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EAST CENTRAL EUROPE 45 (2018) 145-159



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# State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective. East European Circulation of Knowledge during the Cold War (1950s–1980s): *Introduction to the Thematic Issue*

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## Abstract

State socialist experts were at the center of Eastern Europe's internationalization from the mid-1950s until 1989. They acted as intermediaries between their states and other national, regional, and international environments. The contributions integrate national milieus within broader frameworks mostly circumscribed by inter- and nongovernmental specialized organizations (the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; International Theater Institute, or the UN Commission on Population and Development). The issue is an innovative initiative to identify within four fields (economy, demography,

theatre, and historical studies) state socialist experts' contributions to international debates and institution building. We argue that these groups were fundamentally characterized by their transnational dynamism. The resultant forms of mobility and transfer resituate specific systems of knowledge production from Eastern Europe within the larger story of postwar globalization. The collection also includes an anthropological study about the internationalization trajectories of lower-ranked professionals and the resilience of their expertise ethics after 1989. Socialist experts' mobilities can be circumscribed at the intersection of multiple phenomena that defined the postwar: national settings' impact on inter- and supra-state interactions; Cold War politics; the tribulations of international organizations; and global trends determined by the accelerating interconnectedness of the world and decolonization. Our findings de-center established narratives about the Cold War and they show how representatives from the East participated in and sometimes determined the conditions of Europeanizing and globalizing trends in their respective fields within particular organizations.

### Keywords

experts – Eastern Europe – international organizations – globalization – Cold War

The twentieth century was indelibly shaped by experts. It was also a time of ideological storms, a past defined by momentous clashes of modernities inside and outside of Europe. There is an obvious, intricate connection between the two descriptions: communities of specialized knowledge were at the center of entanglements among world-views, international orders, social-economic systems, and nation-states. The very revision of the past century's history depends on the identification and contextualization of the flows of ideas, people, and goods that crossed borders and frontiers among countries, regions, organizations, and political systems.

The present thematic issue focuses on the transnational circulation of state socialist experts' ideas and knowledge from the mid-1950s to the 1980s. These actors were at the core of Eastern Europe's internationalization during this period, as they represented intermediaries between their states and other national, regional, and international sites. The articles tell forgotten stories of socialist experts' internationalization. Starting from the Romanian case, but offering a broader transnational perspective, the contributions integrate national milieus within broader frameworks mostly circumscribed by inter- and non-governmental specialized organizations.

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to international debates and institution building. Simultaneously, we analyze the role of these communities' cross-border circulation in the process of professionalization and policy making in the former socialist bloc. We argue that these groups were fundamentally characterized by their transnational dynamism. The resultant forms of mobility and transfer resituate specific systems of knowledge production from Eastern Europe within the larger story of postwar globalization, which we see, following Mathias Middell and Katja Neumann, as a constant dialectical process of de- and re-territorialization (2010: 152). The issue also includes an anthropological study about the internationalization trajectories of lower-ranked professionals and the resilience of their expertise ethics after 1989.

The collection de-centers bipolarism through an analysis of the post-1945 period that avoids overemphasizing the Soviet Union-United States antagonism or the divide of capitalism vs. communism. By way of experts, we see the Cold War as a struggle of competing modernities. It was also an order of overlapping and clustered boundaries: national vs. regional; ideological blocs vs. international institutions; continental vs. global. The issue moves away from the limitations of diplomatic and political history. It does not take nation-states at face value, as conceptual black boxes. We underline the individuality of historical actors, the diversity of agency in multiple non-national environments, and the fluidity of the geographies of interaction along the East–West and North–South axes.

### Socialist Experts: Who, Why, Where?

The definition of “socialist experts” adopted by the collection singles out individuals qualified in a certain area of expertise whose activity fulfills three conditions. First, they belong to state institutions and professional bodies which the party-state designed to be responsible for the administration and policy-making in a certain field/subject. Second, they employ specialized languages that are standardized via scientific publications at home and abroad. Third, they participate at a national and international dialogue, which was promoted by different tools of intellectual exchange (journals, volumes, conferences), with their peers from other countries. They often hold high-profile positions in party and/or state institutions as well as international organizations specific to their respective fields (Konrád and Szelényi 1979; Beissinger 1988; Kohlrusch et al. 2010). These experts represent larger national epistemic communities, which are networks of professionals with recognized competence in a particular area that make authoritative policy claims (Haas 1992: 3). The *differentia specifica*