



DAGMAR GRAMSHAMMER-HOHL,  
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# FOREIGN COUNTRIES OF OLD AGE

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EAST AND SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN  
PERSPECTIVES ON AGING

## From:

*Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl, Oana Hergenröther (eds.)*

### **Foreign Countries of Old Age**

East and Southeast European Perspectives on Aging

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The exploration of what May Sarton calls the »foreign country of old age« usually does not go far beyond the familiar: the focus of aging studies has thus far clearly rested upon North America and Western Europe. This multi-disciplinary essay collection critically examines conditions and representations of old age and aging in Eastern and Southeastern Europe from various perspectives of the humanities and social sciences. By shedding light on these culturally specific contexts, the contributions widen our understanding of the aging process in all its diversity and demonstrate that a shift in perspectives might in fact challenge a number of taken-for-granted positions and presumptions of aging studies.

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## Preface

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This volume was made possible through the support of a number of people and institutions. First of all, we would like to thank Roberta Maierhofer, who introduced us to each other on the occasion of the first joint conference of the European and North-American Networks in Aging Studies in Graz in April 2017 and strongly encouraged us to collaborate and edit this essay collection. We are also grateful to Roberta's series co-editors Heike Hartung and Ulla Kribernegg for agreeing to include this book into the "Aging Studies" series. Our special thanks go to the Department for Science and Research of the Federal State of Styria as well as the University of Graz for their generous funding of this publication.

The authors of the essays in this collection were partly invited by us to contribute and partly responded to our call for papers. All contributions have undergone a double-blind peer review process. We are grateful to all the reviewers from Austria, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, Russia, Serbia and the United States who invested their time and provided their expertise to help assure the quality of this publication. We would like to thank all of our contributors for their cooperation and their patience during the different stages of the reviewing and editing processes. Peter Kenny deserves our special thanks for proofreading so thoroughly and thoughtfully the major part of the articles. We are also very grateful to Mark Shuttleworth for his excellent translations from Russian.

This publication is directed toward aging researchers, specialists in the fields of Slavic, East and Southeast European studies as well as a broader audience. Both original quotations and their English translations are, therefore, provided. For titles, personal names (except contributors' names), place names, terms and the like, the scientific transliteration of Cyrillic alphabets (ISO/R9:1968) is used.

Graz, July 2020



# Introduction

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*Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl & Oana Hergenröther*

## AGING STUDIES IN THE TIME OF CORONA

We were finalizing the editing of this essay collection, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck Europe, rapidly spreading all over the continent and paralyzing it in an unprecedented lockdown for more than two months. As we are writing these lines, infection curves are, finally, flattening in the countries hit hardest, such as Italy and Spain, whereas the World Health Organization (WHO) is reporting the largest single-day increase in confirmed coronavirus cases since the outbreak of the disease, with two-thirds of them registered in only four countries of the world – the Russian Federation being among them (WHO 2020a; 2020b).

The WHO informs us that “Older people, and people of all ages with pre-existing medical conditions [...] appear to develop serious illness more often than others” (WHO 2020c). Correspondingly, WHO-Europe’s COVID-19 report of, for instance, week 19/2020 (4-10 May 2020) indicates that 79 percent of all intensive care unit admissions were in persons aged 50-79 years of age, and 94 percent of all deaths were in persons aged 60 years and more. It is, however, noteworthy that 97 percent of all deaths caused by a COVID-19 infection in week 19/2020 had at least one underlying condition, with cardiovascular disease being the leading comorbidity (66 percent) (WHO-Europe 2020). The decisive parameter for getting seriously ill, obviously, is not old age *per se*; it is pre-existing medical conditions, which often, but not necessarily, come with old age.<sup>1</sup> Consistently, we read about centenarians and even supercentenarians hav-

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1 In absolute numbers, the majority of people with multimorbidity are middle-aged. However, the proportion of the population with multimorbidity increases with age. See, for instance, Yarnall et al. 2017.

ing fully recovered from a COVID-19 infection, the most famous case being that of Spain's oldest woman, the 113-year-old María Branyas (Rössler 2020).

Nevertheless, in the time of “Corona” – a heading that has come to denote not only the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the infectious disease it provokes but also the global crisis that the pandemic has entailed –, chronological age in the first place underlies government policies, social behavior as well as individual decisions. However, it does so differently in different countries. There is no global response to the challenges of fighting the pandemic. In some regions, chronological age appears to count more than it does in others. In some regions, older people seem to be more in need of protection than they are in others. In some regions, the lives of the elderly matter more than they do in others. This, in fact, is *cultural aging* and thus strongly requires age/aging studies' investigation.

## LOCKDOWN MEASURES ACROSS EUROPE AND BEYOND: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Don't be an idiot! You're not the others, you're  
an exclusion! / Choreograph the furniture, essay  
wall-paper fusion. / Make that wardrobe a barricade.  
The fates require us / to keep out Cosmos,  
Chronos, Eros, Race and Virus!

