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CLUSTER: DISABILITY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

# Constructing and Deconstructing Disability in Eastern Europe and Russia

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## Abstract

The introduction to the cluster on disability history in eastern Europe and Russia provides a framework for situating the three case studies within the larger development of the field. The introduction highlights important themes and arguments presented by the three authors.

The articles in this cluster discuss representations of three forms of disability: deafness, autism, and physical impairment. Illuminating specific, historically contingent visions of normality and abnormality, they show both how the boundary between biological pathology and social norm is always "fragile" (in Gergana Mircheva's words), and how science and political frameworks to understanding disability often mesh together. This heightened attention to the ideological and political context in which narratives of (ab)normality, (un)fitness, (in)validity, and (dis)ability have been crafted and re-crafted is, in our view, one of the most significant contributions that historians of Russia and eastern Europe can bring into conversation with the growing field of Disability History.[1] Because of the region's seismic political shifts in the twentieth century, scholars studying it can use disability to ask potent historical questions: How have the frameworks of abnormality changed with the collapse of empires and emergence of nation-states? How have new forms of public discourse, such as television and mass media, influenced societal norms about disability? How has the socialist experience, in all its diversity, affected these frameworks? Is there a distinct post-socialist way of engaging with disability? What continuities and discontinuities can we trace both synchronically and diachronically? Interpreting disability discourses and practices in our region against the background of diverse and ever shifting local, national, and global biopolitical regimes is certainly a significant challenge. Undertaking it, however, opens new roads into the historical study and conceptualization of Russia and eastern Europe's past. This collection of articles offers several pathways.

Opening the cluster, Maria Bucur's article explores how deafness was constructed as a disability category in the interwar Romanian press. Bucur offers a close reading of how

[1] Maria Bucur and Maria Cristina Galmarini, eds., *UnFit for the Nation: Disability and State Building in Post-Imperial Eastern Europe* (Urbana, IL, forthcoming); Radu-Harald Dinu and Staffan Bengtsson, eds., *Disability and Labour in the Twentieth Century. Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK, 2023); and a recent interdisciplinary manifesto for disability studies in Romania, see Maria Bucur, Radu Harald Dinu, and Leyla Safta-Zecheria, "Introducere: Manifest pentru studiile de dizbilitate în România," and the rest of *Transilvania*, no. 1-2 (2026), at https://revistatransilvania.ro/1-2-2026/, accessed March 31, 2026.

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eugenicist tropes entered mainstream discourse and came to dominate it, even as deaf activists and allies made efforts throughout the period to challenge stereotypes about deafness. The rising prominence and public feting of eugenicist doctors and policy makers solidified the identification of the "normal" with the able-bodied, while people with any kind of disability were cast as "abnormal" or "subnormal" in the law. Deaf artists, educators, and athletes offered opportunities to normalize deafness and integrate the deaf community into the national "body," but were challenged continuously through a refusal to engage with their self-representation.

Interacting regimes of medical and political knowledge are also at the core of Gergana Mircheva's article, which analyzes the relationship between ideological norms and psychiatric paradigms of autism in late socialist Bulgaria. An already significant body of works has looked at the biopolitical role of Soviet psychiatry in dealing with intellectual and psychological disabilities that stubbornly refused to disappear, despite the allegedly optimal conditions of socialist society.[2] Mircheva builds on this historiography and expands it by analyzing Bulgarian psychiatric governance of autistic children. As she argues, autism was officially presented as a form of "social atomism," which constituted a "pathological negation" of socialist humanism. But was this representation an ideological "decorative wrapper" or a deeper framework of scientific psychiatric narrative? And does it even make sense to neatly distinguish between the two and attempt to disentangle them? Mircheva ultimately answers the latter question in the negative, showing that Bulgarian psychiatrists' scientific positions and ideological frameworks mutually constituted each other. We add that, although the "wrapper" (the politically acceptable narrative) was, in the author's words, "a camouflage strategy to achieve ideological acceptability," it nonetheless affected the views of those who produced and consumed these representations.

With Emily Hoge's article, readers are asked to shift their perspective and think more deeply about the variety of ways in which disabled people themselves framed their life stories, specifically in the 1990s in Russia. While several scholars have described how the collapse of the socialist welfare state hit disabled people especially hard, little research has been published on disabled people's agency in shaping change in the 1990s.[3] Focusing on the

