The Graying of Central and Eastern Europe

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This book examines the determinants and implications of population aging in Central and Eastern Europe and is a product of a 2007 international workshop on “Understanding the Drivers of Population Ageing in Central and Eastern Europe—Fertility, Mortality and Migration” held at Oxford University. By way of a brief overview, it is divided into four sections: (a) population aging in Eastern Europe, with individual chapters on Poland, Lithuania, and Russia; (b) population aging in Central-Eastern Europe, with contributions on the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia; (c) population aging in Southeastern Europe, with chapters on Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria; and (d) a summary section containing chapters on the implications of population aging for physical and cognitive functioning; for family relations and family care; and on the sustainability of the demographic trends contributing to population aging. Introductory and concluding chapters by the editor set the stage for and tie together the themes raised throughout the volume.

One might ask why we should be interested in demographic trends occurring in countries such as Lithuania and Slovenia. Individually—and with the possible exception of Russia—the nations given detailed consideration in the book are not major players on the world’s demographic stage. According to the Population Reference Bureau’s 2012 *World Population Data Sheet*, the total population sizes of these nations range from Slovenia’s 2.1 million persons and Lithuania’s 3.2 million to Poland’s 38.2 million (Population Reference Bureau, 2013). Only Russia at 143.2 million was among the 10 most populous countries in the world, and Russia ranked ninth among the 10. Collectively, the nine countries discussed in this book make up slightly less than a third of the total population of Europe and only slightly more than 3% of the world’s population.

So if we are not dealing with major demographic players (e.g., countries such as China, India, and the United States), why then should demographers and gerontologists take note of what is happening in these Central and Eastern European nations? The answer is twofold and relates to the interdependent intersection of social change and demographic aging. First, in the past couple of decades, nations in this region have witnessed fundamental transformations in their social, political, and economic systems. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, these countries went through rapid transitions from socialism and Communism with centralized and highly regulated economies to governance by more democratic political systems with capitalistic, market-oriented economies. Second, and partly as a consequence of the geopolitical transformations, countries in this region have been and will continue to experience both negative population growth and a pronounced, rapid, and dramatic degree of population aging. Of the nine countries on which there are individual chapters, seven are current members of the European Union (Russia does not belong to the EU, and Croatia will become a member on July 1, 2013). Easily accessible Eurostat projections for these seven nations taken together indicate that their total populations will have fallen from 92.7 million in 2010 to 76.1 million by the year 2060, whereas the percentages of persons 65 years of age and older will have increased from 14.9% in 2010 to 35.0% in 2060 (Giannakouris, 2008). This pronounced trend toward population aging—set against the backdrops of declining population size and fundamental changes in the social, economic, and political systems in these regions—comprise what Frątczak in her chapter on Poland refers to as a “... demographic laboratory of modern times, where deep transformations in the demographic processes took place with great intensity in a very short time” (p. 29).

Collectively, the chapters in this book make several important contributions. First, the volume provides valuable case studies of how major demographic changes intersecting with fundamental changes in social, political, and economic systems will present a variety of formidable policy challenges. Labor markets, pension systems, the financing and provision of health care and social services, and family structure and intergenerational relationships, to name a few, will all be affected.
How countries respond to these challenges, and which countries are more (or less) successful in doing so will surely remain topics of great interest to gerontologists. On many levels, then, there is much material here for anyone interested in the reciprocal relationships between social change and population aging.

Second, the book reminds us of the heterogeneity that exists in the process of population aging, even within Europe and within these regions of Europe. Many countries in Western Europe experienced the initial stages of population aging over a lengthy period of time, giving them the luxury of being able to develop national infrastructures to support their older populations. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe will not have this luxury of time. As Hoff points out in his concluding chapter, “...in contrast to CEE [Central and Eastern Europe] Western European societies became affluent before they started to turn into ageing societies” (p. 250). Further, the heterogeneity associated with population aging is seen not only between regions and countries but within countries as well. Safarova’s chapter on Russia, for example, points to the variable impact of gender, rural/urban, and regional differences.

