

Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Sharon

**L. Wolchik (eds.): Women in Power
in Post-Communist Parliaments**

Bloomington, IN, 2009: Indiana University
Press, 256 pp.

This edited volume on women's parliamentary participation in six formerly communist nations (Russia, Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, East Germany, and Bulgaria) is the culmination of a focused effort to bring together scholars studying the role of women in the parliaments of post-communist nations. The book is divided into two parts. The chapters in Part I (Chapters 2–7) analyse a set of common research questions across the six countries in order to facilitate comparative insights. Part II (Chapters 8–13) is based on first-person narratives from female deputies that 'allow the women leaders to speak for themselves' (p. 13) regarding how they came to be involved in politics, how they see their roles, and what issues they have been involved in. The narratives and interview transcripts in Part II add nuance to the patterns discussed in Part I. They provide context and give the reader the opportunity to understand these women's situated experiences. The book begins and ends with remarks by the editors that discuss the broader communist legacy, detail important commonalities and differences among the sample nations, and consider the potential for women to influence politics in each nation.

As outlined in the first chapter, each of the substantive chapters in Part I focuses on six main issues regarding women's representation: (1) factors shaping women's entrance into politics, (2) leadership roles in the parliamentary bodies, (3) perceptions of the place of women in parliament, (4) goals and areas of focus, (5) cooperation between parties, interest groups, and NGOs, and (6) the influence of outside actors (e.g. European Union). Each chapter provides historical, political, and social contextual details and often delves into

broader gender attitudes within the nation, though much of the focus is on the results of interviews with female deputies who served in 2004. Of course, it is not possible in 20–30 pages to fully address all the complex issues discussed above and also cover the particularities of the communist transition, institutional rules, and broader economic and social climate shaping women's representation in each of these nations. Thus, a disadvantage of volumes like this is the tendency to treat the subject in a somewhat cursory manner that is likely less helpful to scholars more deeply involved in the area. Nevertheless, I found the book to provide compelling insights into the situation of female parliamentarians in these nations and applaud the use of a comparative approach that is often missing in similar studies. Therefore, I would emphasise that the *advantage* of such a volume is that it allows the reader to quickly become familiar with the key issues shaping women's political involvement in each nation and to be able to see similarities and patterns that one might have otherwise missed.

Among the similarities of note, all the nations appear to struggle with the shifting meaning of women's representation. The perfunctory status of female members of parliament under communism was apparent and with the transition to democracy, women's representation fell dramatically in all nations. In the years that followed, however, all saw steady gains in women's representation. Yet, many of the women elected were new to politics, and though they often had exemplary qualifications, they lacked access to a pool of female deputies with seniority and experience in leadership roles. Moreover, even where women made gains in representation, this was not matched by a commensurate rise in the level of women as ministers and committee heads. Simultaneously, many of the women elected may have shied away from an explicit focus on 'women's issues' given

that such an approach could be tainted by an association with communism. Along these lines, while quotas were successfully implemented in some nations (e.g. Slovenia), others (e.g., Bulgaria) tended to view them as part of the “undemocratic” legacy of Communism’ (p. 165). Of course, not all patterns found in this sample are unique to the post-communist experience. As found by many prior studies of women’s representation, women’s influence and perception of their role varies by political party affiliation and ties to women’s groups or other non-governmental organisations. In general, the authors do not agree over the utility of having a ‘critical mass’ as being important in shaping the role of women. As prior research has contended, the idea that women must achieve a certain proportion of representation in order to be able to influence outcomes is not particularly useful without attention to the type of women elected, the goals being evaluated, and the context in which they serve. Authors of chapters on the Czech Republic (Wolchik) and Slovenia (Antić) concluded that it was too early to tell what effect higher proportions could have, given that, as of 2005, all nations but Germany had levels at or under 20%. Even in Bulgaria (Ghodsee), which reached a high of 26%, the relative inexperience of the women elected powerfully undermined their impact. No doubt, as the author of the chapter on Poland (Siejmińska) contends, studies of these nations will have to carefully consider how the stability of democratic relations and party co-operation shape women’s experience.