(Не будь дураком! Будь тем, чем другие не  
были. / Не выходи из комнаты! То есть дай  
волю мебели, / слейся лицом с обоями. За-  
прись и забаррикадируйся / шкафом от хро-  
носа, космоса, эроса, расы, вируса.)

*Joseph Brodsky: “Don't leave your room, don't  
commit that fateful mistake...” (1970)*

The overwhelming relevance of the research that went into all the articles in this collection is revealed in the context of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed, among many other things, a deep-set ageism – that is, people's discrimination on the basis of their age.

Lockdown measures have aimed to protect the “older generation” in the first place, whom infection statistics had shown to be the most vulnerable part of the population. However, the consequence has been a far-reaching “locking-up” of members of all population segments not considered systemically relevant. Several countries chose to decree a rigorous curfew without even giving citizens the

permission to take a walk or do sports. As the results of a sociological survey conducted by the Levada-Center in Russia in April 2020 show, what respondents missed most during curfew were the possibility of moving freely (42 percent) and leisure (35 percent), such as sports (Levada-Centr 2020). In Austria, the editors' country of residence, regulations were not so strict in this respect. Different restrictions for different segments of the population had been discussed but were finally discarded as ageist (John/Schnauder/Thaler 2020). The Austrian government, like other European governments, limited itself to giving strong recommendations for older people to stay at home and self-isolate. In other countries, the curfew was more severe for the elderly (mostly, people aged 65 years and over) than it was for younger cohorts. The Swedish government at a certain moment even deliberated introducing different regulations for men and women: as older men, according to Swedish statistics, run a higher risk of being infected with COVID-19 and more often die from the disease, certain restrictions had been considered targeting men aged 70+ on one hand and women aged 72+ on the other (ORF 2020).

While at the beginning of the pandemic, a rhetoric of solidarity with society's weakest members prevailed, social gaps have now become even more striking. The crisis has brought forward inequalities and inequities in living conditions, health status and income, all of which are affecting seniors to an even greater extent. As Jane G. Harris puts it with regard to the U.S., COVID-19 "has wreaked havoc in communities of color, among the poor, and the 'undocumented'."<sup>2</sup> What went rather unnoticed on a global scale is the disproportionately high mortality rate among seniors on the Navajo and other reservations.<sup>3</sup> Not least, COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequalities that exist between those elder people living in long-term care facilities as opposed to those living at home independently. As many of the first COVID-19 deaths occurred in nursing homes, visits to senior institutions were prohibited or at least restricted in many countries. As a consequence, the Corona crisis has made visible the weaknesses of institutional care for the elderly, frail and disabled persons. In countries like Slovakia, for instance, it relies on large-capacity facilities where clients have only minimal space for individual plans and needs. Under the circumstances, the spatial and, hence, the social isolation of seniors in these institutions may cause even more harm than the virus itself.

However, while some assert that those living at home have been fortunate in that they can regulate their lives, using telephones and/or the Internet, without

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2 E-mail to the editors by Jane G. Harris from June 3, 2020.

3 See, for instance, Chatham 2020.

having to leave the safety of their home space, others draw the attention to the situation worsening for those seniors living alone in single households. In Russia, for instance, older people often do not even have simple mobile phones, let alone smartphones or computers, which made them unable either to order food and medicine online or to download or print the necessary permission, during curfew, to go shopping or visit a hospital. Previous studies regarding ICT use by older people in Romania (see Loos/Nimrod/Fernández-Ardèvol 2018; 2020) show that although there was an increase in technology use among older people between 2017 and 2019, still no more than 25-35 percent of people aged 65 and above are using the Internet; the differences between rural and urban areas are also consistent. In addition, the use of Internet-based services (e.g., online shopping or online medical assistance) is below 10 percent among older people in Romania.<sup>4</sup>

Being exposed to the stress of a suddenly changed life, locked in and alone with frightening news in their apartments, deprived of their daily routines such as going for a walk and chatting with their neighbors, many old people's physical, moral and mental condition seems to have deteriorated rapidly. Psychologist Olga Krasnova points to media reports indicating an increase in the number of calls to psychological support helplines in Russia with complaints of anxiety during curfew; the number of people contacting psychologists was four times bigger in May 2020 as compared to May 2019. However, no analysis of those individuals by age, gender or social status has been carried out thus far.<sup>5</sup> Further investigation of the consequences of the measures taken will certainly be needed.

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4 The lockdown raises questions that need further exploration. First, how did older people manage to get basic goods and medicine during this time? Did they acquire new ICT skills during lockdown, as a result of the pressure to access different online applications for information, shopping and communication with family and friends? Did they start to use different media and mobile applications as compared to the time before the pandemic? And, consequently, did they use some of the media (including social media) and mobile applications to a greater extent as compared to the time before the COVID-19 crisis? To answer these questions, a cross-national online survey has been launched in English, French, Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, Spanish and German. The project reunites an international team led by Hannah Marston. It is the first study during the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on technology use in everyday life. See <https://healthwellbeing.kmi.open.ac.uk/covid-19/technology-social-connections-loneliness-leisure-activities/> [accessed June 1, 2020]. E-mail to the editors by Loredana Ivan from June 1, 2020.

