Introduction to the Symposium on Women’s Political Representation in Central and Eastern Europe

Anna Gwiazda
King’s College London

This symposium explores issues concerning the political representation of women in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). More than thirty years after the fall of communism, the assessment of women’s role in democratic politics is timely and important. On the one hand, there has been growing awareness concerning women’s political representation and the need for gender equality in the context of systemic transformation, internationalisation, and Europeanisation (Bego 2015; Chiva 2017; Matland and Montgomery 2003). On the other hand, illiberalism, populism and democratic backsliding have taken hold of the region (Cianetti et al. 2018; Fagan et al. 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rupnik 2017; Vachudova 2020; Waldner and Lust 2018). However, their effect on gender equality in politics remains largely unexplored. Hence, there is a real need to update the scholarly literature with a comprehensive analysis of post-communist politics in relation to women’s political representation (Gwiazda 2019). Reviewing the changes in female representation in Central and Eastern Europe, a region which has undergone significant political, economic, and social changes in the last few decades, is crucial. Consequently, the main objective of this symposium is to reflect on these developments by addressing the following research question: To what extent are women represented in CEE politics and what explains the differences in women’s political representation in the region?

Political representation is multifaceted and can be examined from different perspectives (Childs and Lovenduski 2013; Lovenduski 2005; Saward 2010; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). The democratic theory offers insights into representation which is defined as “the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact” (Pitkin 1967, 8). The most common approach to studying women’s political representation is to examine women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation focuses on the number of women elected to political institutions, whereas substantive representation is concerned with the effects of women’s presence on policy making and policy outputs, as well as the representation of women’s interests and issues.
(Beckwith 2007; Celis and Childs 2008; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Pitkin 1967; Wängnerud 2009). Since political representation is a constituent of modern democracy, analysing the representation of women is important because it is a good test of the democratic quality (Lijphart 2012; Lovenduski 2005) and fairness (Phillips 1995). Yet, it is argued that representative democracies fail to represent women adequately despite advances in women’s political presence and the greater attention given to women’s issues (Lovenduski 2019). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of this problem and find effective solutions, the study of women’s political representation is vital.

The reasons for political underrepresentation are numerous. Drawing on democratic theory and integrating theories of comparative politics, the scholarly literature on women and politics proposes explanations for variations in political representation, including electoral systems, the demand and supply model of political recruitment, political ideology, economic development, gender quotas and informal cultural norms (Erzeel and Celis 2016; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Kittilson 2013; Kenny and Verge 2016; Lovenduski 2016; Stockemer 2007). This symposium contributes to the literature by focusing specifically on institutional and agency-based factors such as nudging, preference voting, political parties and women’s agency.

This symposium is composed of five articles. The first article highlights the role of nudging. Alexandra Iancu argues that political parties in Romania have undergone incremental changes with respect to women’s inclusion in politics owing to changes in party regulations. In the next article, Gabriella Ilonszki and Adrienn Vajda examine the extent to which party selection and voting behaviour determine the electoral opportunities and victories of women candidates. The third article focuses on the case of Latvia. Laura A. Dean demonstrates that small institutional changes can lead, over time, to a high level of female representation. The fourth article discusses the adoption of gender quotas in CEE countries. Anja Vojvodic argues that the advocacy of women’s groups is vital for the representation of women’s issues such as gender quotas in politics. The final article is concerned with the “what” and “when” of women’s substantive representation. Anna Gwiazda uses the refined partisan theory to analyse women’s issues, ideological complexity, and issue-framing in Poland, dominated by the right-wing populist party.

