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From Laggard to Leader: Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) Women Presidents and Prime Ministers

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关键词 国家元首 | 女性参政 | 女性高管 | 妇女赋权 | 中欧和东欧 | 政府首脑 | 性别平等 | 总理 | 总统

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes women executives (presidents and prime ministers) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Specific questions posed include: How successful have CEE countries been in promoting women to executive positions? What conditions facilitate women's executive presence in the region? We offer some preliminary assessments regarding implications of patterns identified. Juxtaposing patterns identified in CEE against global trends reveals encouraging developments but also persistent barriers to women's full inclusion.

Related Articles:

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Stegmaier, M. A., and G. Erb. 2008. "Gender and Generation Gaps in Russian Economic Values During the Yeltsin Years." *Politics & Policy* 33, no. 3: 416–443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2005.tb00802.x>.

Tyner, K., and F. Jalalzai. 2022. "Women Prime Ministers and COVID-19: Within-Case Examinations of New Zealand and Iceland." *Politics & Policy* 50, no. 6: 1076–1095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12511>.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza a las mujeres ejecutivas (presidentas y primeras ministras) en Europa Central y del Este (ECO). Las preguntas específicas planteadas incluyen: ¿Qué tan exitosos han sido los países de ECO en la promoción de mujeres a puestos ejecutivos? ¿Qué condiciones facilitan la presencia ejecutiva de las mujeres en la región? Ofrecemos algunas evaluaciones preliminares sobre las implicaciones de los patrones identificados. La yuxtaposición de los patrones identificados en ECO con las tendencias globales revela avances alentadores, pero también barreras persistentes para la plena inclusión de las mujeres.

[Correction made on 24 October 2025, after first online publication: The text was modified to reflect the correct presidential and parliamentary status of some countries.]

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抽象的

本文分析了中东欧 (CEE) 的女性高管(总统和总理)。提出的具体问题包括:中东欧国家在提拔女性担任行政职务方面取得了多大成功? 哪些条件有利于女性在该地区担任高管? 我们对已识别模式的影响提供一些初步评估。将中东欧发现的模式与全球趋势进行比较, 揭示了令人鼓舞的发展, 但也存在阻碍妇女充分融入的长期障碍。

1 | Introduction

This research addresses a gap in the gender and politics literature, specifically a shortage of research on the politics of CEE (Gwiazda 2019) but also a lack of attention to women presidents and prime ministers. Most of the focus in the CEE has been on women legislators (Rashkova and Zankina 2013; Ilonszki and Vajda 2019; Gwiazda 2019; Galligan, Clavero, and Calloni 2007) followed by women cabinet ministers (Bego 2014; Rashkova and Zankina 2019). While women have ascended most often to presidencies and prime ministerships in Europe than anywhere else in the world (Jalalzai 2019), little is known about cases arising outside Western Europe.

Investigating women executives in CEE presents an opportunity to assess women's empowerment in light of democratic transition. Democratic transition is generally considered a facilitator of women's political inclusion overall and particularly as a springboard to presidencies and prime ministerships (Montecinos 2017; Jalalzai 2013). This, in part, is due to women's political mobilization transpiring during times of change. Advocating for transformation such as independence from colonial powers or toward democratic governance more generally, women carve out space to engage in political protest and sometimes leverage this experience to obtain political positions (Jalalzai 2013; Montecinos 2017).

While transition potentially drives women's political incorporation, political regime transition is also a tenuous time when women may lose ground in the number of elected or appointed offices they hold, and more broadly, in terms of social and legal rights. This particularly depends on the period in which we are analyzing the transition to democracy. Indeed, Waylen (1994) argues that women's engagement in independence movements in communist states proved limited, and Penn (2006) asserts that women's contributions were critical but less visible or rewarded. Women's presence in political institutions notably declined in the immediate aftermath of democratization in CEE, particularly the first decade after 1989 (1990–2000). Many countries backslid during the first ten years of transition against everything communist, including gender quotas, within the former rubber-stamping socialist parliaments (Matland and Montgomery 2003; Chiva 2005, 2018; LaFont 2001; Wike et al. 2019). As some of the major growing pains of democratic transition and economic shock therapy passed after 2000, resentment against the former regime declined and other issues rose in prominence Rincker (2017).

We argue that analyzing a region like CEE which has undergone significant political regime changes can lend critical insights into the mechanisms of transition that best lay the groundwork for women's political inclusion. Incorporating CEE also affords an opportunity to better appreciate complex connections between women's paths and governance to gender

roles and attitudes among the public. Some CEE countries, particularly in early transition years, showed concerning shifts in public opinion wherein large segments of the population articulated beliefs suggesting that women should retreat from formal political life Rincker (2009, 2017). While women in CEE countries managed to gain political office, sometimes as presidents and prime ministers, they tended to face substantial challenges including party gatekeepers who did not believe that women were suited to the pressures of politics (Rincker 2009, 2017).

Attitudes toward gender roles and women's equality in CEE still suggest important limitations (Gwiazda 2019; Wike et al. 2019). One public opinion poll finds that one-quarter of respondents from former Eastern bloc countries do not think women have gained any rights after the communist transition (Wike et al. 2019). A similar percentage holds more traditional views of women's proper roles in marriage and employment (Wike et al. 2019). Women are substantially more likely than men to believe that it is *very* important for women to have equal rights in their country; this awareness can set the stage for women's advocacy of gender equality (Wike et al. 2019). Still, perceptions among the CEE public appear quite different from their Western European counterparts where both men and women widely recognize women's progress toward equality and value women's equal roles. Given the rise of populism in Europe generally and CEE specifically, investigating women's status is especially critical. Moreover, lessons learned from Western European countries regarding women's political empowerment cannot necessarily be applied to CEE, particularly given democratic backsliding and the shift toward conservatism. This research provides an opportunity to better understand effects of recent political and social transformations such as democratic backsliding on women's executive ascension and powers in this region.

In this article, we present data on the women of the 22 Russian and Eastern European bloc countries who have served as presidents and prime ministers since 1989 and report these data in comparison with women executives across the globe but also in Western Europe. Our analysis proceeds as follows: Part I presents global patterns related to women's executive office holding, juxtaposing these against CEE trends to determine how successful this region has been in terms of promoting women to executive positions. Part II provides a historical background of CEE in the twentieth century and its legacy on women executives in the region. Part III analyzes several conditions that may help explain patterns of women's executive leadership in the CEE. These factors can be categorized into three main groups: levels of freedom, executive institutions and structures, and various gender equality indicators.