5 E-mail to the editors by Olga Krasnova from June 18, 2020.

The general assessment is that in Russia, the elderly successfully coped with the period of self-isolation and communication restrictions. Employed elderly people continued to work remotely, fully satisfied with not having to invest their time and efforts into getting to their places of work – which, in megacities like Moscow, can take up to three hours. Those who own a *dacha* in the countryside also experienced a moderated regime. However, official statistics are contradictory.

Among the countries that were most successful in flattening the infection curve was Slovakia. However, it was so at a high cost: there were shopping hours designated only for seniors – from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. –, with no possibility for the younger generations to enter the shops, which caused heated debates in the public discourse. Indicative for the government’s paternalistic stance toward the elderly was prime minister Igor Matovič’s announcement: “We will protect them till the very end...”<sup>6</sup>

Still, seniors in Slovakia were lucky with their shopping time slots. In Serbia, as part of the measures included in the state of emergency declared on March 15, all people over 65 years of age were in strict quarantine until the beginning of May, being entirely forbidden to leave their homes, except for the period between 3 and 7 o’clock in the morning, once a week (most frequently a night between Saturday and Sunday). This measure, although undertaken with the idea to protect the oldest and, reportedly, most endangered generation from the virus, resulted, however, in numerous fines and even arrests of people older than 65 in Serbia – a striking paradox, if the primary declared intention of protecting them is taken into account. Being over the age boundary meant no exercise, no fresh air and no contact with families for an age group that is constantly reminded that these are precisely the things needed for healthy and “successful” aging. On the contrary, the inability to leave their homes, socialize, move and exercise, to see their children, grandchildren and friends, all in a society that still holds the institution of the family in high regard and reverence, will, most probably, have serious and lasting physical and psychological consequences for the age cohort that makes up more than 20 percent of Serbia’s population (Anđelković 2020; Eurostat 2020). The authorities’ patronizing approach has been criticized as the harshest set of restrictions in Europe, though lauded by outside observers for its efficiency.<sup>7</sup>

COVID-19 measures also had a profound impact upon the elderly at the height of the pandemic in North Macedonia. Starting from March 24, persons over 67 years of age were allowed to move freely from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m., which

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6 E-mail to the editors by Ľubica Vofanská from June 3, 2020.

7 See, e.g., Wehrschütz 2020.

was later reduced to only two hours, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Their city transport privileges were temporarily revoked. Lines of pensioners formed in front of the markets and the banks during those two “free” hours. On May 14, the Supreme Court canceled the two-hour limitation on free movement for the elderly and minors, rejecting it as unconstitutional.

Red Cross volunteers had been active in providing for the elderly in need, isolated in their – often tiny – apartments. Many seniors had left the cities for their village houses, where they could move more freely, although this meant risking more difficult access to proper medical care and regular food supply. Extended families living under one roof were able to socialize, but with a significant risk to the elderly dwelling in the same space with younger members who did not have the possibility to work from home.

In Romania, older people also became the main target of the Romanian government’s measures. At the beginning, from March 16, elders were not allowed to leave their houses. Later, they were permitted to go out exclusively to shop for food and medicine, but only for two hours per day. Finally, there was an extension of the time period they could shop for basic goods.

In Croatia, the authorities’ response to COVID-19 was considered successful by most inhabitants; the public opinion coincided with the government’s decision to save lives at all costs. What went rather unnoticed outside Croatia was an earthquake that strongly hit the Croatian capital Zagreb on March 22 – that is, during lockdown. It made people run out of their houses, which made it difficult for them to comply with the social distancing measures imposed by the authorities. Nevertheless, infection and death rates clearly remained below the European average and those of other Southeast European countries. Luckily, the need for elective case triage – whose implicit ageism Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2020) has so forcefully criticized as a “crime against humanity” – could, thus, be avoided.<sup>8</sup>

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8 We are grateful to our contributors Ana Aštalkovska Gajtanoska, Rafaela Božić, Jane G. Harris, Loredana Ivan, Iliana Jakimovska, Maija Kõnönen, Olga Krasnova, Kirill Levinson, Natalija Perišić, Nadežda Satarić, Natalia Stagi Škaro and Eubica Vofanská for the information provided on lockdown measures in their respective countries of residence. For further details on COVID-19 response in the Western Balkans see OECD 2020.