A general question running throughout the book and returned to at the end is what difference women make in these nations. Here the conclusions are relatively mixed. None provide strong evidence that the women either see themselves as representatives of women or women’s issues, though women (and men) in these nations often agree that women are better suited to dealing with social policy concerns. For ex-

ample, in Poland, the main advantage to electing more women was raising the overall acceptance of women as political figures, rather than any concrete policy outcomes. On a more optimistic note, many of the authors concluded that female deputies were more open to the problems facing women and thus the authors could not preclude the idea that women would matter more in the future. For all the nations, women’s influence in parliament was contingent on a supportive party environment (e.g. left party) and pressure from outside organisations (e.g. European Union). Chapters on Russia (Cook and Nchemias) and East Germany (Rueschemeyer) stand out as special cases. The possible impact of women in Russia is severely limited by the overall declines in the power of the legislative branch as governance tilts toward executive power and authoritarianism. In East Germany, reunification with West Germany led to clashes between the goals of Western feminism, the revitalisation of religious influences, and the principles of communist solidarity, making it difficult to create a shared set of policy goals.

In general, this collection of studies achieved its goal of providing a ‘snapshot’ of women in power across these nations. The book is tagged as belonging to the fields of gender studies and East European studies, but it would be a valuable addition to graduate (or upper-division undergraduate) courses on related topics in political science or sociology. I would also recommend it to scholars relatively unfamiliar with this area who are looking for a useful introduction to the issues currently shaping women’s representation in Eastern Europe or Russia. It is clearly written and the continuity of issues and approaches in each of the chapters lends to its readability. Feminist scholars and students planning on conducting interview research in this field will particularly appreciate the chapters that present female deputies in their own words. Theoretically, the payoff

for scholars of women's representation is somewhat more limited. While the book is organised around issues central to this area, it is not explicitly organised around hypotheses derived from prior work nor does the conclusion focus on how the patterns found in these studies extend or contradict work based on prior research. However, I believe that the efforts contained in this book will aid ongoing work developing the theoretical implications of these patterns and empirically testing the relative impact of women's representation across national contexts. As the editors discuss in the first chapter, the question remains as to whether we can continue to view these nations as post-communist or whether new divisions require a rethinking of their place in relation not only to Western democratic traditions but also to each other.

Catherine Bolzendahl
University of California, Irvine
cbolzend@uci.edu

Svetla Baloutzova: Demography and Nation: Social Legislation and Population Policy in Bulgaria, 1918–1944

Budapest and New York 2011: Central European University Press, 280 pp.

Demography and Nation is the first book by Svetla Baloutzova, who works at the Center for Advanced Study (CAS) in Sofia, Bulgaria. This well-researched and highly readable work is a pioneering attempt to investigate the historical origins of modern Bulgaria's social policies concerning women, child care, and family assistance. By providing a rich historical background and a wealth of little-known details, the monograph reconstructs the evolution of government policies on population and family welfare in Bulgaria between the two world wars, as driven by contemporary concerns about the country's demographic and national-security situation. It uses the meth-

odology of the 'regenerated' historical narrative to delve into the genesis of the more important acts of interwar legislation regarding social welfare and population policy. Unfortunately, Baloutzova never makes it clear to what extent her book is based on her almost identically titled doctoral thesis in history, which she defended at Cambridge University in 2005.

The protectionist approach to the family appears to have been first adopted as an official government policy during the disastrous aftermath of the First World War, in which Bulgaria was among the severely punished 'losers'. Elected to power in the immediate postwar period, the leftist Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BZNS) government of Prime Minister Aleksandar Stamboliiski (1919–1923) pursued an activist, state-assisted approach to maternal and child-health issues intended to help Bulgaria recover from the heavy war losses and not crumble demographically from the unbearable war reparations. Stamboliiski's draft Bill for People's Health submitted to the National Assembly in early 1923 was a democratic and egalitarian attempt at the 'physical and spiritual revitalisation' of the traumatised, impoverished and demoralised Bulgarian society, which for the first time included family and child welfare in the scope of state activities. Due to resistance not only from the conservative right but also from the BZNS's erstwhile communist allies, who preferred the statist approach adopted by the Soviet Union in the population domain, the draft bill was holed up in parliamentary committee until a right-wing military coup deposed and most sadistically murdered Prime Minister Stamboliiski in June 1923.

The ruling pro-fascist Democratic Alliance (1923–1934) passed the 1929 People's Health Act, which continued some of the BZNS's progressive policies dealing with the problems of family welfare and motherhood. It also included the broad preventive medicine measures modelled on the State