These contributions make interesting observations from a comparative perspective. Although over time women’s political representation has increased in Central and Eastern
Europe, it varies significantly among the countries in the region. While Latvia is currently the best performer in terms of women’s parliamentary representation, Hungary is the worst (as of December 2020). In Hungary, political parties select a much lower share of female candidates, and women are often placed in unwinnable single member districts and list positions. Although voters do not seem inclined to discriminate at the ballot box, the gendered nature of political parties leads to low female representation. Moreover, although a number of countries in the CEE region opted for legislative gender quotas, Latvia and Romania did not; instead they use other mechanisms which have incrementally increased women’s presence in parliaments. In Latvia, preference votes allow for significant changes to the rank order of female candidates in party lists. In Romania, the candidate selection process has been moderately nudged towards gender equality by new party finance regulations. The case of Poland shows that women’s substantive representation can be gendered if the right-wing populist party is in power. Finally, the positive effects of women’s groups on gender quota adoption in CEE countries are corroborated.

Thus, the use of comparative methodology sheds greater light on women’s political representation in Central and Eastern Europe. Landman and Carvalho (2017) underline the importance of different types of comparative methods and how each is useful for drawing inferences, including single-country studies. Contributions to this symposium use case studies, diachronic comparisons in single-country studies and cross-country comparisons to draw inferences about women’s political representation. Qualitative and quantitative studies are guided by inferences (King et al. 1994) and all contributions pinpoint them.

The first implication is that nudging and preference voting are important means of enhancing women’s descriptive representation. Nudges frame choices (John 2013) but little is known about their effects on women’s representation in politics. In this symposium, it is argued that specific party regulations provide incentives for pro-gender equality behaviour and hence can enhance women’s representation. Likewise, preference voting allows voters to rectify the bias of political elites who place women lower on party lists and can result in increased representation. Overall, small institutional changes can have significant consequences for women’s representation.

Second, agency-based factors matter for substantive representation. Although the role of female advocacy has been highlighted in the literature (Beckwith 2010), its impact in CEE countries has been overlooked. However, it appears that women’s groups advocated for
legislative gender quotas and often aided their adoption process significantly, thus potentially contributing to higher female descriptive representation in the future. By putting women’s issues on the political agenda and contributing to their adoption, women’s advocacy groups have played a crucial role in facilitating substantive representation. Conversely, even if the number of female representatives in parliament is now higher than in the 1990s, it does not guarantee the adoption of feminist policies. The critical mass theory assumes a link between descriptive and substantive representation, that is, more women in parliament should result in better representation of feminist causes (Childs and Krook 2008). In this symposium, it is argued that women’s substantive representation has a gendered nature in countries dominated by right-wing populist parties. Right-wing populists frame issues and adopt policies related to women’s issues in a way that allows them to emphasise their socially conservative values and strategic objectives.

Finally, the role of political parties is undeniable. In the early 1990s, political parties were “the missing variable” in the scholarly literature on women and politics (Baer 1993, 547). Since then, burgeoning literature has examined the relationship between women and political parties in established democracies. However, CEE countries have been neglected. (For example, the special issue of Party Politics entitled “Re-gendering party politics” edited by Celis et al. [2016] examined only Western Europe). Thus, this symposium not only brings attention to an unexplored region but also highlights aspects which have not been discussed sufficiently, for example, parties and nudging, and parties and gendered representation. It also demonstrates that gendered parties are responsible for low levels of female representation. In summary, political parties play an important role in both the descriptive and substantive representation of women. They are “the main variable” explaining women’s political representation.

Overall, this symposium offers new insights into comparative research on women and politics by providing detailed analyses of several countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The findings provide a better understanding of the mechanisms of representation and offer explanations for its variation in the region. Yet, further research is required to understand fully how gendered democracies are transformed into egalitarian democracies, and indeed, what hinders gender equality in politics.
Contributions

Introduction to the Symposium

Anna Gwiazda

1) Increasing women’s political representation in post-communism: party nudges and financial corrections in Romania

Alexandra Iancu

2) Gendered Parties and Gendered Voters in Hungary? “Plus ça change, plus c’est pariel”.

Gabriella Ilonszki and Adrienn Vajda

3) Striking Out Women: Preferential Voting and Gender Bias in Latvian Saeima Elections

Laura A. Dean

4) Persistent Movements and Opportune Moments: Women’s Groups and Gender Quota Adoption in Central and Eastern Europe

Anja Vojvodic

5) Exploring the “what” and “when” of women’s substantive representation: the role of right-wing populist party ideology

Anna Gwiazda

References

Baer, Denise L. 1993. “Political Parties: The Missing Variable in Women and Politics Research.” Political Research Quarterly 46 (3): 547–76.