## CORONA GENERATION(S)?

Currently, there is an increasing debate about which age group of those “locked-up” has suffered more from the restrictions. Children are, rightly, said to have been the forgotten ones for not being regarded as systemically relevant. In Austria, while do-it-yourself and hairdresser’s shops were among the first ones to reopen, kindergartens and schools restarted only in mid-May – the latter with reduced class sizes, an obligation to wear face masks outside the classroom, one-way systems in hallways, the interdiction of sports and singing and harsh hygiene regulations. The more the younger generation, at last, becomes the center of attention, the more often the question is raised of the future psychological impact of the confinement and the economic consequences of the measures taken “for the sake” of the elderly. The young are said to be the “Corona generation”<sup>9</sup> who will pay the bill for the protection of their elders. From the point of view of aging studies, it is important to ask what the use of the label “generation” in the current context implies and for what purposes it is used.

The notion of “generation” is akin to that of “age” in that neither of them can be reduced to biological facts: both are means of expressing cultural meaning by marking difference. In social sciences, generations are often equated with age cohorts, i.e., with groups of people who were born within the same range of years. However, generations refer just as much to the socio-historical situation in which they take shape as to biological reproduction.

The problem with defining the term lies in its varying usage: On the one hand, the notion of “generation” has become a powerful point of reference for people who wish to publicly declare themselves as groups with particular interests and to argue their case. On the other hand, it is used as a category of analysis in various academic disciplines, where generations are treated as identifiable communities of coeval socializing experiences. Scholars have repeatedly called into question the theoretical value of the concept, since by using it one reasserts a group’s claim to social affiliation and power instead of investigating its purpose and argument.

One of the first to have rejected a biologicistic notion of generation and drawn attention to its thoroughly social dimension was the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, with his seminal essay on “The Problem of Generations,” published in 1928 (Mannheim 1952). Mannheim stated that the precondition for a generation to emerge is people’s location (*Lagerung*) in the same socio-historical context. Mere coexistence in time does not suffice to create generations; to be part

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9 For links to media coverage see Großegger 2020.

of what Mannheim calls an actual generation (*Generationszusammenhang*), people have to participate in a common destiny, be exposed to the same key historical events and experience the same historical problems. Those groups within an actual generation that work up their common experiences in different specific ways constitute separate generation units (*Generationseinheiten*).

What is striking in Mannheim's essay is that the term "generation" is used throughout synonymously with that of "youth"; Mannheim's study has proved paradigmatic in this sense, too. There is a tradition in generation studies of focusing on the young who come to replace their predecessors. Processes of generation-building among the elderly have thus far been widely ignored. The current use of the label "Corona generation" confirms these findings. Furthermore, in a historical perspective, generational affiliation seems to be a specifically male experience. The German historian Ulrike Jureit has rightly asked what the category of generation is actually able to identify and shed light on, and what it tends to ignore (Jureit 2006: 34).

A notable feature of the term "generation" is its obvious ambiguity, its "double semantics" (Weigel 2005: 116), for it is used to denote belonging in two different senses – a vertical and a horizontal sense. On the one hand, generations can be seen vertically in the context of genealogical succession. Speaking of generations, then, brings to the fore the aspect of continuity and cohesion. On the other hand, generations can be used to signify genealogical rupture between the "young" and the "old." This meaning has come to prevail with the advent of modernity in the late 18th and 19th centuries. In this perspective, brought into focus by Mannheim, old values start giving way to new ones, and "sons" start replacing their "fathers" as political driving forces, for the elderly are no longer considered able to represent actual and future concerns and thus lose their privileged social position.

Generations in their vertical sense are a way of conceptualizing the relationships between parents, children and grandchildren. These intergenerational relations within the family are the main focus of much psychological, pedagogical and, not least, aging research. At the center of a familial understanding of generation is the idea of passing down knowledge, traditions and values. Through intergenerational relations, familial and cultural memory is shared and preserved. This holds true even more for suppressed memories: family is also the site of unconscious transmission of trauma over generations.

As an expression that serves to frame non-familial social relations, the term "generation" usually highlights change and most often conflict. In 20th-century generation discourse, there is an obsession with the generation gap, and in the 21st century, we are even told to prepare ourselves for a clash of generations.

The latter is said to be a predictable consequence of living beyond our children's means. Obviously, the notion of generation has become a popular formula for discussing social crises. Right before the outbreak of the Corona crisis, a focus on climate justice had started to dominate the public discourse. Environmental ethics had come to be seen as implying responsibility for the welfare of future generations. What is being evoked is inter-generation fairness and fulfillment of the intergenerational contract. This is even more true of the actual debates around the future costs to be expected as a consequence of the economic shut-down induced by the pandemic. The paternalistic discourse on protecting the elderly from the beginning of the crisis is increasingly giving way to a discourse on the need for distributive justice between generations.

In any case, the concept of generation is a means of describing social relations and imagining communities, thereby presenting itself as a quasi-natural phenomenon. Shared chronological age is not what "makes" a generation. Nevertheless, it has consistently been claimed as a reference point in generational discourse. Speaking of a "Corona generation" while having in mind the young, one ignores that, at present, people of all ages are affected by the pandemic, however differently. It might be that the actual experience will unite present-day pensioners more than experiences they made in their youth would do, thus building another – elderly – "Corona generation," and a number of separate generation units among them.

