Introduction to the Special Issue on Politics and Gender in Eastern Europe

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This Special Issue focuses on issues concerning politics and gender in Eastern Europe. Women are still underrepresented in parliaments, executives, and political parties in the region, even though gender concerns have entered public discourses and debates. Consequently, women’s interests are rarely considered and acted on. Moreover, the recent populist and illiberal turn in European politics has had negative consequences for the gender agenda. Therefore, the study of women’s political representation remains timely and relevant. Although there is a burgeoning literature on women in politics in well-established democracies (Celis and Childs 2012; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Kittilson 2006; Lovenduski 2005; Praud 2012; Wångnerud 2009), the study of women’s political representation in Eastern Europe is lacking. Almost three decades since the beginning of democratic transition, the role of women in politics is still underresearched. Hence, this Special Issue aims to address this research deficit.

Political representation is the main subject of politics and gender scholarship. Representation denotes “the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact” (Pitkin...
Pitkin (1967) distinguishes between descriptive and substantive representation. Whereas descriptive representation focuses on the number of women elected to political institutions, substantive representation emphasizes the effects of women’s presence on policy processes and policy outputs. In fact, the theory of the politics of presence suggests that female politicians are best equipped to represent women’s interests (Phillips 1995). The most recent contributions to the feminist literature argue that the political representation of women is undergoing a complex process of change (Childs and Lovenduski 2013; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014). The main implication is that there are many challenges that require scholarly attention. The two main issues addressed here concern the facets of women’s descriptive representation and the complexities of substantive representation in the context of Eastern Europe. This regional focus encompasses countries from Central and southeastern Europe under the term “Eastern Europe” to indicate that they have a common communist past.

The study of Eastern Europe offers an opportunity to revisit concepts and to test and reformulate theories that have been applied to Western Europe and elsewhere. Eastern Europe is a fascinating testing ground for the theories of political representation because of the intricacy of historical and cultural factors— that is, communism and traditional culture. Under communism, women were granted, rather than winning, some rights (e.g., rights to education and employment). This “emancipation from above” and the communist control of independent movements hindered women’s political activism (cited in Waylen 1994). During democratic transition, women’s movements did not influence the politics and policies of the new governments (Waylen 1994). Conversely, traditional culture sustained gendered relations within public and private spheres. Conservative and traditional values have been dominant. Eastern European new democracies were “male democracies” (Eisenstein 1993, 312). More than a decade after regime change, they showed greater variability despite sharing a communist legacy (Matland 2003).

The focus on the most recent developments sets this Special Issue apart from previous studies that have focused on democratic transition (Funk and Mueller 1993; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998) and consolidation (Clavero and Galligan 2005; Galligan, Clavero, and Calloni 2007; Matland and Montgomery 2003). Entering their third decade, Eastern European democracies experienced “democratic fatigue,” and some seemed vulnerable to an illiberal turn (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013, 3). Core
aspects of liberal democracy including rights and freedoms have been threatened: “deconsolidation” is taking place in Hungary and Poland (Foa and Mounk 2017). In fact, populist politics is on the rise, and authoritarian tendencies have resurfaced in states around the world (see Mounk 2018). Moreover, what Celis and Childs (2018) brand a “conservative moment” is also present in Eastern Europe. Against this backdrop, this Special Issue explores topics concerning gender and politics in Eastern Europe, with the main purpose of shedding more light on women’s political representation in challenging times.

The Special Issue consists of four contributions. It starts with a discussion of the descriptive representation of women and is then followed by the analysis of their substantive representation. The article by Michael Jankowski, Kamil Marcinkiewicz, and Anna Gwiazda examines the effects of women’s descriptive representation on female candidate selection patterns. The authors show that thanks to the incumbency effect, elected women have higher chances of reselection and reelection in future elections, all else being equal. Therefore, enhanced women’s representation has an additional advantage — that is, almost guaranteed reelection of women in the future. The incumbency advantage underscores the importance of the politics of presence.

