

Women in Politics in Eastern Europe: 30 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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The dramatic transformations that have marked East European countries, namely the implosion and then collapse of communist regimes, followed by an uneven and troubled transition towards democracy and European integration, as well as the recent democratic backsliding across the region and the rise of radical right parties,¹ have defined the role of women in politics. Change is what best describes gender representation in Eastern Europe.

Former communist countries are often described as patriarchic in culture and a place where women face discrimination, are under-represented in politics, and are expected to have superior credentials in order to be granted access to political positions.² East European women are often accused of “gender blindness”³ and aversion towards the Western feminist agenda,⁴ while political parties are blamed for a lack of interest in pro-

¹ Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina. 2017. “Are (Populist) Radical Right Parties *Männerparteien*? Evidence from Bulgaria”, *West European Politics*, 2017, 40 (4): 848-868; Ekaterina Rashkova. 2020. “Gender Politics and Radical Right Parties: An Examination of Women’s Substantive Representation in Slovakia”, *East European Politics and Societies*, online first. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419897993>.

² Richard E. Matland. 2003. “Women’s Representation in Post-Communist Europe”, in Richard E. Matland and Kathleen A. Montgomery (eds), *Women’s Access to Political Power in Post-Communist Europe*, Oxford University Press, pp. 321-342, p. 326.

³ Malgorzata Fuszara. 2010. “Citizenship, Representation and Gender”, *Polish Sociological Review*, Vol. 172 (4): 367-389.

⁴ Matland 2003, op. cit.

moting women or gender equality.⁵ While such a view is not inaccurate in comparative terms, it prevents us from seeing the fast and dramatic changes that are taking place in the region and that are reshaping women's political representation. If communist regimes staged women in large numbers but with no power, today, female politicians are claiming the highest political posts. Female representation in parliament is steadily growing, in many places due to the reintroduction of gender quotas, whereas the presence of women in government is growing at an even faster rate. The European Union's (EU's) influence is evident not only in legal transposition, but in the gradual adoption of norms and values that bring increased gender awareness and a change of mentality.

We offer a brief account of the changing nature of gender representation in Eastern Europe, emphasising the positive trends in the last decade while accounting for still-existing gaps and past legacies. Gender representation in the region has undergone three major transformations – the forced and hollow emancipation of women during communist rule, the almost complete neglect of women's issues and the sharp drop in women's political representation following the collapse of communist regimes, and the gradual increase in the number and status of women in politics as a result of European integration. To illustrate these changes in women's political representation, we briefly examine each.

Women and Communist-Era Emancipation

Women's activism in Eastern Europe dates back to the 19th century, but in these early days, little progress was made towards ensuring women's political and economic rights. With the establishing of communist regimes across Eastern Europe following World War Two, women's emancipation became an official goal of state policy. The so-called "socialist emancipation project" which focused on integrating women into paid labour and into state positions of power had dubious success. Female participation in the labour force steadily increased, even surpassing figures in the West,

⁵ Christina Chiva. 2005. "Women in Post-Communist Politics: Explaining Under-Representation in the Hungarian and Romanian Parliaments", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57 (7): 969-994; C. Chiva. 2018. *Gender, Institutions and Political Representation*. London: PalgraveMacmillan. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-01177-0.

and the nature of female labour changed with more women occupying managerial positions and jobs in the industry and the state administration. At the same time, women occupied less prestigious, lower-level and lower-paid jobs, in professions that required less education and more commitment. Women were given the additional role of workers, but the bases of the unequal gender order were never contested,⁶ as women were still expected to carry out most household chores.

Communist regimes further showed great commitment to opening channels for women's political participation. Women were granted voting rights (if not gained in the interwar period) and access to political positions; women's socialist mass organisations were formed to mobilise the female population; gender quotas for state legislatures were introduced; and efforts were made to recruit women to communist parties. As a result, the proportion of women in parliaments reached an average of 25 percent by the 1980s and for the first time women entered executive positions. Yet, women played a marginal role in political decision-making, occupying positions at the lower and/or local level. While rubber-stamp parliaments welcomed female representatives, women's participation in bodies with real political power was extremely limited. Women did not exceed 10 percent of party central committees and practically did not feature in politburos. Women's organisations became an instrument of party control and were hardly defenders of women's rights. Political equality came to be associated with women's nominal presence in political bodies, indicating a hollow commitment to women's emancipation.

