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Social Policy, Poverty, and Inequality in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Agency and Institutions in Flux. Ed. Sofiya An, Tatiana Chubarova, Bob Deacon, and Paul Stubbs. CROP International Poverty Series, 6. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2019. 311 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Figures. Tables. €34.90, paper.
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This packed volume takes stock of post-socialist social policy developments in what is termed the “Global East,” an area which is “not rich or powerful enough to be part of the Global North, not poor or powerless enough to be part of the Global South” (11). Using this concept is a form of “strategic essentialism,” meant to provoke and

challenge the focus on the north-south divide in social policy. The editors concede that this bundles societies as divergent from one another as Tajikistan and Slovenia but the post-socialist states concerned have all witnessed the “rescaling of welfare arrangements, the privileging of ‘economic’ over ‘social’ policies, and . . . financial, institutional and capacity constraints which, at times, have resulted in reforms being both ineffective and inequitable (11). The end of state-socialism of course occurred in a parallel to neoliberal ascendancy when the “social” was delinked from the economic and the political as the editors remind us in their comprehensive introduction. Social protection was, at best, ancillary to political and economic reforms.

The collection derives from a 2017 workshop which mapped out some of the diverse welfare trajectories in post-socialist states of central, eastern, and southeastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Rather than focusing on the immediate post-socialist period of the early 1990s, particular attention is paid to the fallout of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia are treated in particular detail. The volume explicitly does not attempt a “handbook” style overview of the countries concerned. Rather, the structure is thematic in its attempt to “bring the social back in” to policy, and the study of it, in the Global East. Some contributions are single country studies, others are comparative. A number of authors focus on more traditional elements of social policy making, like pensions, unemployment benefits, and social services while other contributors rely more on an ethnographically-inflected understanding of social policies as “fluid, complex, multi-actor assemblages” (13).

The first theme addressed is poverty and inequality. Esuna Dugarova’s chapter analyses how social protection is balanced with active labor market policies in five former Soviet states. Yet unemployment is not the most critical cause of poverty; Dugarova reminds us that the majority of those living in poverty are employed. Natalia Grigorieva reviews knowledge production about inequality in Russia in terms of income inequality, regional inequalities, gender, and public opinion. Though critical of the early 1990s privatizations, Russians’ acceptance of inequality has grown over time, couched in more individualistic attitudes and declining sympathy toward the poor. Tatiana Chubarova hones in on inequality in access to the Russian health system and the formation of a two-tier model resulting in a sadly predictable decline in quality for poorer Russians and a better service for those wealthier citizens who can afford out-of-pocket-payments. The final chapter in the section by Natalija Atas examines the daily struggles and constrained agency of Lithuania’s working poor, explored through qualitative interviews.

The second cluster of the book focuses on policy actors and institutional change in four single-country studies. Maja Gerovska Mitev’s chapter examines the role of the World Bank, the EU, and UN agencies in poverty alleviation in (North) Macedonia. A contribution on the fragile Kosovo pension system by Igor Guardiancich details how it is at risk from clientelistic party competition (with war veterans being a key constituent as in other former Yugoslav states). Sofiya An’s study of the transformation of child welfare institutions in Kazakhstan is perhaps the most innovative chapter in the collection. It takes into account the legacy of the Soviet welfare system while carefully mapping out post-Soviet institutional evolution. Her claim that the “question of the relationship between institutional continuity and change is central to inquiry into post-Soviet and post-socialist welfare transformation” (171) is problematized in a manner which is theoretically informed and supported empirically through in-depth semi-structured interviews with “stakeholders” and an array of documents. Ann-Mari Sätre explores the impact of women’s agency in poverty reduction strategies in Russia, noting that it is framed as charity rather than empowerment with the Russian state being reliant on the unpaid labor of women to fill in gaps in the “badly shredded Russian safety net” (199).

The third and final cluster of chapters is organized around the theme of welfare trajectories and assemblages. Elena Maltseva and Saltanat Janenova provide a diachronic account of the pension system in Kazakhstan. The trajectory from privatization to (re)nationalization is explained by shifts of endogenous and exogenous factors. Gulnaz Isabekova examines the diverse courses in healthcare among post-Soviet states. While all inherited the Semashko healthcare system of public ownership, reform paths differed considerably and Isabekova maps out and provides typologies of the respective paths, explainable largely due to interactions between the state and external actors. Noémie Lendvai-Bainton brings central and east European states back into the discussion by exploring their uneven welfare trajectories. Economic convergence within the EU has resulted in a diverse set of outcomes for these countries (most worryingly in Poland and Hungary with their brands of austerity and anti-welfare populism). Here she provides a succinct overview of Hungary's "illiberal neoliberalism" under Viktor Orbán as an attack on the welfare state. The final chapter, by Paul Stubbs and Siniša Zrinščak, examines post-Yugoslav welfare trajectories (often overlooked in the social policy literature of the Global East) through a comparative study of the "drivers of inertia that impact on welfare reforms" (302), offering a middle way between macro-level analysis of welfare and ethnographic approaches to care, wellbeing and welfare.

While the jump between methods, foci, and approaches can disorient the reader somewhat, the volume absolutely succeeds as a critical appeal for the expansion of the study of the "social" at different scales. The book is certainly of interest not only to scholars of social policy but to specialists of the area more broadly ("area" understood in the widest possible sense here) who are interested in how the legacies of universal welfare and full employment (or nearly full employment in the case of Yugoslavia) have fared in the divergent paths charted through the "peak neoliberalism" of recent decades.

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