## **(RE-)MAPPING EUROPE**

What are the Balkans? If nobody asks me, I know. If they ask me to explain, I don't.

(Šta je Balkan? Ako me niko ne pita, znam; ako neko traži da objasnim, ne znam.)

*Muharem Bazdulj (2007)*

This volume aims at contributing to a developing body of critical work on the topics of age and aging as seen in and from the perspectives of East and Southeast European societies and cultures. To many aging researchers, East and Southeast Europe still are blind spots; the exploration of what May Sarton calls "the foreign country of old age" does not go far beyond the familiar. This essay collection intends to make the region's marginal status productive. Since the study of age and aging has heretofore been primarily developed in academia in Western Europe and North America, certain topics have been explored more

than others, bringing them into the forefront of the scholarly discussion and discourse of what it means to age, to become or to be old and what the conceptualizations of age in the collective imagination are. There are phenomena and topoi that have been ubiquitous in the study of age and aging over the last decades; they are, in part, being taken for granted, although they might, in fact, be not so much universally valid as culturally specific.

The title of this essay collection indicates a focus which implies a danger that we are well aware of: it seems to suggest that Europe's East and Southeast are a sort of "o/Other" than the rest of the continent and, at the same time, that they form a homogeneous region with a unified or, at least, unifiable view on aging, old age and the elderly. Of course, this is not the case. We do not intend to assert an Eastern Europe as a homogeneous whole with clearly identifiable borders and reaffirm images of a seemingly backward East that has to tackle problems which the "progressive West" has long overcome. Scholars have explored the discourses that create such images with the objective – or, at least, the consequence – of implicitly defining a Western Self and often claiming the latter's superiority (see Kaser/Gramshammer-Hohl/Pichler 2003). Larry Wolff (1994) has argued that Eastern Europe was "invented" as an uncivilized, backward Other against an allegedly civilized West only in the age of Enlightenment; before this time, Europe was conceived to be divided into a North and a South, respectively. Drawing on Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Maria Todorova (1997), on her part, has identified and analyzed the discourse of Balkanism, which produces the mental map of the Balkans as an internal Other of (Western) Europe – a semi-civilized, semi-backward, semi-Oriental, semi-European imaginative space. By highlighting the history and historicity of these mental maps, Wolff's and Todorova's works have, among others, contributed to a re-mapping of Europe – at least, in academia.

Due to the Corona crisis, we are currently witnessing a novel re-mapping of Europe. As a first reaction to the threat of the pandemic, Europe saw a re-emerging nationalism, which some have even labeled "coronationalism" (Ozkirimli 2020, cited in Bieber 2020). A tendency toward reclaiming national rights and pursuing exclusionist policies had already existed; however, the pandemic has made this tendency more visible, as it has made visible a number of other imbalances in society.

Until now, Europe's countries most affected by the pandemic have been Italy and Spain; those states, such as Austria, which proved to be quite effective in fighting COVID-19 thanks to strict lockdown measures, prompted their citizens to support the measures by constantly evoking an "Italian scenario" that must be prevented. Within the EU, those countries that claimed to be most successful in

battling the pandemic are now forming a Central European alliance – the “Central Five” – with Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, and thus, some kind of Visegrád+ (though without Poland) (Schallenberg 2020). Croatia, which, at the beginning, also succeeded in containing the spread of the virus, seems to have “imported” new cases from neighboring countries and is now, at the beginning of summer tourism, confronting a closing of borders to its North. For the Western Balkans, borders with the EU are already shut. Though border closures certainly have their medical reasons, they also bear symbolic meaning: infection curves are now the basis of a new kind of “nesting Orientalisms,” as Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995) termed this phenomenon. In the actual case, countries compete in proving that the bearer of the disease is not the Self but the Other – namely, their respective Southern and Eastern neighbors.

However, speaking of Eastern and Southeastern Europe does not necessarily mean reproducing problematic mental maps; a focus on this region is justified if we consider the latter’s historical legacies, such as communism and post-socialist transformation. Recognizing these legacies helps us understand specific – though no less diverse – conditions, experiences and perspectives on old age and aging in the region this volume investigates. As one of the key texts in aging studies claims, one is “aged by culture” (Gullette 2004), and what and where this culture is determines, then, the ways in which local, regional, national or cross-cultural communities might frame their answers to the basic question of what it means to grow old.