We find that women's presence as prime ministers and presidents in CEE was limited for years but has noticeably expanded. CEE

is a global leader in terms of women's executive promotion. When we assess possible explanations for women's success, we find that women ascend in partly free or free states. Women also arise more often in premier-presidential systems followed by parliamentary systems and are more likely to serve as prime ministers. When they do hold the presidency, it is the penultimate office—the weaker of the two national executive positions. Women leaders are most often found in countries featuring higher percentages of women in parliament. However, the percentage of women in cabinets, gender-related development index, and women's labor force participation rate are not highly associated with women's presence as prime ministers or presidents. Overall, women's ascensions to executive leadership roles in the region reveals both encouraging developments but also important barriers.

2 | Global and Regional Trends of Women's Executive Leadership

More than 65 years ago, in 1960, a watershed event occurred. In Sri Lanka, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the first woman prime minister. Between 1960 and August of 2024, approximately 158 women have come to power as presidents and prime ministers.¹ In the first 40 years, progress for women was very slow and few women held executive posts. Between 1960 and 2002, only 44 women served as presidents or prime ministers (Jalalzai 2004). In the most recent decades, however, the pace has substantially picked up and the numbers of women leaders have more than tripled (Jalalzai 2019). Among the approximately 158 women presidents and prime ministers who have served to date, 71 (45%) have hailed from Europe. 38 (24%) are from Western Europe and 33 (21%) come from CEE. One of every five women therefore, ascended in CEE. Given that the region contains merely 11% of the world's countries (22/193), women's progress in the CEE appears is quite striking.

2.1 | Women Executives Currently in Office—August 2024

How prominent are women of the CEE among women in office currently? As of August 1, 2024, 26 women hold executive office (10 prime ministers and 16 presidents). Twelve of the women in power at the time of this writing are in Europe, six of whom are from CEE. In 2024, 23%—nearly one in four—of all women executives in office globally govern within a CEE country (see Table 1). Fifteen of 22 countries in our sample across time have seen women in these positions of power (see Table 2). That at least one woman was at the helm in almost 70% of CEE countries suggests that this occurrence is rather commonplace now rather than extraordinary.² Across the 15 countries, 33 different women executives overall ascended. Twenty of the cases are prime ministers (61%) while 13 are presidents (39%). This total also includes seven interim or acting leaders (four prime ministers and three presidents, respectively). While we engage these cases throughout our article, when appropriate we exclude them, reducing the total cases to 23, distributed between 16 prime ministers (70%) and seven presidents (30%).

Looking at trends over time in the region, progress proved slow at first, which matches the global patterns outlined. Five women

emerged in CEE as executives during the 1990s and another five cases surfaced in the first decade of the 2000s. By the 2010s, much more progress was noticeable with 15 new cases. So far in the first half of the 2020s, another eight women ascended. Together Tables 1 and 2 show that CEE women have formed a large portion of women executives. Women leaders in CEE, however, have tended not to receive academic attention despite their numbers and the region is not typically pointed to as one offering high levels of women's political empowerment.

The increased executive presence of women in the CEE may be due to different factors. While women's parliamentary levels declined significantly immediately after the transition from communism (Poretskova et al. 2024; Gwiazda 2019), democracy may now have gained more of a foothold.³ In part, this could be due to the influence of international governmental organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or supranational institutions such as the European Union that have emphasized the importance of women's political empowerment (Rincker et al. 2019).⁴

Institutional factors such as the executive system and position type should also be scrutinized as they have shaped women's access to executive leadership posts (Jalalzai 2013, 2019). CEE countries may have implemented executive systems and installed positions that are more conducive to women's presence. Women, however, may be relegated to less powerful positions (Jalalzai 2013). Finally, structural factors such as increased access to higher education and traditionally male occupations as well as gender equity advocacy through women's grassroots mobilization may have provided enhanced political opportunities for women (Rincker, Aslam, and Isani 2016).

3 | Historical Background of CEE in the Twentieth Century and its Legacy on Women Executives

During the Cold War, the United States and the USSR diplomatically sparred in the UN—not just about developing nuclear weapons and economic strength—but also over whether capitalistic democracies or one-party state socialism better addressed the multifaceted needs of girls and women. US diplomats lauded the ability of American democracy to free many American women to vote in competitive, free, and fair elections and choose to stay home with their growing children and opt out of the paid workforce. Soviet diplomats touted communism as recognizing the essential contributions of women to the industrialization and modernization of their societies, pointing to women's advancement in traditionally male-dominated occupations and fields of study as evidence of this (Baldez 2014).

We point to the unique historical legacy that state socialism had on the CEE region that had begun to modernize before the Second World War. Scholars note that this legacy for women is complex (Einhorn 1993; Galligan, Clavero, and Calloni 2007; Montecinos 2017; Matland and Montgomery 2003). State socialist regimes during 1945–1990 took many steps to advance women and girls in work, education, and public life (Poretskova et al. 2024). Women and men received legal equality in state socialist constitutions, and many countries in the region needed women's formal labor force participation to industrialize and modernize. This led to the adoption of policies providing free

TABLE 1 | Women executives currently in office—August 2024.

Leader	Country	Position
Sandra Mason	Barbados	President
Mia Mottley	Barbados	Prime Minister
Mette Frederiksen	Denmark	Prime Minister
Judith Suminwa Tuluka	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Prime Minister
Sylvanie Burton	Dominica	President
Sahle-Work Zewde	Ethiopia	President
Salome Zurabichvili	Georgia	President
Katerina Sakellariopoulou	Greece	President
Xiomara Castro	Honduras	President
Halla Tómasdóttir	Iceland	President
Droupadi Murmu	India	President
Giorgia Meloni	Italy	Prime Minister
Evika Siliņa	Latvia	Prime Minister
Ingrida Šimonytė	Lithuania	Prime Minister
Myriam Spiteri Debono	Malta	President
Maia Sandu	Moldova	President
Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila	Namibia	Prime Minister
Gordana Siljanovska Davkova	North Macedonia	President
Dina Boluarte	Peru	President
Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa	Samoa	Prime Minister
Nataša Pirc Musar	Slovenia	President
Viola Amherd	Switzerland	President
Samia Suluhu Hassan	Tanzania	President
Victoire Tomegah Dogbé	Togo	Prime Minister
Christine Kangaloo	Trinidad and Tobago	President
Robinah Nabbanja	Uganda	Prime Minister

Note: **Bold** indicates elected by popular vote. Updated on August 1, 2024. The shaded ones rows are women from CEE.

day care (Fodor 2002). Higher education was also offered to both women and men (LaFont 2001). CEE women began entering, if not at an equivalent pace, male-dominated fields like agriculture, medicine, law, and engineering.

In Poland, a famous poster depicted a woman driving a tractor (see Figure 1). This exemplified changing Polish gender stereotypes about men being the only ones to do physical or machinery tasks (Rincker 2017). As government depicted women successfully performing work previously done only by men, jobs that marked a good citizen, newer generations conceivably accepted women's participation in myriad realms given their exposure to different images of women.