Communist Legacies and the Post-Communist Context

The communist experience of centralised decision-making, regimented political mobilisation, and political oppression left a legacy of passivity as well as a distaste for Western feminism,⁷ which had little applicability in the

⁶ Raluca Maria Popa. 2003. "The Socialist Project for Gender (In)Equality: A Critical Discussion", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol.6 (Winter 2003): 49-72, p. 69.

⁷ With the exception of Yugoslavia, which was much more open to the West and where Western feminist ideas penetrated and took root in the 1970s, resulting in independent women's organisations and embracing of Western feminist ideas, particularly by Croatian and Serbian women's activists.

East European context. Unlike their Western counterparts, East European women did not view men as oppressors, but rather as fellow victims of state oppression. Given such legacies, women's political involvement in post-communist societies was characterised by (1) an aversion to political mobilisation, (2) hostility towards Western feminist agendas, and (3) negative attitudes towards affirmative action for women.⁸ The immediate result of such an outlook was the abolition of gender quotas for legislatures and a subsequent 50 percent drop in women's political representation.⁹

The transition context further proved particularly harmful to women's representation and interests as women's issues were subordinated to the "larger" issues of democracy and economic restructuring.¹⁰ Women's interests were bundled with those of larger groups such as the unemployed or the pensioners, preventing the emergence of a distinct women's agenda and strong women's parties. Women's parties were found in few post-communist states, with only three of these parties entering national parliaments.¹¹

At the same time, the number of women occupying executive positions in Eastern Europe has dramatically risen. In Slovenia, Croatia and the Baltic states, for example, 68 women headed 80 ministries and at least 122 women held 132 executive positions in the first decade of the transition.¹² In Bulgaria, women's representation in the executive reached over 35 percent in the past decade, while in Romania and Croatia, it reached 25 percent.¹³ Female executives have further enjoyed greater access to "big" ministries

⁸ Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina. 2014. "When Less Means More: Influential Women of the Right – the Case of Bulgaria", in Sarah Childs and Karen Celis (eds), *Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation*, ECPR Press, pp. 103-120.

⁹ United Nations. 2005. *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, United Nations Research Institution for Social Research.

¹⁰ Ann Graham and Joanna Regulska. 1997. "Where Political Meets Women: Creating Local Political Space", *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Vol. 15 (1): 4-12, p. 6.

¹¹ Mona Lena Krook and Ekaterina Rashkova. 2006. "The Emergence and Impact of Women's Parties: A Comparative Analysis of Western and Eastern Europe". Unpublished manuscript.

¹² Maxime Forest. 2011. "From State-Socialism to EU accession: Contrasting the Gendering of (Executive) Political Power in Central Europe", 2nd ECPR Conference, Budapest, January 12-15, p. 6.

¹³ Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina. 2019. "Executive Leadership and Gender Politics in South-Eastern Europe", *Politics & Gender*, 15 (2): 211-239. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18001071>.

such as economy, finance or defence, in addition to the more traditional ministries for women – environment, social care or education. The growth rate of women ministers has been much higher than the steady and slow growth rate of women in parliament.¹⁴ Moreover, only a few ministers had previously served as members of parliament, suggesting a much broader source of supply than just the legislature.

One of the most significant factors in improving women's representation and placing gender equality high on the agenda has been the role of the EU.¹⁵ Legislative and policy transfers entailed by EU accession have resulted in a smaller gap in women's representation between new member states and the EU-15 average,¹⁶ as well as legal frameworks more sensitive to women's issues.¹⁷ Along with regulatory changes, European values have been making headway, slowly changing rigid views of gender relations. The EU has been the key external force in increasing women's representation, but domestic actors and their ability to mediate external pressures have been critical in the implementation of the EU's gender equality policy in the East.¹⁸ In the 2014 and 2019 EU parliament elections, the European Parliament has urged Member States and political parties to support gender-balanced electoral lists, as well as the nominations of women to high-level positions in the EU institutions. Moreover, for the last 30 years, the EU has actively promoted a balanced participation of women and men in decision-making at local, regional and national levels through various "hard" and "soft" measures, including quotas, "zipped systems", data-collection and funding, to support the Member States and civil society.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ingrid Bego. 2013. "Accessing Power in New Democracies: The Appointment of Female Ministers in Postcommunist Europe", *Political Research Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1177/1065912913509028, p. 347.

