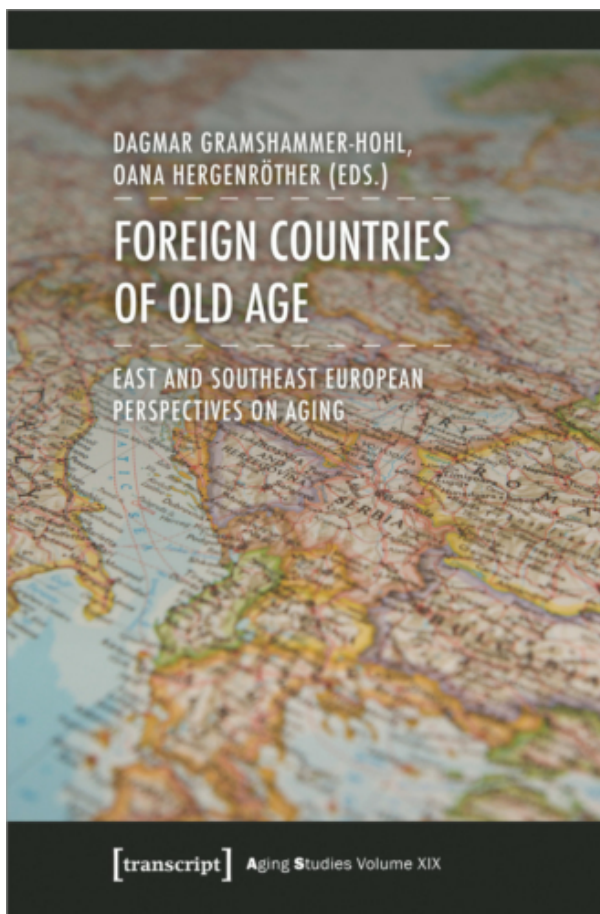


Essay Collection on Aging in Eastern and Southeastern Europe

2023-12-13 | **by:** Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl, Oana Hergenröther

The book brings together two rarely connected fields: Aging and East and Southeast European Studies. Its multi-disciplinary essays examine the region's culturally specific contexts and challenge our understanding of aging and aging studies.



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In 2021, we published the **essay collection *Foreign Countries of Old Age: East and Southeast European Perspectives on Aging***, which has proved to be a pioneer publication on the topic. The book results from an international cooperation of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, with, among others, historians from Graz, sociologists and ethnologists from Belgrade, Bucharest, and Skopje, or literary scholars from Dubrovnik and Zadar.

We have tried to add to a body of scholarship that connects the growingly important age and aging studies to contexts other than, for instance, North America or Western Europe. The title of our essay collection – *Foreign Countries of Old Age* – is a spin on May Sarton’s famous quote, which describes old age itself as a foreign country. We have used the plural “foreign countries” to indicate that there is a need to understand the aging process in all its diversity and to show the importance of gaining more insight – and more comparative insight – into what it means to be, as Margaret Morganroth Gullette has termed it, “aged by culture.”

We tried to show not a homogeneity of Eastern Europe or Southeastern Europe, but precisely the plurality of the standpoints from which age and aging can be discussed and analyzed, and also the potential for research inherent in the diversity of these regions.

The essays in this volume address the topics of age and aging both synchronically and diachronically, focusing, among other things, on the transformations and perspective shifts in the last decades that countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe have undergone. The topics range from discussions of age and care, age-related personnel and pension policies, the transformation of older adults’ social roles, generational relations and conflicts, gender differences, age and technology, and representations of age and aging in literature, science, and popular culture.

One of the trigger points for us to initiate this book project took place at the “Aging Graz” conference in 2017 organized by the European Network in Aging Studies, where one of the keynote speakers, Professor David Ekerdt from the University of Kansas, gave a talk entitled “Aging in a World of Things” about the accumulation of physical objects over time and its meaning in US-American culture – a very interesting talk which did and could not, however, resonate with topics that scholars in Slavic or Southeast European studies might encounter in their analyses. The recently increased interest in the “material turn” in aging studies would provoke quite different responses in the societies of Eastern and Southeastern Europe – very generally speaking – where the population of 65 and over is probably less 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. Obviously, there are noticeable imbalances and sometimes taken-for-granted positions about what old age and the aging process mean.

We tried to reflect on this starting point for the composition of the volume in our critical introduction, as well as on the moment in which the book was being finalized, namely the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked the contributors to the volume to report on the diverse lockdown measures in their respective countries and the result was very interesting, because it seems that general ageist attitudes were quickly reflected in various

lockdown policies that singled out the population of 65+, under a patronizing pretext of knowing what is best for them, so that in some countries of the Western Balkans, for instance, people over 65 were literally locked inside their apartments for several months, only allowed to go out during the night (for example, from 3 to 7 a.m. one day a week), not allowed any visitors etc. The pandemic only exposed existing social gaps, like the fact that access to technology, for instance, is very limited, in some places especially for the age cohort of people over 65, that there are many older people without even very basic mobile phones, let alone smartphones or printers where they could download and print out the permissions needed during the lockdown to go out and do grocery shopping.

During the first wave of the pandemic, one of our contributors from North Macedonia sent us a mail saying “I was just thinking how important the topic of this collection becomes in these new circumstances.” So, this volume, as we also believe, has come in timely, and the essays can truly be read as a testimony to the fact that much of what we are living now are consequences of well-established cultural practices towards age and aging. It is, thus, crucial to widen our understanding of these practices in culturally specific contexts, including Southeastern Europe.