Third, the book not only examines in detail the principal country-specific drivers of demographic change—fertility, mortality, and migration—but it also shows how these drivers of population aging differ in their impacts. Although all three of the major demographic processes play a role in population aging, the specific impact of each of these factors varies from country to country, a point noted by Gjonça and Gjonça in their chapter on the future sustainability of these demographic trends.

Despite the book’s strengths and its appeal to those who may be interested in the antecedents and consequences of rapid population aging, several features of the volume detract from its overall value. First, edited volumes tend to have a certain amount of unevenness to their contributions. Regrettably, this is true of Population Ageing in Central and Eastern Europe. For one thing, the contributions dealing with the nine specific nations all have a section documenting the demographic antecedents of population aging, which presumably is intended to provide a measure of comparability across these chapters. This reviewer wishes that the editor had imposed an even more consistent template on each of these contributions. A close examination will disclose that some chapters use 60+ as the delineation of old age while others use 65+. Periods of future projections vary. Basic information such as total population size and size of the older population—historically, at present, and into the future—are not consistently available or easily accessible in each of the chapters. Either by ensuring that each author provided such comparable information or by collating it in a summary table, comparability of the basic information provided in each of the chapters would have been appreciably enhanced.

Each chapter then deals with a specific subtheme related to population aging, presumably reflecting the particular interests of the individual contributors. Thus, the chapter on Poland explores in depth the nuclear family and intergenerational relationships in Poland, whereas the chapter on Lithuania examines changing perceptions of the aged and aging in the Lithuanian context. The chapter on Romania, in addition to providing the basics about population aging, considers aging in the rural Romanian context and international labor migration, whereas the chapter on Croatia focuses on the economic implications of demographic aging in Croatia. Although these individual emphases may be of more or less interest to any given reader, carrying some of these subthemes across chapters also would have enhanced the comparative value of the volume. A couple of simple examples follow. A consistent conclusion in the book is that these nations will experience rapid growth of their older populations coupled with relative and/or absolute decreases in the size of their gainfully employed populations. One of the responses to this growing imbalance between the numbers of contributors to pension systems and the number of recipients has been to increase the age at which one can begin to draw pensions. What the age of eligibility for pensions has been in the past, what it is currently, and whether and how it is changing is an illustration of the kind of information that might have been presented consistently across the chapters. Then, too, a few of the chapters offer tantalizing glimpses of the state of gerontological research and the state of research on population aging in the respective countries; additional information about the quality of the gerontological research enterprise in each of the nations (somewhat along the lines of the International Spotlight series in The Gerontologist) would have been of great interest.

Not all of the material presented in the figures is reader friendly. This reviewer’s corrected vision with glasses is quite good, yet it took a rather
powerful magnifying glass to decipher the age group legend in Figure 4.4 of the book. Magnifying glasses will not be needed for all of the figures, but the grayscale format of the figures may make it necessary for readers to work a little harder to glean the information being presented.

One last issue deals with emphasis. As this volume makes abundantly clear, the rapid population aging that will occur in Central and Eastern Europe will pose enormous challenges to the economies and polities of these countries. These challenges will be all the greater because they come at a time when these nations are struggling to shift to capitalism and democratization, economic and political processes which themselves are contributing to the population aging. But population aging is not simply a major social problem in search of solutions. Population aging may also be seen as an achievement to be celebrated, a demographic phenomenon to be applauded. In this view, declining birth rates reflect growing individual control over reproductive processes, whereas increasing life expectancy represents the triumph of good health over illness and disease. And population aging may also be viewed as a significant societal opportunity. Larger numbers of older persons in better health and with more discretionary time are available to contribute to the amelioration and solution of a nation’s problems. The social capital represented by the wisdom and experience possessed by elders is there to be drawn upon for the mutual benefit of older persons themselves and society at large. In short, although there can be no denying the challenges and problems resulting from rapid population aging that lie ahead, challenges that are amply documented throughout this book, a greater emphasis on these corollary perspectives would have provided a more balanced portrait of the implications of population aging.

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