¹⁵ Leah Seppanen Anderson. 2006. "European Union Gender Regulations in the East: The Czech and Polish Accession Process", *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 20 (1): 101-125.

¹⁶ Maxime Forest. 2011. "From State-Socialism to EU accession: Contrasting the Gendering of (Executive) Political Power in Central Europe", 2nd ECPR Conference, Budapest, January 12-15.

¹⁷ Not surprisingly, many ministerial positions overseeing EU affairs or integration in the countries examined here have been occupied by women.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Rosamund Shreeves, Martina Prpic, and Eulalia Claros. 2019. "Women in politics in the EU: State of Play", European Parliamentary Research Service, p. 10.

Women in Politics Today

Women's representation in Eastern Europe has changed vastly since the region's transition to democracy. While the number of women in the majority of the first post-communist parliaments was negligible, today, nine out of the seventeen countries examined here show a proportion of women in parliament on par with or larger than the current world average of 24.6 percent.²⁰ The data in Table 1 indicates that in their current legislatures, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, and Serbia have a higher percentage of women in parliament than most world states. Furthermore, Kosovo, Latvia, North Macedonia, and Serbia have a higher percentage of women in parliament than the European average of 30.1 percent.²¹

This phenomenon can be attributed to the EU's influence, as well as the gradual reintroduction of quotas across the region. Of the countries examined here, only three have no gender quotas, seven have legislative candidate quotas of 30-35 percent, and one (Kosovo) has reserved seats (see Table 1). Voluntary quotas ranging from 20 to 40 percent are also common, primarily among social-democratic parties. This shows that in most cases negative attitudes towards affirmative action for women have been overcome and gender awareness is increasing.

Besides a vastly changing parliamentary representation, women are beginning to penetrate "the highest ceiling" by increasing their numbers as well as securing bigger roles in governments. Data from the current cabinets in the seventeen East European countries included here shows that the average proportion of women in government for the region is 23.1 percent, with Albania at 50 percent, Bulgaria at 35 percent, Kosovo at 29.4 percent and Serbia at 26 percent. Given the fact that politics is considered a primarily male domain in many of the East European states,²² this is a remarkable sign that things are rapidly changing. Moreover, East European states have pioneered the electing of female politicians to the highest political

²⁰ IPU Women in National Parliaments. Available here: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> (last accessed 27 May 2020).

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Matland 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

leadership posts. Seven states have chosen females to be President, and nine of the countries have had female Prime Ministers. Poland stands out with the fact that it has had not one but three female Prime Ministers since its transition to democracy. Compared to just five years ago when three countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary and Slovakia – did not have any women in their cabinets, currently all countries examined here have female ministers, ranging from two to six. Even countries with a legacy of ethnic conflicts (for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina), which is typically associated with lower political representation of women, particularly in the executive,²³ currently have female ministers – a significant change compared to five years ago. Hungary is the country where developments have been in stark contrast to overall regional trends. This may be due to the fact that parties which have adopted voluntary quotas and presumably are more sensitive to women's representation are not currently in power in either country.²⁴ More importantly, Orbán, who has now ruled Hungary for a decade, has been increasingly authoritarian and for the first time since the collapse of the communist regime, Hungary is no longer classified as a democracy by Freedom House.²⁵ Such an authoritarian tendency has had a clear negative impact on female political representation in Hungary. Poland, in turn, is rolling back on legislation protecting women rights and similarly turning more authoritarian.²⁶

²³ Leonardo Ariola and Martha Johnson. 2014. "Ethnic Politics and Women's Empowerment in Africa: Ministerial Appointments to Executive Cabinets", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58 (2): 495-451.

²⁴ Slovakia represents an interesting case, as the incumbent social-democratic party has no voluntary quotas, whereas the conservative Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) has a voluntary quota of 30 percent.

²⁵ Freedom House, "Dropping the Democratic Façade in Europe and Eurasia", 2020, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>.

²⁶ "Poland's Top Court to Probe Europe's Domestic Violence Pact", *The New York Times*, 30 July 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/07/30/world/europe/ap-eu-poland-domestic-violence.html>.