Despite progress on women's empowerment during the state socialist era, it is important to note that government and societal progress in addressing sources of gender inequality

were not uniform and cross-sectoral. Many issues of gender inequality were ignored during this period. Violence against women and girls remained a largely endemic and private issue, and in many relationships, women also maintained responsibility for domestic work (LaFont 2001; Fodor 2002). Intersectional issues should also be considered. Minority women facing violence and discrimination whether linguistic, religious, or ethnic, found their identities erased under Marxist ideology; social class was viewed as the only factor of relevance. Additionally, during any time or under any regime, movements for women's empowerment and counter-movements against it can be on shifting ground based on the hegemonic ideology/ies of the time, and what entity/ies an opponent sees as the external threat. Underground religious opponents (both men and women) of the socialist regime may have been against women driving tractors or working outside the home, viewing these initiatives as extreme Marxist

TABLE 2 | Women executives: Dates in office and position by country.

Country	Position	Name	Dates in office (MM/DD/YYYY)
Bulgaria	Prime Minister ^a	Reneta Indzhova	10/16/1994–01/25/1995
Croatia	Prime Minister	Jadranka Kosor	7/06/2009–12/23/2011
Croatia	President	Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic	2/19/2015–2/18/2020
Estonia	President	Kersti Kaljulaid	10/06/2016–10/11/2021
Estonia	Prime Minister	Kaja Kallas	1/26/2021–7/23/2024
Georgia	President ^a	Nino Burdzhanadze	11/23/2003–01/25/2004 11/25/2007–1/20/2008
Georgia	President	Salome Zurbishvili	12/16/2018–present
Hungary	President	Katalin Novak	5/10/2022–2/26/2024
Latvia	President	Vaira Vike-Freiberga	6/17/1999–7/8/2007
Latvia	Prime Minister	Laimdota Straujuma	1/22/2014–2/11/2016
Latvia	Prime Minister	Evika Siliņa	9/15/2023–present
Lithuania	Prime Minister	Kazimiera Danuta Prunskienė	3/17/1990–1/10/1991
Lithuania	Prime Minister ^a	Irena Degutienė	5/04/1999–5/18/1999 10/27/1999–11/3/1999
Lithuania	President	Dalia Grybauskaitė	7/12/2009–7/12/2019
Lithuania	Prime Minister	Ingrida Šimonytė	12/11/2020–present
Moldova	Prime Minister	Zinaida Greceanii	3/31/2008–9/14/2009
Moldova	Prime Minister ^a	Natalia Gherman	6/22/2015–7/30/2015
Moldova	Prime Minister	Maia Sandu	6/8/2019–11/14/2019 12/24/2020–present
Moldova	Prime Minister	Natalia Gavrilița	8/6/2021–2/16/2023
North Macedonia	Prime Minister ^a	Radmila Šekerinska	5/12/2004–6/2/2004 11/18/2004–12/17/2004
North Macedonia	President	Gordana Siljanovska Davkova	5/12/2024–present
Poland	Prime Minister	Hanna Suchocka	7/11/1992–10/26/1993
Poland	Prime Minister	Ewa Kopacz	9/22/2014–11/16/2015
Poland	Prime Minister	Beata Szydło	11/16/2015–12/11/2017
Romania	Prime Minister	Viorica Dăncilă	1/29/2018–11/04/2019
Serbia	President ^a	Nataša Mičić	12/29/2002–02/04/2004
Serbia	President ^a	Slavica Đukić Dejanović	4/5/2012–5/31/2012
Serbia	Prime Minister	Ana Brnabić	6/29/2017–3/20/2024
Slovakia	Prime Minister	Iveta Radičová	7/08/2010–4/4/2012
Slovakia	President	Zuzana Čaputová	6/15/2019–6/15/2024
Slovenia	Prime Minister	Alenka Bratušek	3/20/2013–9/18/2014
Slovenia	President	Nataša Pirc Musar	12/22/2022–present
Ukraine	Prime Minister	Yuliya Tymoshenko	1/24/2005–9/8/2005 12/18/2007–3/04/2010

Note: Sandu (Moldova) held the prime ministership before the presidency; we count her as president (the role she held longer) to avoid confusion with total numbers of different women leaders ($n = 33$).

^aInterim or acting leader.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_elected_and_appointed_female_heads_of_state_and_government; https://guide2womenleaders.com/Female_Leaders.htm (Cases through 2017); <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023>.



FIGURE 1 | Polish poster art during state socialism.

ideology that contradicted nature and basic religious values and gendered division of labor (Rincker 2017). After 1989, some in the CEE associated women's empowerment with communism and therefore yearned to rebel against it by returning to traditional gender roles for women (Mejere 2012). Oftentimes, this was expressed as adherence to religious traditions (Matland and Montgomery 2003). Others feared attempts by the United States or Western Europe to impose outside regimes and Western liberal feminism to control the populations of states in flux (Matland and Montgomery 2003). Regardless of post-1989 CEE framing of policies and whether one believes women should fill political roles or evaluates women's prospects evenly with men's, we argue that 45 years of CEE state policies on education, childcare, and work outside the home likely opened some mindsets regarding women in public life and even in executive roles.

4 | Conditions Explaining Patterns of Women's Executive Leadership in the CEE

This section examines conditions explaining patterns of women's executive leadership in the CEE. These factors can be

categorized into three main groups: levels of freedom, executive institutions, and various gender equality indicators. We begin focusing on levels of freedom.

4.1 | Levels of Freedom and the Presence of Women Executives

In assessing factors that help explain where and why women political executives emerge in CEE and more broadly, we begin with examining levels of democracy.

Significant variation exists in levels of democracy and the tendency for women to gain presidencies or prime ministerships in CEE (see Table 3). We used Freedom House's three-fold categorization of states into free, party free, or not free to examine system types most associated with women political executives. Freedom House data is from 2023, but we also analyze data from when leaders first ascended. Among the 15 CEE countries with women executives, the majority are currently considered free. Moreover, nearly all countries with women executives were free when women ascended. We identify six countries that are only partly free and had women executives at the time: Georgia,

TABLE 3 | Women executives: Level of freedom and executive structure by country.