In their article, Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina propose to reexamine the link between party ideology and women by looking at the descriptive representation of women in the executive. Presenting data for women ministers in five southeastern European states, they explore the impact of the left-right spectrum on female executive appointments. They demonstrate that although there is a low number of women in the top executive positions, contrary to findings in the West, in southeastern Europe, women ministers are appointed primarily by the parties of the right. The authors argue that since the parties of the right in Eastern Europe were initially in the opposition (to former communist parties), they adopted a more progressive attitude, and because they were also new and less institutionalized, they provided more access to women.

Two articles on substantive representation revisit the mechanisms of representation of women’s interests in Eastern Europe. The recent conservative and illiberal turns in Hungary and Poland have had consequences for the substantive representation of women in both countries, as examined by Gabriella Ilonszki and Adrienn Vajda and by Anna Gwiazda. Hungary has had very low levels of female parliamentary representation since the beginning of the democratic transition, which, according to Ilonszki and Vajda, is problematic because in the long
term, it implies substantive underrepresentation, too. Nevertheless, women’s interests were still evident in the parliament in 2000, when women politicians from the left could voice women’s interests, but with little policy impact. However, by 2011, it was only in the extraparliamentary context that women’s interests were formulated. This coincided with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s populist and illiberal turn, which was detrimental to women’s substantive representation in Hungary.

Likewise, Gwiazda shows that women’s substantive representation is influenced by the type of political regime. In Poland, the government controlled by the Law and Justice party has limited, among other things, the checks and balances in the political system and posed a threat to the rule of law (Ekiert 2017). The government’s initial support for restricting already limited abortion rights gave rise to the so-called Black Protests. This case shows that when elected representatives do not represent substantively all interests and try to restrict already confirmed rights, nonelected representatives become more vocal in the extraparliamentary context. Moreover, although conservative interests dominate in the incumbent parliament, feminist voices are heard, too, especially through extraparliamentary sites of representation.

In what follows, I highlight the contribution of this Special Issue to the scholarship on gender and politics.

First, the advantages of descriptive representation are underscored. The presence of women in parliament matters because of the justice principle and the representation of women’s interests and issues (see Philips 1995), but it also matters for enhancing women’s future prospects for reelection. Although some strands of the literature question the value of descriptive representation (Kymlicka 1996; Young 2000), the politics of presence is important.

Second, the parties of the right promote women to ministerial positions, which contrasts with the finding that the parties of the left are more representative of women and appoint more women to executive posts (e.g., Kittilson 1999, 2006; O’Brien et al. 2015; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). The discussion of the parties of the right and women’s presence in political institutions is timely but underresearched. It also raises questions about the types of interests that are advocated by conservative representatives.

Third, women’s political representation depends on the majorities in parliaments and parties in governments. If the parties of the right have majorities in political institutions and a number of conservative women
are present, traditional and conservative interests and issues can be expected to dominate in parliaments and executives. As a result, feminist interests are underrepresented in political institutions. This requires the reexamination of the relationship between women’s presence and women’s interests. The existing scholarship implies that the more women are present in political institutions, particularly when they reach a critical mass, the more feminist claims will be promoted (Dahlerup 1988; Grey 2002). This relationship is not that straightforward. Hence, a more nuanced analysis of the politics of presence is advocated here, too.

Fourth, the importance of extraparliamentary representation in illiberal democracies is highlighted. The cases of Hungary and Poland show that there is a close relationship between the type of democracy and the type of representation. When the quality of democracy worsens and democracies turn into illiberal ones, the extraparliamentary sites of representation become important and nonelected actors play an increasingly significant role in expressing feminist interests.

Finally, political parties influence both women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Not only are they gatekeepers to political office, but also they moderate the expression of women’s interests. Political parties remain the main agents of women’s representation.

To summarize, this Special Issue sheds new light on the study of political representation, women, and democracy in Eastern Europe. By examining case studies and intraregional comparisons, it enhances our understanding of gender politics in societies that are undergoing social, political, and economic transformations. The findings are useful for understanding women’s political representation in the region and in other democracies. But further research is required. For example, the following issues could be examined: intersectionality, female political leaders, and the conditions under which parties decide to speak for women and promote their interests.

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REFERENCES


