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What are Eastern European Social Movements and
How to Study Them?

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Introduction

The idea for this issue emerged in Budapest during a two-day workshop on social movements in Central and Eastern Europe. The ideas behind this workshop (and thus this issue) was to discuss the specificity of civil mobilizations in the region and to contribute to academic debates ongoing since the transformation of 1989. Is there a regional specificity of social activism? Is, and if yes, how social activism is different from other parts of the world? Does this imply different theoretical and analytical approach? Other questions, closely linked to these are, how Eastern Europe is defined, characterized and constructed? How the eastern European context and environment affect social movements and mobilizations in the region? The main goal of this article is to present the main discussions among social movement academics and practitioners in the region and to deconstruct some of the clichés about grassroots activism in Eastern Europe that arose over the years.

What are we talking about?

Within common perception, Eastern Europe has undergone a political and social transformation to large extent due to social mobilizations, although levels of activism were not even within the region. When looking at the size of the dissident sectors prior to 1989 mobilizations, one not only sees variety in the sizes, but also that in most cases it is problematic to talk about mass movements that supported democracy, with the exception of Polish Solidarność [Solidarity] movement (Skovajsa, 2008).

Today, the dominant academic perception (to large extent shared by the activists) is that the levels of mobilization in Eastern Europe are much lower than in other parts of the continent (Howard, 2003). Most mobilizations were based on a growing disappointment towards the new elites (Ekiert and Kubik, 1999) because of the increasing economic cleavages. These feelings of disappointment are, according to Howard (2003), the main reason for civil society's weakness in the region. As Kopecký (2003: 5) notes, even in comparison with other post-authoritarian states in Southern Europe and Latin America, Eastern Europe today stands out with "distinctly lower" figures of participation in voluntary associations and trust in both political institutions and civil society actors. The only significant mobilizations have been based on "disappointment towards the new elites", often because of the increasing economic cleavages resulting from the post-1989 transitions and 'shock therapies' (Klein, 2007).

Besides the lower numbers in participation, are there any other significant characteristics of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe¹? Are there any characteristic features of popular mobilizations that can be linked to the specificity and history of the region? And are the above-mentioned diagnoses and assessments correct?

What are social movements?

There is a multiplicity of terms used in connection to social mobilizations, such as advocacy and interest groups, protest waves and cycles, social movement organizations, civil society organizations, NGOs to name just a few. Quite often the dividing lines between them are quite blurry, so are some of the definitions. One of the definitions of social movements developed by Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (1999: 14-15) underlines that (1) social movements are informal interaction networks. They are never formed by an organization, but always by a plurality of organizations, groups, and individuals. (2) Interactions among them form a movement; they are kept together by shared beliefs and solidarity. In other words, social movement is cemented by collective identity that is shared across its constituent parts. (3) Social movements engage in collective action focused on conflict. They take part in political and/or cultural conflicts, and strive to promote or prevent a social change; (4) they also use a protest action repertoire meaning they act as actors engaged in non-institutional protest and direct action tactics, such as protests, blockades, occupations and physical confrontations with opponents.

The above mentioned approach that stresses the presence and importance of networks and the meaning of practices (such as direct action), is significantly different from more organizational/institutional approaches in political science that "conceptualized social movements as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part." (Snow et al., 2007: 11). Other scholars, using more cognitive-based approach, claim that: "[social movements are] those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents." (Tarrow, 2006: 2). It seems that in the case of Eastern Europe cultural context plays a far more important role in the formation and composition of the social movements, in particular when looking at the genealogy of social activism in the region and the rise of counter-cultural groups during the 1980s. Today's social movements in Eastern Europe carry the burden of their genealogy but also of being associated with the activities of the dissident sector prior to the 1989 changes. Also, the labeling of social movements used in Eastern Europe is at times confusing: NGO

¹ This article's and this issue's goal is to present social movements from the whole region of Eastern Europe, however numerous quoted academic works relate to the more narrowly defined Central and Eastern Europe, also known as East Central Europe, Central Europe etc. Being aware of the multiplicity of terms as well as the subtle differences between them, the discussion about these nuances lays beyond the scope of this article.

and civil society sectors are labeled interchangeably making the analysis of social activities in the region more difficult as scholars are balancing between cultural, network, and organizational approaches, each time presenting different results and outcomes.

Types of activism in Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe witnessed the emergence of nearly all kinds of groups and movements seen in other parts of the world, from the most common such as labor unions, environmentalists, antifascists to the most exotic and marginal ones such as hardliners, conservative punks or alco-vegans. Ondrej Cisař (2013) suggests organizing civic activities into four categories. The most obvious case is the *participatory activism* that compared to other types of mobilizations organizes fewer collective action events, as it relies on formalized and conventionalized interaction with the political system. One of the most recognizable forms of participatory activism, trade unionism, is often integrated into the policy process through institutionalized channels. They are incorporated into post-communist Europe after Western European models through i.e., tripartite (or bipartite) bodies. However, their representation of working-class interests is contested among scholars (Ost, 2005) as well as activists. In this case, the concept of a *weak civil society*, for years a dominant narrative describing social activism in Eastern Europe can be grounded in empirical material, when comparing numbers of protest events and protesters with other parts of world, as such activities have smaller support of the population in Eastern Europe, according to numerous Value Surveys.

