

Book Review: The Political and Social Construction of Poverty: Central and East European countries in transition

by Serena Romano

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In *The Political and Social Construction of Poverty*, **Serena Romano** provides an extremely comprehensive and thoughtful account of the changes in welfare provision and government attempts to deal with poverty in the Central and East European region from the Soviet period up to the contemporary period. **Eleanor Bindman** concludes that this volume will be of interest to both academics and domestic and international policymakers concerned with the persistent problems of welfare reform, poverty and social exclusion in Europe.

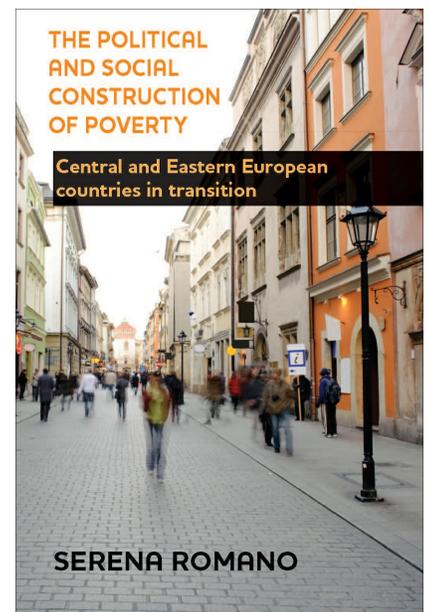


The Political and Social Construction of Poverty: Central and East European countries in transition. Serena Romano. Policy Press. January 2014.

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In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the imposition of dramatic changes to welfare provision in a number of European countries as part of the subsequent adoption of 'austerity' programmes for public spending, there has perhaps never been a better time to explore the changing nature of the welfare state in those Central and East European countries which have moved from Communist systems of state welfare based on full employment to varying models which are now much more in line with those maintained by their fellow EU member states.

[Serena Romano's](#) volume on Central and East European welfare systems and their attempts to deal with poverty in the years since the collapse of Communism in the region in 1989 seeks to explore this relatively under-researched area. It provides both a comprehensive account of the welfare models which existed in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, and Slovenia, and of the significant changes that they have undergone in the post-Communist period, which includes the process leading up to accession to the European Union in 2004 and the challenging years following the EU's eastern enlargement. By focusing more specifically on the issue of poverty both before and after the collapse of Communism and the various attempts by governments to tackle this problem (which exploded as a consequence of radical economic reforms in the region such as the infamous 'shock therapy' approach), Romano shows us how poverty as a problem is socially and politically constructed, as are the purported solutions to it. In taking this approach she argues that ideas, norms, and values exert a major influence over policy formulation, delivery, and the identification of those groups deemed to be either 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of state social support.



The early sections of the book examine the type of welfare provision available in Central and Eastern Europe during the post-war Communist period, while drawing attention to the fact that all of the countries used here as case studies had extensive systems of social insurance, family allowances, and pension provision which not only predated the Communist era but were put in place often many years ahead of other, supposedly more 'advanced' nations in Western Europe. While the Communist regimes which were established in the region introduced their own, extensive forms of social security which were designed to eliminate the problem of poverty once and for all,

Romano points out that the total reliance on full employment and workplace-based distribution of social goods and benefits and the absence of civil and political rights meant that those who for whatever reason were unable to work were divided into the categories of the 'deserving' poor (i.e. those with physical disabilities which prevented them from working) and 'undeserving' poor (those who were able-bodied but unemployed and therefore denounced as 'parasites').



Photo 68 by Marius Mhler, from the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion project. Credit: [DG EMPL](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Indeed, as Romano highlights, the Communist maxim that 'he who does not work, does not eat' with its emphasis on individual responsibility and the importance of work has a number of overlaps with the growth in popularity in Western Europe and North America from the late 1980s onwards of 'workfare' programmes which sanction those perceived to be too reluctant to take up paid work and the related political discourse on unemployment and poverty which emphasises individual rather than state responsibility for ensuring one's social needs are met. At the same time, while significant poverty and social inequality persisted under these Communist regimes, it was virtually impossible to discuss these issues since to admit they existed would be to question the success and legitimacy of the regimes themselves and those who did live in poverty became increasingly stigmatised or simply ignored by the state, attitudes which were to shape the way in which post-Communist elites and societies also came to see these problems in subsequent years.

As Romano points out, the collapse of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the radical economic, political, and social changes which followed meant that most elements of the soviet social contract – which relied upon full employment, employment-linked social security coverage, and the allocation of subsidised goods – were abandoned, leading to a dramatic decline in living standards and an explosion in levels of poverty and unemployment in the region. Yet the decision to pursue EU membership and seek advice on economic reform from international organisations such as the World Bank and IMF in the early to mid-1990s brought no respite. While the World Bank insisted that these countries' relatively extensive social security systems be cut back and brought into line with a market economy, the EU either ignored the issues of poverty and social exclusion in these 'transition' countries or made recommendations for 'streamlining' these systems into a more basic social safety net which were broadly in line with those of the international financial institutions and privileged economic integration over social cohesion. More recently, the financial crisis of 2008 has brought fresh challenges to welfare provision and levels of employment in both old and new EU member states with consequences that are still unravelling.

Overall, Romano provides an extremely comprehensive and thoughtful, if at times a little repetitive, account of the changes in welfare provision and government attempts to deal with poverty in the region from the Soviet period up

to the contemporary period, with all six of the countries she uses as case studies now established members of the European Union. It is clear from her account that the experience of the soviet model of welfare provision and the impact of its collapse has shaped, and in many respects continues to shape, both elite and public attitudes towards the state's obligations in this area, those who receive social security payments, and those who live in poverty. While Romano focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, much of what she says has great relevance in terms of social policy developments in those countries which were part of the Soviet Union, such as Russia, and for the European Union in terms of how it continues to influence the development of a 'social model' in its own member states but also in its 'Wider Neighbourhood' which includes countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. As a result, this volume will be of interest to both academics and domestic and international policymakers concerned with the persistent problems of welfare reform, poverty and social exclusion in Europe.

Eleanor Bindman is a third-year PhD researcher in Politics at the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses on the EU's human rights policy in relation to Russia, with other research interests including contemporary Russian politics, international relations and social policy. She previously studied Russian language, history and politics at the universities of Edinburgh and London and in 2010 worked as an intern for the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Prior to starting her PhD she worked as a research assistant for Human Rights Watch in Moscow and has also worked as a freelance translator for several years. [Read more reviews by Eleanor.](#)

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