Circumstances produced by the post-socialist switch to open markets, EU integration and globalization are leaving piercing traces on societies in the region, also in terms of age. For example, the accelerating trend of migration from countries on the Balkan peninsula, predominantly of the young population seeking better opportunities and a higher standard of living in Western Europe, leaves – to use the metaphor referring to another ex-centric world region, South America – *open veins* in the migrants’ home countries, which are increasingly populated by older generations and which have, thus far, not come to comprehensive or far-sighted responses to the brain- and power-drains and changes in population structures taking place. Since its accession to the EU in 2007 and a free exchange of people and goods made possible, in Romania, e.g., entire generations are growing up with their grandparents, while parents leave for seasonal work as strawberry pickers, care workers or construction workers to the UK, Spain, Italy, Austria and other EU countries.

When David J. Ekerdt delivered his keynote speech at the conference *Cultural Narratives, Processes and Strategies in Representations of Age and Aging*

in Graz in 2017 with the title “Aging in a World of Things,”<sup>10</sup> the very valuable insights he offered in his talk about the accumulation of objects over time and its meaning and evolution in meaning in US-American culture did and could not resonate with topics that scholars in Slavic or Southeast European studies might encounter in their analysis from the perspective of age and aging studies. The recently increased interest in the “material turn” in field research would provoke quite different responses in the societies of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where the population of 65 and over is probably rarely preoccupied with liberating themselves of the “stuff” they have acquired over time, but instead has difficulties in obtaining “basic stuff” for a decent living in the first place.

The phenomenon of the so-called “pension shock,” considered a primarily male experience in Western countries, has an impact on women in Eastern and Southeast European societies as well, seen as how women in socialist countries took active part in wage-work (see Voľanská 2017). Another phenomenon that is notably different in countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe is the idea and study of the spaces of old age. The Swedish best-selling novel *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009) or films like the British comedy *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and other immensely successful cultural products having at their center a narrative about aging characters might be understandable in Sweden or Great Britain, but in other cultural spaces, Eastern and Southeastern Europe among them, the issues around and about aging and old age are substantially different in focus. A huge success of a novel dealing with an escape from a care home can hardly be imagined, seen as how the care for the elderly very often still remains within the family circle: the old are cared for at home, making the space and context of old age quite different. Similarly, the cultural narratives, as well as cultural models and norms and what is considered acceptable or transgressive behavior, are very different, so that a comedy about old age romance, such as in the aforementioned film, might be seen, quite literally, *out of place*. As a basis for comparison with the said novel and film, we might think of Daša Drndić’s novel *Belladonna*, or of the very well received film *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* by the Romanian director Cristi Puiu, both devastating critiques of systemic discrimination against (gendered) old age in their specific contexts.

In the same way, for example, masculinity and its performance in the context of war is a burning topic for the countries of former Yugoslavia that went through a civil war merely 25-30 years ago, and the character of the war veteran

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10 The entire talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkAONmwLcOQ> [accessed June 1, 2020].

is very much present and re-imagined in cultural products in these societies – a character that would probably be out of focus in the present cultural production in Western Europe.<sup>11</sup>

In the light of such disparities, the development of a body of critical literature on themes of age and aging in Europe's East and Southeast is, therefore, crucial and timely.

## **MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON OLD AGE AND AGING**

This essay collection consists of three parts, whose present organization is based on the authors' approach to the topic of age and aging in their respective regional and academic foci. While Part 1 includes articles approaching their material from a historical perspective, the contributions to Part 2 are based on data obtained through quantitative and/or qualitative methods, whereas Part 3 involves analyses of literary representations of old age and aging.

Part 1, "Historical perspectives," opens with KARL KASER's paper entitled "Old Age in the Balkans: Increasing Life Expectancy – Decreasing Regard," which also gains an added value after the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In his contribution, Karl Kaser points to the changes in generational patterns that took place in the Balkans around the middle of the 20th century, and as a result of the mixed effects of industrialization, urbanization and migration taking place. Covering the historical development of a radical change in status of the elderly in societies with centuries-old patriarchal systems, the author analyzes two phenomena that show continuity in the region: women acting as caretakers and institutional caretaking remaining a marginal phenomenon – both issues mentioned and analyzed in other papers as well.

The history of intergenerational relations is also the topic of the chapter authored by SIEGFRIED GRUBER: "Co-Residence of Elderly Persons with Children and Grandchildren in Eastern and Southeast Europe: 18th and 19th Centuries." Using historical microdata, the author discusses in detail the positions of different family members in traditional households in East and Southeast European countries, going on to analyze the patterns of the elderly's co-residence with children and grandchildren. The author defines six rural areas (Russia, Baltic,

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11 For an analysis of social constructions and representations of aging masculinities across European cultures see the ongoing ERA Gender-Net Plus Project "MascAge": <https://www.mascage.eu/> [accessed July 15, 2020].

Belarus and Ukraine, Romania, South Slavic and Albania) and two groups of cities (Albanian and non-Albanian). These areas consistently show discrepancies in household patterns, which, as the author concludes, demonstrate that from the perspective of historical demography, Eastern Europe is a highly diverse region that cannot be categorized into a discrete unit.