Country	Level of freedom	Executive structure	Position	Name	Dates in office (MM/DD/YY)
Bulgaria	Free	Premier-Parliamentarism	Prime Minister ^a	Reneta Indzhova	10/16/1994–1/25/1995
Croatia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Jadranka Kosor	7/06/2009–12/23/2011
Croatia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President	Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic	2/19/2015–02/18/2020
Estonia	Free	Parliamentarism	President	Kersti Kaljulaid	10/06/2016–10/11/2021
Estonia	Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Kaja Kallas	1/26/2021–7/23/2024
Georgia	Partly Free	President-Parliamentarism	President ^a	Nino Burdzhanadze	11/23/2003–1/25/2004 11/25/2007–1/20/2008
Georgia	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	President	Salome Zurabishvili	12/16/2018-present
Hungary	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	President	Katalin Novak	5/10/2022–2/26/2024
Latvia	Free	Parliamentarism	President	Vaira Vike-Freiberga	6/17/1999–7/8/2007
Latvia	Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Laimdota Straujuma	1/22/2014–2/11/2016
Latvia	Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Evika Siliņa	9/15/2023–present
Lithuania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Kazimiera Danuta Prunskienė	3/17/1990–1/10/1991
Lithuania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister ^a	Irena Degutienė	5/04/1999–5/18/1999 10/27/1999–11/3/1999
Lithuania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President	Dalia Grybauskaitė	7/12/2009–7/12/2019
Lithuania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Ingrida Šimonytė	12/11/2020–present
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Zinaida Greceanii	3/31/2008–9/14/2009
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister ^a	Natalia Gherman	6/22/2015–7/30/2015
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Maia Sandu	6/8/2019–11/14/2019
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	President	Natalia Gavrilița	12/24/2020–present
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Natalia Gavrilița	8/6/2021–2/16/2023
North Macedonia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister ^a	Radmila Šekerinska	5/12/2004–6/2/2004 11/18/2004–12/17/2004
North Macedonia	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	President	Gordana Siljanovska Davkova	5/12/2024–present
Poland	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Hanna Suchocka	7/11/1992–10/26/1993
Poland	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Ewa Kopacz	9/22/2014–11/16/2015
Poland	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Beata Szydło	11/16/2015–12/11/2017

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

Country	Level of freedom	Executive structure	Position	Name	Dates in office (MM/DD/YY)
Romania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Viorica Dăncilă	1/29/2018–11/04/2019
Serbia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President ^a	Nataša Mičić	12/29/2002–2/04/2004
Serbia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President ^a	Slavica Đukić Dejanović	4/5/2012–5/31/2012
Serbia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Ana Brnabić	6/29/2017–3/20/2024
Slovakia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Iveta Radičová	7/8/2010–4/4/2012
Slovakia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President	Zuzana Čaputová	6/15/2019–6/15/2024
Slovenia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Alenka Bratušek	3/20/2013–9/18/2014
Slovenia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President	Nataša Pirc Musar	12/22/2022–present
Ukraine	Partly Free	President-Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Yuliya Tymoshenko	1/24/2005–9/8/2005 12/18/2007–3/4/2010

Note: Sandu (Moldova) held the prime ministership before the presidency; we count her as president (the role she held longer) to avoid confusion with total numbers of different women leaders ($n = 33$).

^aInterim or acting leader.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_elected_and_appointed_female_heads_of_state_and_government; https://guide2womenleaders.com/Female_Leaders.htm (Cases through 2017); <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023> and Floriano (2010).

Hungary, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. Notably, not free countries in CEE are very unlikely to advance women to executive office. Seven CEE countries that have not yet had a woman leader at the time of this writing are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Czech Republic, Montenegro, and the Russian Federation. Besides Czech Republic, these countries are not considered free. Partially free status seems to be a minimal condition for women to ascend as prime ministers or presidents in the region. When we examine democracy over time, women started to emerge in CEE when countries moved toward partly free status in the first two decades following transition. It was not until the 2010s, however, that women started to gain more ground numerically. This progress has continued during the first half of the 2020s. Despite a later transition to democracy, CEE countries have seen rapid growth in women's executive leadership.

4.2 | Type of Executive Institutions and Structures and the Presence of Women Executives

Our second area of investigation is the role of executive institutions and structures in determining where women executives emerged in CEE. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the post-colonial wave of democratization in African and Asian countries, many states adopted the systems of their colonizers (Levy and Young 2011). Within a few years of independence,

however, most former British colonies in Africa shifted away from parliamentary to presidential systems. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Latin American regimes transitioned away from military dictatorships and opted for a form of presidentialism (Mainwaring 1990). Latin American political leaders reasoned that citizens themselves would directly elect the president, and the executive could bypass governmental wrangling to expedite democracy for the masses, focusing on efficiency of presidentialism as opposed to the representativeness of parliamentarism (Shugart and Carey 1992). In contrast, in 1990s Central and Eastern Europe, many countries opted for a mixed system (modeled on the West German or French Fifth Republic) featuring both a president and a prime minister (Elgie and Moestrup 2008; Fruhstorfer and Passarelli 2020). Deliberating and deciding on a constitutional framework after the fall of the USSR was a challenging process that Elster, Offe, and Preuss (1998) likened to passengers rebuilding a damaged boat on the open sea (27).

Part of CEE's leading status as a region where women executives arise stems from the fact that unlike other post-colonial systems, many CEE countries adopted new constitutions after 1989 featuring dual executive systems where both a prime minister and president govern. The reasoning behind implementing these systems was to escape the centralization of power in the period of state socialism (1945–1989) in a Politburo or Communist Party Secretary. These systems could also forestall the possibility of delegative democracies that O'Donnell (1994) feared could lead

to despotic presidents with little accountability. However, an arrangement with both a strong president and a strong prime minister, particularly from different political parties, still risks inter-institutional fighting or can even trigger a constitutional crisis (O'Donnell 1994). By delving into definitions of presidentialism, parliamentarism, and variations, we can better understand the executive context in which women leaders in CEE operate. Shugart and Carey (1992) define presidentialism as when the president, who is the chief executive:

1. is popularly elected
2. serves a fixed term (and, along with the assembly, terms are not dependent on mutual confidence)
3. selects/organizes the government
4. is invested with some constitutionally granted authority to make law (19).

According to Sedelius and Linde (2018), no purely presidential systems exist in CEE. In a premier-presidential system, the president comes to power through the popular vote and possesses considerable powers. However, a prime minister and cabinet (subject to assembly confidence) also exercise executive functions (Shugart and Carey 1992, 23; Duverger 1980, 161). The prime minister is stronger than the president because the president is not guaranteed a legislative check. Even if the president vetoes parliament's decision, parliament in principle can override the president. Furthermore, the president cannot unilaterally dismiss a cabinet minister; this must be done with the parliament (Shugart and Carey 1992). In contrast, a president-parliamentary system features the following:

1. the popular election of the president;
2. the president appoints and dismisses cabinet ministers;
3. cabinet ministers are subject to parliamentary confidence;
4. the president has the power to dissolve parliament or legislative powers, or both (Shugart and Carey 1992, 24).