Table 1. Female Representation in Parliament and Government, Quotas in Eastern Europe.

Country	Last election	Women in parliament	Women in government	Female PMs since transition	Female Presidents	Quotas: Type, %
Albania	2017	29.5 % (36)	50% (8)	0	0	Legislated candidate, 30
Bosnia & Herzegovina	2018	21.4 % (9)	23.5 % (4)	0	1	Legislated candidate, 40
Bulgaria	2017	26.7 % (64)	35% (7)	1	0	None
Croatia	2016	19.2% (29)	19% (4)	1	1	Voluntary party, 40
Czech Republic	2017	22.5% (45)	28.6% (4)	0	0	Voluntary party, 25
Estonia	2019	28.7% (28)	13.3% (2)	0	1	None
Hungary	2018	12.1% (24)	14.3% (2)	0	0	Voluntary party, 20-30
Kosovo	2019	31.7% (38)	29.4% (5)	0	1	Reserved seats, 30
Latvia	2018	31.0% (31)	21.4% (3)	1	1	None
Lithuania	2016	28.0% (30)	20.0% (3)	1	1	Voluntary party, 33
North Macedonia	2016	31.7% (38)	21.7% (5)	0	0	Legislated candidate, 33
Montenegro	2016	23.5% (19)	20.0% (4)	0	0	Legislated candidate, 30
Poland	2019	28.7% (132)	16.7% (4)	3	0	Legislated candidate, 35
Romania	2016	20.7% (68)	16.7% (3)	1	0	Voluntary party, 30
Serbia	2016	34.8% (86)	26.0% (6)	1	1	Legislated candidate, 33
Slovakia	2016	22% (33)	14.3% (2)	1	0	Voluntary party, 30
Slovenia	2018	24.4% (22)	23.5% (4)	1	0	Legislated candidate, 35
<i>Total (average)</i>		25.7%	23.1%	11	7	

Source: Data collected by authors (amongst others from: data.ipu.org). Albania has 29 reserved seats for women. The number of female leadership positions for Serbia has been counted since 2000, after the end of the war period.

In addition to seeing a largely more optimistic picture of the current political representation of women in Eastern Europe, for a smaller segment of five democracies from Southeastern Europe,²⁷ we observe a positive trend not only in representation as a whole, but also in the type of representations that women have. In those countries women are making headway across the political spectrum and, unlike in many West European countries, their avenues to power have not been primarily limited to parties on the left. In fact, it is the Right that have assigned women to the highest positions of power and those traditionally occupied by men. Such findings may be explained by the peculiarity of the political spectrum in post-communist countries, where the *Left* was largely dominated by former communist parties, and hence, was associated with the status quo, whereas the *Right* came to represent change and reform, attracting people with more progressive views and diverse backgrounds.²⁸

Conclusion

The story of women's political representation in Eastern Europe is one of dynamic and positive change. We have witnessed growing representations of women in parliaments and a significant increase of women in the executives. Moreover, women are represented across the political spectrum, occupying a wider range of positions as well as positions traditionally reserved for men. Nevertheless, mentalities have been slower to change, with the EU being the key driver of increased gender awareness and the transfer of values and norms. Quotas are increasingly the norm in the region and have proved very successful in improving women's political representation. Yet, countries with no quotas have demonstrated some of the highest number and percentage of women in the executive.

While positive trends are evident in regard to the presence of women in politics, the substantive representation of women in Eastern Europe remains a far-fetched reality and the most we can argue for is *substantive*

²⁷ Those are Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. See Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina. 2019. "Executive Leadership and Gender Politics in South-Eastern Europe", *Politics & Gender*, 15 (2): 211-239. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18001071>.

²⁸ Rashkova and Zankina, 2014, op. cit.

presence,²⁹ i.e., the increased presence of women in key decision-making positions, which holds a potential for substantive claims and for bringing about social-attitude transformation. Hence, efforts from here on should be focused not only on placing women in key positions, but on pushing a political agenda that is responsive to women's interests and concerns, which can eventually bring change not only to the policies addressing women's issues but also to the mentality regarding what is a man's job and what isn't.

²⁹ Rashkova and Zankina 2014, op. cit.