

Marilyn Rueschemeyer, Sharon L. Wolchik, eds.. *Women in Power in Post-Communist Parliaments*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xiv + 292 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22169-8.



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The position of women in political power has been at times a heated, yet also a curiously neglected topic by students of Eastern and East Central Europe. In certain ways, this was the case during the Communist period, in spite of the centrally directed lip service paid to gender equality in all spheres of life. During the ideologically turbulent decades since 1989, the issue has occasionally surfaced only to disappear again. I agree with Mitchell A. Orenstein's comment on the book jacket blurb. He calls the work not only a "highly generative and coherent piece of scholarship" but also "the most important cross-national comparative book to date on the role of women in post-Communist politics."

The volume developed from a 2004 workshop/conference sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center. The editors are Marilyn Rueschemeyer, professor emerita of sociology at the Rhode Island School of Design and presently chair of the European Politics Series at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, and Sharon L. Wolchik, professor of political science

and international affairs at George Washington University. Following the editors' acknowledgments and helpful introduction, the volume is divided into two main sections. The first, "Women in Six National Parliaments," deals with Russian, Polish, Slovene, Czech, East German, and Bulgarian cases respectively. The second, "Perspectives of Women Parliamentarians," includes transcripts of interviews, providing telling views and fascinating voices of women parliamentarians from these countries.

Guiding the contributors in their research were the following questions. First, they asked about the women's motivations for running for office. Second, the contributors inquired about the specific roles women filled in the contemporary legislative elite. Third, they examined how women viewed their roles as female supporters, as advocates for their specific party, or as politicians concerned with the well being of their constituencies--regardless of gender. Fourth, the researchers asked about the various difficulties the politicians faced, the most crucial issues for their countries

in general and for women in particular, and the achievement of their original goals. Fifth, questions addressed the relationships between the women and other politicians, and the impact that these women in power made. Sixth and finally, the researchers discussed the types of influence (if any) the European Union and Western feminist organizations had on women parliamentarians in post-Communist Europe and Eurasia.

In the second chapter, using in-depth interviews, Linda Cook (Brown University and Harvard University) and Carol Nechemias (Pennsylvania State University) examine women deputies in the Russian Duma. They focus on the question “does gender matter?” and argue that the legacy of Communism, gender consciousness, and women’s lack of political ambitions are some of the reasons why so few women are deputies (p. 26). Renata Siemieńska (Warsaw University), in chapter 3, starts with the notion of “critical mass,” then discusses women’s representation in the Polish parliament in the post-1989 period (p. 62). While she is hopeful about the changing attitudes toward women in politics among the younger, more educated segments of the Polish population, Siemieńska examines in detail the complex perception in the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) about women in politics, including traditional cultural views. Poland’s membership in the European Union (2004) helped to increase women’s participation in politics. Even though Polish women’s “views vary from far right to far left,” Siemieńska considers the increased number of women in active politics a success (p. 91).

In the fourth chapter, Milica Antić (University of Ljubljana) asks, “what difference do female deputies make in the Slovene parliament?” (p. 93). In addition to discussing positive and negative results of the quota system, Antić shows that while during the transition period women were more active in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), “politics is still [considered] a man’s domain” (p. 101). In the following chapter, Wolchik examines

women’s participation in the parliament of the Czech Republic and finds that—similar to other cases—the number of women participating in parliament dropped after the end of Communism. Valuably, Wolchik also pays attention to continuing gender differences in the division of labor within households, and states that many so-called women’s problems not only are those of women, but also belong to the sphere of much wider societal problems.

Because Rueschemeyer examines East German women in the parliament of unified Germany, chapter 6 is considerably different from the other five in this section. She delineates the complexities of the situation when different values and different political goals collided during and after unification. After discussing the historical situation of women in East Germany and women’s changing positions during Communism, Rueschemeyer illustrates the difficulties women who represent eastern Germany face and enumerates some economic and social reasons for these difficulties. Yet, she suggests, these women in the German parliament “take enormous pride at being part of” the political system (p. 156).

In the last chapter of section 1, “The Return of the King: Women in the Bulgarian Parliament,” Kristen Ghodsee (Bowdoin College) tells us that “Bulgaria became the former socialist country with the highest percentage of women parliamentarians in Central and Eastern Europe” (p. 161). Ghodsee offers a brief historical overview of women in politics under the Communist regime. She then suggests that the high percentage of women in the Bulgarian parliament was neither the result of “a sudden surge in popular support for women politicians” nor “a reinstitution of electoral quotas,” but “rather the result of a historical anomaly,” mainly but not only the king’s return and the way he formed his party (p. 183).

Chapters 8 through 13 comprise the bulk of the second part of the volume. As mentioned already, these chapters consist of interviews

through which we “hear” women’s voices and gain access to fascinating perspectives of women parliamentarians. I found the great differences between the women who decided to enter politics in post-Communist parliaments worth pondering. Some hailed from working-class backgrounds, others worked in clerical positions; and they claimed to have been uninterested in politics prior to 1991. Still others—for example, a professor of economics and finance—were already active in politics before the fall of the Berlin Wall and viewed their continued participation as almost natural. Generational differences are also worthy of note, as clearly seen in Agnieszka Majcher’s interview with Senator Dorota Kempaska.

In the book’s conclusion, the editors draw the voices of academics and politicians into a reflective summary of changes to parliamentary politics in this region. Unlike so many other edited works, with its succinct and suitable introduction and conclusion, Rueschemeyer and Wolchik’s study manages to bring these contributions into a valuable and unified whole. Also, the selected bibliography with its specific focus on women in politics is very useful.

This volume is a valuable addition for students of gender politics, as well as of those of post-Communist Central and East Central European cultures and societies.

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