TATIANA SABUROVA's essay, "'University Elders,' 'Young Professors' and Students: A Generational Approach to the History of Higher Education in Russia in the Late 19th Century," explores the notion of generation, the various approaches used in generational studies and their links with aging studies. Generational identity, the author argues, was unquestionably significant within university culture in late Imperial Russia for both students and professors, who interacted and situated themselves within a designated generation, both real and imagined, and described the mutual relations of professors and students in generational terms.

Entering into dialogue with the chapter authored by Tatiana Saburova is KIRILL LEVINSON's contribution "Changes in Soviet Academia's Age-Related Personnel Policies during the Cold War," which investigates how age as a category shapes academia and scientific development. It analyzes data about personnel planning and selection based on certain age prerequisites at the USSR Academy of Sciences research institutes and the Moscow State University between 1945 and 1991. However, as these practices were never formulated in any policy papers and no mention could be found containing explicit age-related benchmarks, the author draws on unpublished, to date, archive material that reflects the main guidelines for personnel policy, including talks and speeches by high-ranking functionaries, by heads of departments and research institutes or by the president of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

The articles in Part 2, entitled "Qualitative and Quantitative Inquiries," are based on field research conducted by academics who come from the fields of sociology, social psychology, ethnology and human geography.

This section of the essay collection opens with a chapter by ANA AŠTALKOVSKA GAJTANOSKA and ILINA JAKIMOVSKA on traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of old age in a rural environment in the Balkans, "No Country for Old People: Ethnography of Traditional and Contemporary Conceptualizations of Old Age in Rural North Macedonia," which, thus, resonates with Karl Kaser's paper from Part 1. The authors discuss the rapid and sudden change that occurred in notions of both male and female aging in North Macedonia in the 20th century. With changes in the political, economic and social systems in the country as a whole, rural communities of both Orthodox Macedonian and mixed Orthodox-Muslim communities went through a shift, from a reverence for

old age as the age of wisdom and authority to a narrative and practice of old age as an age of uselessness and unproductivity, regarded as a burden for the young and working population.

Serbia is also a country that has undergone transformation and radical changes of system, and NATALIJA PERIŠIĆ and NADEŽDA SATARIĆ analyze the results of their combined-method research conducted in the municipality of New Belgrade, in a chapter entitled “Meanings of Getting Old in Post-Transition Serbia: A Gender Perspective.” The special focus here is on the disparity of social roles and individual destinies depending on gender, while underlining the extreme pressure on the elderly in Serbia, brought on by the changes in public policies – most importantly, the pension policy reforms. Furthermore, the authors discuss their findings from parts of their research that included a survey and focus groups about topics such as violence and both the systemic and the cultural discrimination against older women.

The situation of the elderly in urban environments is also at the center of attention in the chapter “On Nearness and Distance: Seniors’ Lives in Urban Areas in Slovakia” by ĽUBICA VOLANSKÁ, MARCELA KÁČEROVÁ and JURAJ MAJO. The social pressure, moral discourse and intergenerational behavior patterns are analyzed in treating the topic of lonely older adults in different living arrangements in the urban environments of Slovakia. Combining statistical data from censuses with findings from narrative and semi-structured interviews with seniors in “aging cities,” this interdisciplinary team of authors also provides an interesting insight into the challenges of interdisciplinary work and co-authorship.

LOREDANA IVAN writes about seniors and their use, relationship to and view of technology in “The Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Family Communication: Dialogues with Grandmothers from Romania.” This chapter also outlines findings from field research with a focus on family practices. Ivan’s chapter contributes to a growing body of work that investigates how older adults use and understand ICTs in their everyday lives, including social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), blogs and other communication platforms such as Skype or WhatsApp.

OLGA KRASNOVA’s chapter “The Elderly in Russia: A Socio-Psychological Approach” analyzes the elderly’s situation in the Russian Federation from the perspective of social psychology. After giving an overview of the development of a social-psychological approach to the study of aging, the author provides an analysis of how differently aging and old age are perceived and experienced by members of distinct age cohorts in Russia, with all the political, social and economic upheavals the country and its citizens have seen during the so-called short 20th century. The author also points to the extreme difference in life expectancy

between women and men, which makes old age largely a female experience in Russia.

Part 3 of this essay collection, entitled “Literary Representations,” is dedicated to literary works and other artistic production that in many different ways deal, overtly or not, with the issues of age and aging.

RAFAELA BOŽIĆ writes about “Aging in Soviet Utopian and Dystopian Literature,” giving special attention to literary production between the October Revolution and the ending of World War II. The chapter analyzes the specific meanings of age and aging in both utopian and dystopian universes and characters, the focus being on Evgenij Zamjatin’s *We* and Andrej Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit* and *Chevengur*. One of the important conclusions the author comes to is that literary constructs of age and aging are genre-specific and deliver particular messages about and to the time they are written in.