[2] See especially Mat Savelli and Sarah Marks, eds., *Psychiatry in Communist Europe* (Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire, UK, 2015); Mat Savelli "Beyond Ideological Platitudes: Socialism and Psychiatry in Eastern Europe," *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (45) (2018): 1–8; and Benjamin Zajicek, *Scientific Psychiatry in Stalin's Soviet Union: The Politics of Modern Medicine and the Struggle to Define 'Pavlovian' Psychiatry, 1939–1953* (Chicago, 2009). See also Greg Eghigian, "Was There a Communist Psychiatry? Politics and East Germany Psychiatric Care, 1945–1989," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 10, no. 6 (November-December 2002): 364–68; Maria Cristina Galmarini-Kabala, *The Right to Be Helped: Deviance, Entitlement, and the Soviet Moral Order* (DeKalb, IL, 2016); "Between Defectological Narratives and Institutional Realities: The 'Mentally Retarded' Child in the Soviet Union of the 1930s," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 93, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 180–206; "Psychiatry, Violence, and the Soviet Project of Transformation: A Micro-History of the Perm′ Psycho-Neurological School Sanatorium," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 2 (Summer 2018), 307–32; and "Moral′no defektivnyi, prestupnik ili psikhicheskii bol′noi? Detskie povedencheskie deviatsii i sovetskie dist-sipliniruiushchie praktiki: 1935–1957," in I. Kukulin, M. Maiofis, and P. Safronov, eds. *Ostrova utopii: Pedagogicheskoe i sotsial′noe proektirovanie poslevoennoi shkoly (1940-1980-e)* (Moscow, 2015), 107–51.

[3] Mark Field and Judyth Twigg, *Russia's Torn Safety Nets: Health and Social Welfare During the Transition* (New York, 2000); Melissa Caldwell, *Not By Bread Alone: Social Support in the New Russia* (Berkeley, 2004); Andrea Chandler, "The Social Promise: Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities in Russian Welfare State Reform since Gorbachev," in Thomas Lahusen and Peter Solomon, Jr., eds., *What Is Soviet Now?: Identities, Legacies, Memories*, Geschichte, Forschungen und Wissenschaft, vol. 27, (Berlin, 2008); Teodor Mladenov, "Neoliberalism, Postsocialism, Disability," *Disability & Society* 30, no. 3 (2015): 445–59; and Teodor Mladenov, *Disability and Postsocialism* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK, 2018). For research that emphasizes disabled people's agency see Sarah D. Phillips, *Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine* (Bloomington, 2011); Natalia Pamuła, "Ordinary Trauma. Twenty-One Disabled Women Surviving the 1989 Polish Transformation," *Aspasia* 16, no. 1 (June 2022): 130–48; and *Disability Disruptions: Gender, Family, and Society in Post-1989 Poland* (Urbana, IL, forthcoming); Magdalena Zdrodowska, "I'm Angry! Disability Protests in Post-Communist Poland," *Problems of Post-Communism* 72, no. 3 (November 2023): 228–39; Radu-Harald

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Russian Fund for Invalids of the War in Afghanistan (RFIVA), this article presents disabled people as active agents in the creation of social safety nets. It also reveals their participation in the violence and organized crime during that decade. Hoge writes: "RFIVA found ways to reconcile their profoundly negative views of disability and disabled people with the fact of their own disability by mobilizing an ideal of militarized masculinity that separated them from disabled people who were not soldiers." This self-portrayal was a legacy of the Soviet period in two crucial ways. First, it continued to privilege so-called "war invalidity" over other forms of disability. Second, it remained an overcoming narrative.

In addition to showcasing the interplay of medical, political, and gender regimes in shaping disability constructions even across such different geographies and time periods, the three articles reveal the persistent salience of stigma for understanding disability as an experience. The concept was famously introduced by Erwin Goffman in his 1963 book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*; its connection to ableism was made clear by Henri-Jacques Stiker in his now classic, *A History of Disability* (1982). Bucur and Mircheva see stigma in the victimizing, normative, and plainly discriminatory power of the frameworks used by Romanian and Bulgarian societies to engage with disabled people. At the same time, the essays highlight efforts at de-stigmatization. The deaf community, for instance, worked to positively shape their own public image through acceptable roles, such as talented soccer players. Hoge instead shows that Afghan veterans pushed back against stigma by de-normalizing the association between physical disability and lack of virility. The fact that they felt the need to do so, however, speaks volumes about the place of stigma in Russian views of mobility impairment.

Ultimately, the centrality of stigma, whether it was enforced by able-bodied publics or challenged by disabled ones, brings up the crucial issue of who performs the construction and deconstruction of disability or, in Bucur's words, "who gets to speak for whom." In late socialist Bulgaria, autistic children and their caregivers are spoken for by psychiatrists. In interwar Romania, however, deaf activists attempted to "flip ... the narrative" and portray deaf individuals as heroes. In post-Soviet Russia, the disabled Afghan veteran Valerii Radchikov also strove to accomplish this with his daredevil stunts. But does this truly undermine ableism? Or is it just a reversal of the plus and minus signs? Deaf soccer players and a lone school in Bukovina that changed the meaning of deafness to a "neutral signification" appear as "unique" achievements. Yet, by analyzing these "unique" experiences—and why they were unique—historians of Russia and eastern Europe can do much to deconstruct stigmas deriving from notions of normality and abnormality.

Dinu, "Recent Historiographical Trends in Scholarship on Disability and Socialism in Eastern Europe," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 24, no. 1 (2022): 42–53; and Kateřina Kolářová, *Rehabilitative Postsocialism: Disability, Sex, and Race in Eastern Europe* (Ann Arbor, 2025).

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