Beckwith, Karen. 2007. “Numbers and Newness: The Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women.” Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique 40 (1): 27–49.

———. 2010. “Beyond Compare? Women’s Movements in Comparative Perspective.” In Women, Gender and Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bego, Ingrid. 2015. Gender Equality Policy in the European Union: A Fast Track to Parity for the New Member States. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Celis, Karen, and Sarah Childs. 2008. “Introduction: The Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women: New Directions.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 61 (3): 419–25.

Celis, Karen, Sarah Childs, and Johanna Kantola. 2016. “Regendering Party Politics: An Introduction.” *Party Politics* 22 (5): 571–75.

Childs, Sarah, and Mona Lena Krook. 2008. “Critical Mass Theory and Women’s Political Representation.” *Political Studies* 56 (3): 725–36.

Childs, Sarah, and Joni Lovenduski. 2013. “Political Representation.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, edited by Weylan, Georgina, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon, 489–513. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chiva, Cristina. 2017. *Gender, Institutions and Political Representation: Reproducing Male Dominance in Europe’s New Democracies*. London: Springer.

Cianetti, Licia, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley. 2018. “Rethinking ‘Democratic Backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking beyond Hungary and Poland.” *East European Politics* 34 (3): 243–56.

Erzeel, Silvia, and Karen Celis. 2016. “Political Parties, Ideology and the Substantive Representation of Women.” *Party Politics* 22 (5): 576–86.

Fagan, Adam, Petr Kopecký, Lenka Bustikova, and Andrea L. P. Pirro. 2020. “Anniversary Symposium, ‘1989 at 30 Years.’” *East European Politics* 36 (3): 315–17.

Franceschet, Susan, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2008. “Gender Quotas and Women’s Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina.” *Politics & Gender* 4 (3): 393–425.

Gwiazda, Anna. 2019. “Introduction to the Special Issue on Politics and Gender in Eastern Europe *Politics & Gender*, Volume 15 (Issue 2): 175–81.

John, Peter. 2013. *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think*. London New Delhi New York Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.

Kenny, Meryl, and Tània Verge. 2016. “Opening Up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era.” *Government and Opposition* 51 (3): 351–69.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry. Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kittilson, Miki Caul. 2013. “Party Politics.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Landman, Todd, and Edzia Carvalho. 2017. *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*. Fourth Edition.

Lijphart, Arend. 2012. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lovenduski, Joni. 2005. *Feminizing Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 2016. “The Supply and Demand Model of Candidate Selection: Some Reflections.” *Government and Opposition* 51 (3): 513–28.

———. 2019. “Feminist Reflections on Representative Democracy.” In *Rethinking Democracy*. Chichester: Wiley.
Matland, Richard, and Kathleen Montgomery, eds. 2003. Women’s Access to Political Power in Post-Communist Europe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Phillips, Anne. 1995. The Politics of Presence. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1967. The Concept of Representation. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Rupnik, Jacques. 2017. “Illiberal Democracy in East-Central Europe.” Esprit June (6): 69–85.

Saward, Michael. 2010. The Representative Claim. Oxford University Press.

Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie A., and William Mishler. 2005. “An Integrated Model of Women’s Representation.” The Journal of Politics 67 (2): 407–28.

Stockemer, Daniel. 2007. “Why Are There Differences in the Political Representation of Women in the 27 Countries of the European Union?” Perspectives on European Politics and Society 8 (4): 476–93.

Vachudova, Milada Anna. 2020. “Ethnopolulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe.” East European Politics 36 (3): 318–40.

Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding.” Annual Review of Political Science 21 (1): 93–113.

Wängnerud, Lena. 2009. “Women in Parlaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation.” Annual Review of Political Science 12 (1): 51–69.