

POST-1991 GENDER REPRESENTATION IN EASTERN EUROPE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Politics has been rife with gender inequality¹ for many centuries (Wallach Scott, 1988), and the politically tumultuous CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries are no exception. With the upheaval caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union came uniquely unprecedented societal and cultural shifts. In this volatile context, the place of women in society and politics was similarly in flux.

Generally, gender representation in CEE countries reflects global trends: more women are holding public office now than ever before. Scholars, however, emphasise that we are still a far cry from parity in representation (Wängnerud, 2009; Tremblay & Bauer, 2011). Many studies underline the need of contextualisation of the evolution of gender representation in CEE countries (UNIFEM, 2006; Fuszara, 2010; Forest, 2011). The paragraphs that follow explore this further. The literature can be broadly organised into four subgroups: *historical*, *social*, *political* and *economic*² contexts that have influenced gender representation in CEE countries in recent decades and continue to hold sway nowadays. This essay will look at the literature in each of these subgroups of study respectively before concluding on the field as a whole.

The CEE countries' *historical* experiences intertwine and vary, despite some cultural and linguistic similarities (Whitefield & Evans, 1999). Many scholars agree on the continuing influence of Communism's legacy on gender representation in CEE countries (Wolchik, 1998; Šiklová, 1997; Montgomery, 2003; Chiva, 2005). Pre-transition, the Communist state is credited with low unemployment, enabling many women to obtain higher education, high gender representation and even policymaking similar to what are now called 'family friendly policies' (Pollert, 2005). There were also significantly more women in parliament before than after the transition, according to Montgomery (2003). But this, according to some scholars, does not ring true. This is what Forest (2011) calls the "politics of fake representativeness"—some women *were* high up in state apparatuses but rarely held positions of consequence or responsibility. This, in part, contributes to the apathy to women's initiatives and representation explored later in this essay (Šiklová, 1999; Fuszara, 2010).

With respect to *social* contexts, many scholars agree that pre- and post-Soviet women's movements played a role in the advancement of discussions on gender representation. They do not, however, agree to what magnitude this took place. A large body of literature points towards a generalised "reluctance" and scepticism in society to support women's movements in the decade following the USSR's collapse (Watson, 1997, p. 22; Wolchik, 1998; Šiklová, 1997; Šiklová, 1999; Jalusic, 2002; Sloat, 2005). Einhorn and Sever (2003, p. 183) criticise some

¹ In this literature review, I use the phrases "gender inequality in politics" and "gender representation" interchangeably. With respect to representation, I am primarily focussing on *descriptive representation*, the representation of a group of people with similar traits by a person with those traits (e.g. somebody from town *x* representing people from town *x*—or, in this case, the representation of women by a woman). This follows from the Childs' and Cowley's (2011) definition of descriptive representation.

² It is worth noting that these four subgroups are of an *illustrative* character only; the areas overlap and are interdependent.

studies with this conclusion as “fundamentally flawed”—scholars, according to them, often try to draw parallels with Western women’s movements when they took place in different political, temporal and historical contexts. Fodor and Balogh’s (2010) study adds to this: in their view, women in CEE countries do support issues such as increased female representation in political spheres. But these studies do not paint a picture of a dichotomous literature. While opinions differ, it is fair to say that no one conclusion can be applied to every CEE country: context varies across time and space.

Certain contemporary studies, such as Funk (2014), emphasise the nuanced—and at times contradictory—nature of state-sponsored women’s organisations. They suggest that the lack of female political mobilisation was down to pre-existing male-centred political lobbying and mobilisation methods. Šiklová (1999) adds to this discussion by highlighting the dichotomous nature of the role of the Soviet state: on the one hand, it provided security and employment to women (to a greater degree than post-transition states), but on the other, it instilled conformity and passivity in the population. Watson (1997) even goes as far as to say that an absence of discourse on topics of feminism or gender equality in the 1990s meant simply that the issues did not necessarily exist. Fuzsara (2010) suggests that as time went on, gender representation discourse became more progressive. This development, however, varied from country to country. In Poland, there was a vibrant debate about abortion rights, while in the Balkans, participatory quotas were on the agenda.

Within the vibrant academic debate on gender representation discourse and women’s movements, more recent analyses (see Funk, 2014; Fodor & Balogh, 2010) differ from those published in the 1990s: they have had the benefit of a more long-term perspective. The cornerstones of literature in this field—the work of Watson (1997), Wolchik (1998) and Šiklová (1999)—are all now more than twenty years old.

Additionally, it is worth noting the rich body of literature analysing *social*, situational and psychological barriers to equal gender representation. Many of these are outside the direct control of individuals. These range from traditional family obligations, sexism, bias, ingrained societal preconceptions, prejudice, clientelism³ and even election design (Lawless & Pearson, 2008; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Bjarnegård, 2013; Watson et al., 2005; Matland, 1998; Fuzsara, 2010; Zake, 2007; O’Brien et al., 2015; Hutchinson et al., 2018). Factors such as the timing of women’s suffrage, media portrayal, women’s labour force participation rates, marginalisation, cultural attitudes, competition aversion and political engagement are also suggested to play a role (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Preece & Stoddard, 2015; Preece, 2016; Wolchik, 1998; Fuzsara, 2010). In post-Soviet CEE countries specifically, Šiklová (1997, p. 274) laments the “primitive” male-dominated political environment at best discouraging and at worst prohibiting women from being politically represented. Those women that do manage to break through experience many issues including high visibility, lower rate of promotion and many other

³ *Clientelism* is the exchange of goods or services in a *quid pro quo* manner for status enhancement, e.g. political gain (Pellicer et al., 2020).

factors associated with a patriarchal society such as lack of legitimate authority and sexual harassment (Dahlerup, 1988). This is another potential discouraging factor in the motivation of women to pursue political office, explaining past and contemporary gender representation rates.

