance into the EU required aspiring states to meet entrance requirements that could, theoretically, influence women's representation, both descriptively and substantively. Yet, there are few empirical studies of this impact. Avdeyeva (2010) finds variation in how well new East European members met these requirements. Another study found that EU incentives impacted the presence of women in East European cabinets (Bego, 2013). These are important first steps; however, we need more research on this question.

Since the initial decrease in women's representation, Eastern Europe has experienced significant increases in the number of women elected to the legislature in many countries. Yet, the existence of variation among Eastern European states, the absence of levels of women's representation approaching equality, and the potentially interesting differences between East European countries and other countries makes the further study of women's representation important. East European countries differ not only in terms of the overall level of representation, but in electoral system effects, party behaviours, and other institutional factors such as quotas. These differences need to be explored further. In addition, important differences between the East European experiences, such as the communist legacy or the patriarchal political culture, and other countries provides a unique opportunity to understand better those factors that drive gender equality. By comparing Eastern European cases with others more broadly, we can better isolate the impact of these and other influences on women's representation. We should expect differences between regions; however, the best way to understand those differences is to continue to compare Eastern Europe with other cases. This provides us with one of the best justifications for the continued study of women's representation in Eastern Europe.

Of course, the best reason to continue our analysis of women's representation in Eastern Europe is to understand better the causes of the continued inequality between men and women in the political realm. Eastern Europe, as in many other regions of the world, has seen an increasing trend in women's representation. The improvements, however, leave all countries in the region well below gender equality. Until women are able to translate their policy preferences into outcomes, we will continue to see gender inequality not only in politics but in other spheres.

While questions about the cause of gender inequality remain, the existing research has certainly pushed us closer to more definitive answers. Thanks to the efforts of scholars asking important questions and undertaking important research we certainly understand more about women's representation in Eastern Europe than we did in the past. As more scholars conduct research using new methods, approaches, and data, we will move even closer to understanding why women remain underrepresented in Eastern Europe.

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