Further analysis of the semi-presidential type is important in CEE because so many of these systems opted for a form of semi-presidentialism. Roper (2002) notes that Shugart and Carey argue:

that there are two general dimensions to presidential power, legislative and nonlegislative power, in any system of government. The legislative dimension includes veto power, decree authority, reserved policy areas, budgetary powers, and the ability to propose referenda. The nonlegislative dimension includes cabinet formation and dismissal, censure, and dissolution of the parliament.

(Roper, 256)

Shugart and Carey created a score for each of the two dimensions of presidential power (legislative and nonlegislative), where 4 is the highest level of presidential power, and 0 is the least for each dimension. Roper (2002) refined the scores for the

CEE context, arguing that CEE presidents don't tend to have budgetary powers, the power to censure cabinet ministers, or exclusive legislative authority over legislation (Roper, 256). Roper coded Lithuania (1), Slovenia (2), Poland (3), and Moldova and Romania (5), though writes that referendum powers existing in Romania had not at the time been employed by its presidents (Roper 2002, 259). As Baylis (1996) argues, in many CEE countries there is inter-institutional conflict because presidents have popularity and legitimacy but less power (306). On the other hand, prime ministers have power but less visibility and legitimacy to do something. Prime ministers regularly lack (or lose) a parliamentary majority and enjoy shorter tenures (often about one year). The path through appointment and lack of security in this role (versus a president in a presidential system that is popularly elected to a fixed term unless impeached) may help explain women's greater presence as prime ministers worldwide (see Jalalzai 2013, 2019).

As noted, since 1990, 33 cases of women executives overall have ascended in CEE. Women prove more numerous in premier-presidential and parliamentary systems than in the presidential-parliamentary type (see Table 3). Since transition in 1990, 19 cases of women executives served across eight countries in systems that feature premier-presidentialism (Bulgaria, Croatia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia). Of the 19 women who ascended in premier-presidential systems, 13 were prime ministers. We examine these leaders first.

Prime ministers are viewed as holding the ultimate role in premier-presidential systems. These 13 leaders include: Indzhova (Bulgaria), Kosor (Croatia), Degutienė (Lithuania), Prunskienė (Lithuania), Šimonytė (Lithuania), Šekerinska (North Macedonia), Suchocka (Poland), Kopacz (Poland), Szydło (Poland), Dăncilă (Romania), Brnabić (Serbia), Radičová (Slovakia), and Bratušek (Slovenia). Three of these leaders (Indzhova, Degutienė and Šekerinska) were in office on an interim basis. Six women served terms of less than two years. For example, Viorica Dăncilă was Romania's third prime minister in a span of seven months. She was not immediately Social Democratic Party (PSD) party leader when she first ascended. This role was held by Liviu Dragnea, who had not been allowed to serve as prime minister when faced with charges of corruption. Dragnea was still seen as the real party leader even after Dăncilă became PSD head: "observers say he has still wielded power from behind the scenes, directing his PSD and the government they lead" (BBC News 2019). Not only did she face conflict within the PSD, she experienced multiple conflicts with President Klaus Iohannis of the National Liberal Party (PNL). As may be predicted given the tendency for tumult, she remained prime minister for less than two years, succumbing to a no confidence vote.

The four remaining women among the 13 prime ministers in premier-presidential systems—Kosor (Croatia), Šimonytė (Lithuania), Ana Brnabić's (Serbia), and Beata Szydło (Poland)—remained in their positions for more than two years, though just barely in Szydło's case. While Brnabić's nearly seven-year tenure as prime minister is the longest in Serbia to date, the complexity of this case must be acknowledged. While the prime minister is officially the dominant player in Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic (who served as prime minister immediately

prior to Brnabić) appointed her to head an ostensibly surrogate government. “Brnabic appears to be just another team player in Aleksandar Vucic’s well-trained squad with no actual power” (Kljajic 2021). This demonstrates the difficulty in drawing firm conclusions in terms of the real exercise of executive power absent deeper analysis.

Six women of the 19 women in premier-presidential systems were presidents: Grabar-Kitarovic (Croatia), Grybauskaitė (Lithuania), Čaputová (Slovakia) Pirc Musar (Slovenia), Dejanović (Serbia), and Mičić (Serbia). Dejanović and Mičić were acting presidents, however. The remaining four presidents do exercise some power, unlike purely ceremonial presidents. They can perform important functions, often in areas that are stereotypically considered more masculine in nature such as foreign affairs, defense, and national security (Barnes and O’Brien 2018; Barnes and Taylor Robinson 2018; Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019; Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023). At the same time, they are expected to work with the prime minister and ministers overseeing these areas rather than take unilateral action. Overall, the prime minister holds the ultimate role.

We now analyze women ascending in parliamentary systems. Twelve women executives have ascended across six countries in systems that were parliamentary at the time. Six of them held the penultimate office of the president: Kaljulaid (Estonia), Zurabishvili (Georgia), Novak (Hungary), Vike-Freiberga (Latvia), Sandu (Moldova), and Davkova (North Macedonia). The remaining six were prime ministers: Kallas (Estonia), Straujuma (Latvia), Silina (Latvia), Greceanii (Moldova), Gavrilița (Moldova), and Gherman (Moldova). While the prime ministership is seen as the ultimate role in these systems, we offer some important caveats. Greceanii and Gavrilița were in power for less than two years, and Gherman was an interim prime minister. Kallas and Straujuma both held the ultimate role and were in power for more than two years. Straujuma just barely surmounted the two-year threshold, however. Finally, Silina first ascended in September of 2023 and is still in office at the time of this writing (August 2024). Women have not yet arisen in Albania and Czech Republic, both parliamentary systems.

Only two women have ascended within systems featuring presidential parliamentarism. Yuliya Tymoshenko (Ukraine) occupied

the penultimate role of prime minister on two different occasions. Nino Burdzhnashvili (Georgia) was acting president. Notably, women have never ascended in other presidential parliamentarism systems in CEE (Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russian Federation).

Overall, Table 3 demonstrates that several women executives in the CEE occupied positions that vary in terms of significance. They have often been in the ultimate position in the system as prime ministers. For example, in Estonia, Kaja Kallas, who governed from 2020 to 2024, occupied the ultimate role of prime minister. But we also see some presidents that were essentially symbolic. In Hungary, Katalin Novak served briefly in the very weak role of president and resigned following a scandal (Nagy 2024). Some presidencies, while not completely symbolic, offer substantially fewer powers than compared to the prime minister. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic of Croatia and Zuzana Čaputová of Slovakia are good examples of these types of presidents. Premier-presidential systems or parliamentary systems in our analysis appear more favorable to women executives. We argue that the dual structure provides more opportunities for executive leadership since power is dispersed rather than concentrated (see Jalalzai 2013).