Concerning *politics*, the literature also underscores the role of the incumbent government in gender representation: some studies suggest that left-leaning governments are beneficial to female representation (Caul, 1999; Kittilson, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2015; Wängnerud, 2009). This is being debated in a growing body of literature, where scholars suggest that this does not apply to CEE countries. Some studies suggest the contrary, that right-leaning governments that end up having the most female representation in CEE countries (Gwiazda, 2019; Kostadinova & Mikulska, 2017; Rashkova & Zankina, 2019).

There is a wealth of studies that suggest that women already in areas of executive responsibility generally contribute to the strengthening of women's interests by means of the incumbency effect⁴ and as political role models (Wängnerud, 2009; Jankowski et al., 2019; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007; Montgomery, 2003), although the magnitude of this is debated by other scholars (Tremblay & Bauer, 2011). They maintain that there are "no guarantees" (p. 178) that a female head of state results in increased female gender representation; in some instances, it can happen whereas in others, it does not. It is increasingly apparent, however, that more studies are needed in this field to explore these realities further.

Additionally, studies such as Matland (2003) suggest that female gender representation is at an advantage in proportional representation electoral systems. The extent of this is debated by Chiva (2005), who maintains that party ideology is a greater influencing factor. Wängnerud (2009) and Kittilson (2006), on the other hand, suggest that party structure and internal party processes along with the links a political party has to other organisations, are of paramount importance when it comes to increasing women's share in political circles. Rashkova and Zankina (2019, p. 237), conversely, argue that "rigid" and "male-dominated" party structures can impede women rising through the ranks. The literature with respect to CEE country electoral systems shows the nuanced reality: multifaceted processes influence political choices, which, in turn, influence gender representation.

Lastly, with respect to *economic* context, the post-Soviet transition was turbulent; moving from a planned economy to a competitive, capitalist one was not straightforward. These shifts were reflected in the labour markets of CEE countries, as documented by UNIFEM (2006), Šiklová (1999) and Blau et al. (2013). Currently, labour market differentials are similar across Europe. Scholars, however, emphasise the *means* by which we arrived at those numbers: in Eastern Europe, labour market gender differentials declined whereas those in the West rose, in part due to the decreased role of the state in providing for women (Pollert, 2005).

⁴ I.e. the 'advantage' experienced by an incumbent over a newcomer in political elections.

Gal and Kligman (2012) suggest that transition economies entered a ‘genderisation’ of certain labour market sectors. Men, according to their study, tend to hold positions in the private sector while women have jobs centred in the public sector and small-scale services. This is in line with other studies, which note that women held these roles despite their (at times, especially in the public sector) poor pay (Pollert, 2005).

Looking to the future, there is hope: much progress has been made in recent years. Gender-balanced representation is no longer a taboo topic or out of public discourse (Hutchinson et al., 2018; Fuszara, 2010; Rashkova & Zankina, 2019). With many CEE countries’ accessions into the EU, issues of gender equality were thrust into the public eye—in some instances, appointing female leaders was even seen to be a vestige of transparency (Forest, 2011).

To take the literature in post-Soviet CEE country gender representation in sum, it is clear when it comes to areas of improvement. Issues that arise are a lack of affordable childcare and inflexible work schedule arrangements which at best discourage and at worst downright prohibit women from taking up executive roles, along with many others (UNIFEM, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2018). Scholars recommend the instillation of more women-friendly policies in this regard. In CEE countries, these recommendations are compounded by the aforementioned historical baggage. Here, scholars propose additional measures—there is alas no ‘silver bullet’ to these issues and many of the proposed remedies require an abundance of time. Šiklová (1999; 1997) suggests that the exposure to outside ideas—westernisation—along with continued perspectives shifting with generations likely boost progress in gender representation. Other studies propose improving women’s general standing in the labour market which would reflect in gender participation: accessibility to paid work, flexible working hours, better childcare, increasing training and further education possibilities (UNIFEM, 2006; Blau et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the literature concerning gender representation in CEE countries is spread over several subtopics and areas. The field of *global* gender representation is thoroughly studied but some aspects of studies specific to CEE countries come across as limited. The latter research area is also rather fragmented. However, this is at least partly due to countries’ differing experiences along with the haphazardly knotted fabric of historical turmoil.

It is clear, though, that in some areas, the literature is lacking. Many scholars agree that there is a necessity for further research, with many underlining the need of cross-country comparisons in the CEE region (Wängnerud, 2009; UNIFEM, 2006; Tremblay, 2007; Welch, 2005; Gwiazda, 2019). There are even fewer direct comparison studies between the East and West of Europe such as that of Matland (2003). Additionally, a large section of the literature is outdated, at times referring to fleetingly relevant political events (Tremblay & Bauer, 2011). Further long-view perspectives, such as those included in the ‘Special Issue on Politics and Gender in Eastern Europe’ in *Politics & Gender* (see Gwiazda, 2019) are necessary.

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