In “Ageless, Vital, Immortal: Human Transformation in 20th-Century Russian Science and Literature,” TATJANA PETZER addresses the important intersections of science and literature, as well as the intertwining notions and enduring imagined relation of aging and (im)mortality. The article treats the issues of physicality, mortality and longevity, embodiment and discourse through analyzing three distinct literary thought experiments from 1910, 1920 and 1970 (one of them, as in Rafaela Božić’s article, by Andrej Platonov). The author shows how these three texts can be used to trace specific changes in the scientific and social discourses on the creation of spheres of immortality.

Analyzing Lev Tolstoj’s well-known novel from the vantage point of age and aging studies, JANE GARY HARRIS in “Noticing Signs and Stereotypes of Aging: Representations and Performance of Mind and Body in Tolstoj’s *War and Peace*” goes on to write about Tolstoj’s very concrete, empirical observations of what age means, how he recognizes age and aging and how he then codifies them in aesthetic, sociological and psychological representations. Youth, aging and old age are all central topics for an author who, claims Harris, shows his fascination with change in building an expansive fictional portrait gallery in *War and Peace* that undergoes, among other things, also the transformations that the passing of the fictional time brings.

In “Does Genre Matter? The Role of Literary Genre and Narrator in Contemporary Russian Caregivers’ Narratives,” MAIJA KÖNÖNEN combines a narratological analysis with elements from critical gerontology in arguing that the contradictions and presumptions embedded in narratives of aging can be revealed with the tools of narratology and that narratives of dementia are indeed, as age and aging in a more general sense, a constructed, social and political affair. The author explores the value of narrative techniques used in a literary text

in enhancing our understanding and empathy toward a protagonist with dementia and the ethical and aesthetical implications thereof. By attributing to senility the now predominant cultural stigma of disease and anomaly, the biomedical mainstream narrative has radically changed the discourse around memory loss from the cultural sphere to biology. How this mainstream narrative is then embedded and reconstructed within a narrative text is, however, a consequence and result of the surrounding cultural practices and models, the author claims, and goes on to examine this claim in two Russian short stories from the beginning of the 21st century.

Whereas the first four essays in this section deal with the Soviet and Russian cultural spaces, the last three articles focus on the South Slavic context, analyzing some of the distinct, even stock, characters of this region's cultural production. INGEBOG JANDL's article "Traumatic Aging in Borisav Stanković and Miloš Crnjanski: The Symptomatic Body in the Modern and Expressionist View on Soul and Society" provides a close reading of two novels written in Serbian at the beginning of the 20th century – one in a realistic tradition and the other in a modernist aesthetic form. Pathological family dynamics within the traditional patriarchal system in Serbia are shown to produce patterns of traumatic aging in both male and female characters, albeit in a different form and with different consequences. The author also explores the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma as illustrated by often rigid social norms and unyielding structures, which produce tragic, timeless heroes.

Similarly, the way popular imagination, relationships between generations, collective attitudes toward age and aging and established social practices form and inform, subsequently, certain characteristics of narratives is explored in the chapter by NATALIA STAGL ŠKARO, "The Dark Past of Family: Age Roles and Superstition in Southeast European Literature and Popular Culture." The author traces the paths along which collective imagination in South Slavic cultures gave rise to certain stereotypes and stock characters in myth, fairy tales, literature and films. Analyzing the way in which a stage of life would be associated with specific magic or otherworldly figures (the mischievous girl with the fairy; the middle-aged man with the werewolf; the old woman with the witch and the old man with the vampire etc.), Stagl Škaro localizes these characters in different narrative forms, all the while keeping to comparative methods, using the Classical Greek myth, Central European, Russian and other cultural contexts as mirrors.

Another inquiry into the myths of old age – and the myths of female aging in particular – is found in DAGMAR GRAMSHAMMER-HOHL's chapter, entitled "The Hag and the Egg: Slavic Mythologies of Old Age as Reflected in Dubravka Ugrešić's Novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*." The article traces different embodi-

ments of the old woman in Slavic mythologies, with Baba Yaga as the pervasive character, and their enactment in the contemporary Croatian writer's well-known novel. By analyzing the narrative devices used in the text, the author shows how Ugrešić's novel unmasking aging as a social construct that can, and must, be demythologized.

Rounding the discussion on age and aging in East and Southeast European social and cultural imaginations is an interview conducted by Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl in July 2018 with contemporary Russian writer and certainly one of the best-known voices of Russian literature abroad, LUDMILA ULITSKAYA [Ljudmila Ulickaja]. The author provides an insight into her motivation to introduce aging characters and the subject of aging into her work and also takes a firm stand on the elderly's situation in present-day Russia.

The authors of this essay collection, thus, invite their readers to take a closer look at the Eastern and Southeastern European regions, which, for the majority of aging researchers, still are "foreign countries," whose histories, experiences and images of old age usually escape broader academic consideration. By highlighting these culturally specific contexts of aging and old age, this volume aims to show how multifaceted the "foreign country of old age" is, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the aging process in all its diversity.

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