As noted, among the 33 instances of women executives in CEE, seven were solely acting or interim leaders (four prime ministers and three presidents) while 26 served on a more permanent basis (16 prime ministers and 10 presidents).⁵ In countries like Bulgaria, where a woman only led on a temporary basis, women’s executive leadership remains elusive. However, 10 countries have seen multiple women at the helm.

In Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Slovakia, two women have ascended. Poland, Latvia, and Serbia have seen three different women come to power. Finally, Lithuania and Moldova have each had a staggering four women in power (see Table 4).⁶ Among countries with repeated instances of women in power, Moldova, Georgia, and Serbia are not considered full democracies. We also point out that women held the presidency and prime ministership at the same time in Estonia and Moldova recently, a very rare occurrence globally.⁷

In CEE, the path to becoming prime minister is not strictly tied to party leadership, though it often proves beneficial for aspiring candidates (Grotz and Weber 2017).

TABLE 4 | Number of cases of women executives in CEE countries through 2024.

Number of times country has had female political executive	One	Two	Three	Four
CEE country	Bulgaria ^a	Croatia	Poland	Lithuania ^a
	Hungary	Estonia	Latvia	Moldova ^a
	Romania	Georgia ^a	Serbia ^b	
	Ukraine	N. Macedonia ^a		
		Slovenia		
		Slovakia		
Total	4	12	9	8
				33

^aOne-interim/acting.

^bTwo-interim/acting.

TABLE 5 | Women prime ministers and party leadership.

Country	System	Leader	Party leader	Powers
Croatia	Premier-Presidentialism	Jadranka Kosor	Yes	Ultimate
Estonia	Parliamentarism	Kaja Kallas	Yes	Ultimate
Latvia	Parliamentarism	Laimdota Straujuma	No	Ultimate
Latvia	Parliamentarism	Evika Siliņa	No	Ultimate
Lithuania	Premier-Presidentialism	Kazimiera Danuta Prunskienė	No	Ultimate
Lithuania	Premier-Presidentialism	Ingrida Šimonytė	No	Ultimate
Moldova	Parliamentarism	Zinaida Greceanîi	No	Ultimate
Moldova	Parliamentarism	Natalia Gavrilița	No	Ultimate
Poland	Premier-Presidentialism	Hanna Suchocka	No	Ultimate
Poland	Premier-Presidentialism	Ewa Kopacz	Yes	Ultimate
Poland	Premier-Presidentialism	Beata Szydło	No	Ultimate
Romania	Premier-Presidentialism	Viorica Dăncilă	Yes	Ultimate
Serbia	Premier-Presidentialism	Ana Brnabić	No	Ultimate
Slovakia	Premier-Presidentialism	Iveta Radičová	No	Ultimate
Slovenia	Premier-Presidentialism	Alenka Bratušek	Yes	Ultimate
Ukraine	President-Parliamentarism	Yuliya Tymoshenko	Yes	Penultimate

Note: This list does not include four acting/interim prime ministers: Reneta Indzhova (Bulgaria) Irena Degutienė (Lithuania) Natalia Gherman (Moldova) and Radmila Šekerinska (North Macedonia). Kopacz became party leader about two months after ascending prime minister. Dancilă became party leader four months after becoming prime minister. Bratušek was party leader when she first took office but lost the party leadership after an election. She stepped down as prime minister soon after that.

TABLE 6 | Women presidents: Party, popular election, and power.

Country	System	Leader	Party	Popular vote	Ultimate
Croatia	Premier-Presidentialism	Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic	No	Yes	No
Estonia	Parliamentarism	Kersti Kaljulaid	No	No	No
Georgia	Parliamentarism	Salome Zurbishvili	No	Yes	No
Hungary	Parliamentarism	Katalin Novak	No	No	No
Latvia	Parliamentarism	Vaira Vike-Freiberga	No	No	No
Lithuania	Premier-Presidentialism	Dalia Grybauskaitė	No	Yes	No
Moldova	Parliamentarism	Maia Sandu	Yes	Yes	No
North Macedonia	Parliamentarism	Gordana Siljanovska Davkova	Yes	Yes	No
Slovakia	Premier-Presidentialism	Zuzana Čaputová	No	Yes	No
Slovenia	Premier-Presidentialism	Nataša Pirc Musar	No	Yes	No

Note: Party is meant to capture whether the president is supposed to represent a party while president. This does not mean that they were unaffiliated with a party when they were elected, nor does this indicate anything about their actual behavior as president. The Georgian system changed from a president-parliamentarism system to a parliamentary one by the time Salome Zurbishvili came to power. The Macedonian system changed from premier-presidentialism to parliamentary by the time Gordana Siljanovska Davkova ascended. This list does not include 3 acting presidents: Nino Burdzhaneladze (Georgia), Slavica Đukić Dejanović (Serbia), and Nataša Mičić (Serbia).

Party leadership can provide political capital and party influence. Among cases of women prime ministers in the CEE, were they also party leaders? Limiting our analysis to the 16 prime ministers that did not serve in acting or interim capacities, six women were party leaders at some point during their tenures (see Table 5). A majority (63%) do not lead their parties, indicating potential vulnerabilities and power curtailments.

Party representation and popular election of presidents are important factors to consider in determining the progress women have made. A lack of party affiliation can indicate mainly symbolic roles or less political influence (Jalalzai 2014).

When we analyze women presidents throughout time in CEE, only two women among the subsample of 10 to date officially

represented a political party while in office (see Table 6). If we consider the global patterns outlined earlier, it is noteworthy that 10 of the 16 women presidents in power around the world currently (August 2024) were *not* elected by the popular vote. Among the six presidents that were directly elected, three are from CEE (see Table 1).⁸ That half of the directly elected presidents in office now are from CEE is worthy of mention. How does this compare to the paths of women presidents of CEE throughout time? When we analyze the 10 women presidents to date in CEE who held power on a non-temporary basis, seven were directly elected to their posts. No women in this group, however, held dominant power as presidents in their countries. As stated, systems with singular or dominant presidents are less common in most CEE countries. Countries sought a strong break with the past after a 45-year tradition of centralized one-party communist rule. These positions were exclusively held by men when they were in place. And, as stated, women have not held the presidency in presidential parliamentarism systems on a non-acting basis.

As noted, several countries have witnessed multiple women coming to power over time. These cases do not display a consistent pattern in terms of power. Some countries like Croatia and Slovakia see women in the ultimate role first and then the penultimate one subsequently. In Estonia, the pattern was reversed. Other times women have only been in the ultimate role (in Poland, for example, as prime minister but never as president). We believe again, however, that a closer look at some of these cases is in order as the system classifications may not be telling the full story about power dynamics at work. In Poland, for example, it is well known that the most dominant political actor in the Law and Justice Party (PiS) is the party leader (Jarosław Kaczyński)—not the prime minister. Beata Szydło was thus subordinate to the party leader while she was prime minister.

