For decades, disability in post-Soviet countries seemed erased from academic discussion. After the fall of the Soviet Union, sociologists, economists, historians and political scientists from western countries paid attention to disability in the Global South rather than the post-socialist space. Yet, disabled lives provide a great lens for studying the great social and political transformations of the region. The edited volume *Disability in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: History, policy and everyday life* is evidence for an emerging interest surrounding disability in Eastern Europe, and it provides an insightful overview of up-to-date research on a wide range of historical and contemporary topics concerning people with disabilities in post-Soviet societies. The editors bring together a well-balanced collection of various country studies by experienced and junior researchers from the region and abroad. This composition provides clear evidence of the highly diverse and prolific field of disability research in Eastern Europe today.

In their introduction, Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova point out that “by investigating the experiences of ‘actually lived socialism’ and ‘actually lived transition’ from the standpoint of bodies and minds that do not fit with dominant norms and ideals of society” (2014:1), more general characteristics of “political, social and cultural dynamics” (2014:1) of post-socialist societies come into focus. The editors pay special attention to how the study of disability enlightens general traits of modernity, for example, Soviet industrialization and social planning projects. Furthermore, they investigate how this affected Soviet forms of state-citizen relations. Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova reject a one-sided argument that a Soviet legacy of marginalizing the ‘deviant’ alone would determine the social position of the disabled today. Instead, they insist that “there was no single experience or model of disability during state socialism or the transformations since the late 1980s” (2014:2). The rejection of this one sided-argument allows the analytical view to include specific developments of welfare state, state-citizen relations, technical and scientific institutions with regard to post-Soviet countries, and various forms of disability. The eleven chapters of this text represent this breadth of thought in a clear and impressive manner.

The first three chapters enlighten soviet welfare policy, technological development, and ideology of society through the lens of the state’s relationship to its disabled citizens. Beate Fieseler’s investigation of welfare for disabled soldiers after World War II and Frances Bernstein’s study of Kononov’s prosthetic arm demonstrate how the state fell short of providing
welfare and social inclusion for the disabled while simultaneously using them as symbolic representation for its welfare ideology. Moreover, in their study of visual representations of disability Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov unveil discrimination embedded in the Soviet welfare policy and illustrate how disability served as cultural ‘signifier’ for transporting ideological patterns of an ideal socialist society. All three chapters show how the governing of disability was deeply interwoven with communist rule.

The four subsequent chapters turn to a close-up perspective on disabled life since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Agita Lūse and Daiga Kamēraē confront professional discourses surrounding mental illness in Latvia and their impact on public stigma in relation to psychiatric patients. Next, Eszter Gábor investigates how Hungarian students with disabilities make sense of being stigmatized and how they integrate these experiences into the meaning-making in their personal life-stories. However, living a meaningful life can also be connected to breaking a social taboo, for example publicly talking about intimate relations, as Teodor Mladenov demonstrates in his essay on disability and sexuality in Bulgaria. Furthermore, Sarah Phillips explores both self-perceived and rights-related citizenship among people with mobility issues in Ukraine. It is the joint contribution of these chapters which shows the breadth of experiences of disabled persons in post-Soviet space.

The final part of this text provides insights into various policy interventions concerning discrimination and stigmatization of persons with disabilities. Darja Zaviršek tracks how a new neoliberal work ideology in Eastern Europe still incorporates segregating elements which disadvantage people with disability. Additionally, Hisayo Katsui illuminates why the global norm of a human rights approach to the social inclusion of disabled people is unlikely to be adopted in Central Asia due to local political and social barriers. Next, Majda Bećirević and Monica Dowling discuss non-governmental organizations and their role in the development of a suitable welfare model for children with disabilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. Finally, Victoria Shmidt explores the difficulties of reforming disabled children’s education in the Caucasus Region while also adequately considering local legal and institutional particularities. All authors impressively display how international influence is fragmented and transformed locally, and how it inherits regional features of welfare arrangements in flux.

The contributors of the volume share their interest for the imprint of Soviet patterns, while elaborating upon the simultaneousness of inclusive and exclusive elements in post-Soviet societal processes and how they impact disabled people’s lives. Because most emphasis is placed on investigating state policy and individual experiences, the reader misses an analysis of civil society as the intermediate institution of social integration. Although collective interest representation and civic activity of the disabled or advocacy on their behalf is weaker than in western countries, the role of NGOs, parental initiatives, self-help groups, etc. in increasing pressure for societal changes towards empowerment and equality of disabled people cannot be underestimated. Still, this book is a unique and comprehensive account of disability in Soviet and post-Soviet space. It applies not only to scholars engaged in disability studies, but will be particularly interesting for social and political scientists researching the region. Certainly, it will
stimulate and inspire future exploration of the relationship between disability and society in post-Soviet context.