4.3 | Other Gender Equality Indicators and the Presence of Women Political Executives in CEE

What other gender equality indicators are associated with countries with women executives when they first ascended? We aim to provide a clearer connection between women's executive leadership and possible facilitating conditions. We investigate four factors: (1) the percentage of women in parliament, (2) the percentage women in cabinet, (3) gender-related development index (GDI), and (4) women's labor force participation rate.

First, we examine the percentage of women in parliament (see Table 7). This variable appears associated with the presence of women political executives in CEE. The percentage of women in parliament at the time of women's ascension to non-acting executive positions ranges from 24% in Croatia to 32% in Slovenia. Though a fuller multivariate analysis is needed to weigh the impacts of social, cultural, and institutional variables on the presence of women executives, the percentage of women in parliament appears associated with women-led countries. We see that very few countries in which women ascended had less than 10% of parliament comprised of women. There are limited exceptions where countries with very low levels of women

parliamentarians have executives. In Ukraine, women were only 5% of the parliament. In Georgia, Serbia, and Poland, women comprised 7% of parliament. In Georgia and Serbia, both women served on an acting basis. By the time women led on a more permanent basis in these countries, women formed a much larger share of parliament (see Table 7). In Poland, women were 20% of the parliament by 2001 but were less than 15% before (Notes from Poland 2023). The average percentage of women in parliaments across the countries where women governed is 21%, in line with expectations.

Second, when we examine the percentage of the women in cabinet, we see quite a bit of variation across CEE. Looking at Table 7 at only the countries where women have held executive office, the average percentage of women in cabinets is 22%. Other than Ukraine, which had only 5% of cabinet comprised of women, levels do not dip below ten% (though data was unavailable for three cases). We see several countries where women comprise 30% or even 40% of the cabinet. For the most part, women's presence in cabinets in CEE countries that have had women executives proves rather impressive. We caution, however, that greater cabinet diversity may sometimes be a result of having women at the helm, rather than a predictor (Jalalzai 2019). For example, Estonia's former Prime Minister Kaja Kallas received a great deal of attention for appointing women to fill nearly half of the cabinet posts (Hankewitz 2021).

Third, we examine the gender development index (GDI). The index assesses gender disparities across three aspects of human development: education, health, and control over economic resources.⁹ GDI is uniformly high for countries in the CEE region, ranging from 0.981 in Montenegro to 1.03 in Lithuania, where the world average is 0.958. Looking at the period the year women ascended to power in Table 6, GDI, again, is uniformly high for countries in the CEE region, ranging from a 0.892 in Bulgaria and Lithuania to 1.029 in Moldova. This factor may have less association with which CEE countries have had women at the helm.

Fourth, and similarly, we look at women's labor force participation rates which range from 42% in Romania to 62% in Poland. The global average is 47%, and many CEE countries exceed that threshold. Looking at the time of women's ascensions, women's percentage in the labor force was also quite high, ranging from 40% in North Macedonia (in 2004) to 61% on Poland (in 2014). Thus, while a higher percentage of women in parliament is associated with women executives, the percentage of women in cabinets, gender-related development index and women's labor force participation rates are not highly associated with where we see women executives because they tend to be higher across the board. State socialism's emphasis on these dimensions may explain why the region has exceeded others in terms of some indicators but not women's ascensions as prime ministers and presidents. Further research is necessary, however, before drawing more firm conclusions.

5 | Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed women executives (presidents and prime ministers) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). We

TABLE 7 | Indicators in CEE when women ascended.

Country	Level of Freedom	Executive Structure	Position	Name ^a	Women Lower House Parliament	Women Cabinet Ministers	Gender Related Development Index	Women's Labor Force Participation Rate
Bulgaria	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Reneta Indzhova ^a	13% (1994)	Unknown	0.892 (1994)	46.9% (1999)
Croatia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Jadranka Kosor	24% (2007)	23.5% (2008)	0.935 (2009)	47% (2009)
				Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic	26% (2011)	20% (2015)	0.942 (2015)	47% (2013)
Estonia	Free	Parliamentarism	President	Kersti Kaljulaid	24% (2015)	25% (2016)	0.943 (2016)	48.6 (2016)
				Kaja Kallas	26% (2019)	46.7% (2021)	0.951 (2021)	48.8 (2021)
Georgia	Partly Free	President-Parliamentarism	President ^a	Nino Burdzhanadze	7% (1999)	22% (2005)	0.925 (2003)	57.5 (2003)
				Salome Zurbishvili	16% (2016)	27.3% (2018)	0.943 (2018)	55.6% (2018)
Hungary	Partly Free	Parliamentarism	President	Katalin Novak	13% (2022)	21% (2020)	0.851 (2022)	46.6% (2022)
Latvia	Free	Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Vaira Viķe-Freiberga	17% (1999)	Unknown	0.914 (1999)	47.9% (1999)
				Laimdota Straujuma	18% (2014)	30.8% (2014)	0.942 (2014)	49.7% (2014)
Lithuania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Evika Siliņa	32% (2022)	42.9% (2022)	1.022 (2023)	55.5% (2022)
				Kazimiera Danuta Prunskiene	10% (1990)	Unknown	0.892 (1990)	48.2% (1991)
				Irena Degutiene	18% (1996)	Unknown	0.914 (1999)	49.3% (1999)
				Dalia Grybauskaitė	19% (2008)	23.1% (2008)	1.028 (2009)	50.6% (2009)
Moldova	Partly Free	Parliamentary President-Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Ingrida Šimonytė	27% (2020)	43% (2020)	1.027 (2020)	49.4% (2020)
				Zinaida Greceanii	27% (2020)	10.5% (2008)	0.933 (2008)	52.9% (2008)
North Macedonia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister ^a	Natalia Gherman	22% (2005)	27.8% (2015)	1.024 (2015)	52.5% (2015)
				Maia Sandu	22% (2014)	40% (2020)	0.951 (2020)	52.1% (2020)
Poland	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Natalia Gavrilița	25% (2020)	40% (2020)	1.029 (2021)	52% (2021)
				Radmila Šekerinska	41% (2021)	40% (2020)	0.924 (2004)	40.2% (2004)
Romania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Gordana Siljanovska Davkova	19% (2002)	16.7% (2005)	0.945 (2022)	42.2% (2022)
				Hanna Suchocka	33.9% (2024)	25% (2023)	0.905 (1992)	62% (1992)
Romania	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Ewa Kopacz	7% (1990)	0% (1990)	0.942 (2014)	61% (2014)
				Beata Szydło	24% (2011)	16.7% (2014)	0.942 (2015)	62% (2015)
				Viorica Dăncilă	24% (2011)	27.8% (2015)	0.943 (2018)	43.3% (2018)

(Continues)

TABLE 7 | (Continued)

Country	Level of Freedom	Executive Structure	Position	Name ^a	Women	Gender Related	Women's
					Lower House Parliament	Women Cabinet Ministers	Development Index
Serbia	Partly Free	Premier-Presidentialism	President ^a	Nataša Mičić	7% (2000)	0.922 (2002)	43.8% (2002)
	Free (2012)		President ^a	Slavica Đukić	33% (2012)	0.940 (2012)	43.8% (2012)
	Partly Free (2016)		Prime Minister	Dejanović Ana Brnabić	34% (2016)	0.944 (2017)	45% (2017)
Slovakia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Iveta Radičová	25% (2010)	0.994 (2010)	51% (2010)
			President	Zuzana Čaputová	20% (2016)	0.946 (2019)	52.5% (2019)
Slovenia	Free	Premier-Presidentialism	Prime Minister	Alenka Bratušek	32% (2011)	0.943 (2013)	45.8% (2013)
				Nataša Pirc Musar	36% (2022)	0.999 (2022)	45.9% (2022)
Ukraine	Partly Free	President-Parliamentarism	Prime Minister	Yulia Tymoshenko	5% (2002)	0.928 (2005)	51.4% (2005)

^aIndicates Interim or acting leader.

aimed to uncover how successful CEE countries were in terms of promoting women to these positions. We also were interested in assessing factors facilitating women's executive presence and how regional trends compared to global patterns. We find that women's ascensions to executive leadership roles in CEE reveals both encouraging developments but also persistent barriers to their full inclusion.

First, we demonstrated that between 1960 and 2024, CEE women comprise 21% of all women political executives globally. In 2024, nearly one-quarter of women executives are from this region of the world. Among the entire sample worldwide of women currently holding presidencies, CEE presidents are among the few women who gained their positions through a direct popular vote. Between 1990 and 2024, there were 33 women who rose to power in CEE countries. Clearly, women of the CEE deserve further attention to better understand the global footprint of women executives.

Second, we examined factors associated with CEE countries with women presidents and prime ministers and identified important limits or constraints. We found that women ascend to executive office under the condition that the system is at least partly free. More often, they arise in free systems. In terms of executive institutions and structures, premier-presidential and parliamentary systems are more associated with women leaders. We offer important caveats, however. A quarter of CEE women executives have served in less powerful acting or interim roles. Some held the penultimate role in the political system such as presidents in a system where the prime minister is stronger. Among prime ministers holding ultimate power, most were not party leaders and or did not remain in power long. While nearly all women presidents in our sample were elected to office, they were less powerful than their prime ministers. As studies confirm, women struggle to gain presidencies through a direct popular vote even when the post affords more limited power (Jalalzai 2013). While beyond the scope of this article, we note that several women prime ministers in our sample also ran for president whether before, during, or after their prime ministerial terms.

When we examine other gender equality indicators that might be associated with women executives in CEE, we found that the percentage of women in parliament appears associated with countries with women executives, while the percentage of women in cabinets, women's labor force participation rate, and gender-related development index appear less relevant or straightforward. We suggest that the higher than-average levels of these factors in CEE may relate to the regions higher than expected number of women leaders but may not be associated with within-region variation. While exceptions exist (such as former Prime Minister of Estonia, Kaja Kallas who exercised ultimate power, was party leader, and held power longer than many of her female counterparts), our analysis indicates persistent limitations women face in the region including:

- serving in only acting or interim capacities
- holding power for a short time even among those not serving in acting or interim capacities
- occupying the penultimate rather than ultimate office

- lacking the party leadership role as prime minister
- not being able to represent a party or play an explicitly political role as president.

Our findings mainly confirm previous global research that finds little connection between many structural conditions and women's presence as executives (Jalalzai 2019). Women in CEE constitute an impressive number of cases globally (currently and over time). If women, however, mainly serve as placeholders, gain the penultimate office, serve briefly, fail to occupy party leadership roles as prime ministers, or in the case of presidents, lack authority to be political, we may question women's advancement. Looking more closely at the institutional dynamics to see where power lies and where women are located is necessary. As indicated, determining powers in practice can be challenging. The potential benefits to women's executive leadership such as symbolic and substantive empowerment of women (Jalalzai 2019), while beyond this article's scope, is very likely constrained by these factors. These and other topics are fruitful avenues for future research. We hope that this study inspires more scholarship on this growing yet understudied group of leaders.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ This number is derived from author analysis of women in power from August 2024. It includes acting/interim leaders. If the acting/interim leader moved to a more permanent position, they are only counted once. If a leader served in more than one permanent position, they are analyzed in the position they held longer. We note that this number excludes two women leaders from countries that no longer exist: Yugoslavia and East Germany.

² According to Clancy and Jackson, "About a third of UN member states have ever had a woman leader" (2024). However, they only examine heads of government, thus omitting several cases of women leaders. Nevertheless, most countries worldwide have not yet had a woman prime minister or president.

³ We note that global studies have not found level of democracy to be a significant factor to women's executive advancement (Jalalzai 2013, 2019). When we break down Western Europe and CEE, we find quite comparable numbers even though many Western European countries were categorized as free by Freedom House for roughly 40 years before their CEE neighbors. Western Europe has had 38/158 (24%) women executives from a total of 17 different countries out of 193 (9% of the world's countries), and Central and Eastern Europe has had 33/158 (20.9%) in 22 countries/193 (11% of the world's countries). If longstanding democracy was a main explanatory factor behind women's ascensions, Western Europe would substantially outpace CEE in women executives.

⁴ Some countries may have promoted women to help their bids to become part of the European Union. We note, however, that women have been an important force even after the accessions of 10 CEE countries to the European Union on May 1, 2004 (European Commission).

⁵ Sandu of Moldova is counted once, as president, though she also held the prime ministership briefly before this. The acting or interim prime ministers are Reneta Indzhova (Bulgaria), Irena Degutienė (Lithuania), Natalia Gherman (Moldova), and Radmila Šekerinska (North Macedonia). The acting or interim presidents are Nino Burdzhanadze (Georgia), Slavica Đukić Dejanović (Serbia), and Nataša Mičić (Serbia).

⁶ For many of these countries with multiple cases, at least one of these leaders served on an acting or interim basis.

⁷ This is no longer the case in Estonia. Other countries worldwide where two women have led at the same time include Finland (previously and on two occasions), Sri Lanka (previously), and Barbados (currently).

⁸ For presidents not elected by the popular vote, most are selected by the legislature. Samia Suluhu Hassanof Zambia moved up to the presidency when the President died. Peruvian President Dina Boluarte succeeded the President when he was impeached. These women were both vice-presidents.

⁹ HDI refers to the human development index and "GDI is the ratio of female HDI to male HDI" (UNDP 2024).

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