An attempt to overcome the weak movements narrative was a concept being the second kind of mobilizations - the so-called *transactional activism* - characteristic for post-communist countries (Petrova and Tarrow, 2007). Instead of only focusing on individual participation, transactional activism is a particular form of activism based on inter-organizational exchange - transaction - of resources, know-how, and information. This type of activism can be observed mostly in environmental protection, women's and human rights' movements. The repertoire of actions can be associated with NGOs: lobbying, independent expertise knowledge, influencing public opinion and alike. Petrova and Tarrow (2007) explained the lack of mass mobilizations in the region with dominance of transactional activism, through which civil society actors rather seek direct contacts with politicians and the authorities to promote their goals instead of relying on mass mobilizations and massive participation.

It is observed that activists in Eastern European countries seldom use disruptive forms of protests, and that the authorities in general have a low tolerance and are less responsive to such repertoires of actions (Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2013: 257). Therefore *radical* groups that predominantly use direct action repertoire, protests etc. and remain an extra-institutional political force are underrepresented in the region. Cisař (2013) writes: "In postcommunist settings, this concerns especially radical Left organizations, which are unable to get any resonance for their anticapitalist demands discredited by the former communist regimes. On the other hand, radical Right

associations, especially racist and nationalist ones, seem to have greater resonance in the postcommunist world (e.g., Hungary, Poland, but also other states)” but for both strains “their demands usually fall outside what is generally regarded as socially acceptable”. (Cisař, 2013) The use of violence (attributed in particular to alterglobalists, anarchists and antifascists) or its potential use marginalizes some movements in an area that some (Kopecký and Mudde, 2003; Kotkin, 2009) call the ‘uncivil society’, characterized mainly by the use (or the will to use) violence.

The final type of activism, gaining popularity in the recent years in Eastern Europe is the *Civic self-organization*, consisting of collective action mobilized without the involvement of an organization or a group but relying on spontaneous mobilizations. The groups forming this type are focused on local claims and issues important for local communities and they are often short-lived and depoliticized. Many of these groups in Eastern Europe are urban-based and creatively interpret Harvey’s concept of ‘the right to the city’ and also ‘city as commons’.

Beyond these four types of activism, Eastern Europe has witnessed numerous spontaneous mobilizations for particular causes or associated with particular events such as the color revolutions in mid-2000s². These events mobilized many people, but left few structures afterwards; however their impact and the methods used link them closely to social movements (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). There were also many spontaneous mobilizations rooted in economic factors, especially in the early 1990s as a response to neoliberal economic reforms (Kubik and Ekiert, 1999 for overview of the Polish case). These mobilizations, although popular (in particular among workers) have not resulted in stable formations after the time of contention, especially after the economic demands of the protesters were met.

Social movements and the Eastern European historical context

The term Central Eastern Europe (or East-Central Europe or Eastern and Central Europe) is often used in order to signal the difference from both the Western part of the continent that consists of the ‘old’ members of the EU – in general capitalist states –, and Eastern Europe, which entails the former Soviet republics as well as the Balkans. The term emphasizes not only the differences, which appeared after the period of transition in 1989, but also from before this date, referring to the specific conditions of the communist regimes and stressing the difference between the Soviet Union and other communist countries of the region. This term, though, is not limited to the regions’ political and economic differences, as Paul Lewis argues, “conception of Central Europe was one developed by peoples, and eventually nations located between the greater powers and more extensive states of Germany and Russia. In this sense, the idea of Central Europe is one that is more political and cultural than geographic in origin. It is a region that lies in the middle of Europe... but geographical form has not been its most important characteristic” (Lewis, 1994: 8).

The distinction also refers to the ‘eastern backwardness’ (Ágh, 1998: 3) suggesting a close link between the region’s specificity and the post-socialist condition

² Color revolutions is the name given to a series of social mobilizations and protests that emerged in different countries of the region, with the Ukrainian events being the most well-known.

within it. This creates tension, both because of the risk of marginalization due to its belonging to the East and because of the threat of ‘westernization’ and the loss of local – or regional – identity (Zarycki, 2013). This precaution may be observed within social movements as well: “situation of ‘westernization’ of social movements was perhaps not that obvious, as in the German gay and lesbian movement, where its members spoke about ‘friendly takeover’ or even ‘occupation’.” (Kleres, 2007: 180). Nearly all social movements and collective actions were diffused into Central and Eastern Europe either through processes of Europeanization at the time of the EU enlargement (Fagan and Carmin, 2011), building of advocacy groups in the early 1990s or through individual brokers.

The movement’s activists often share the notion of Eastern Europe being a periphery as well, and they indicate living in the peripheries as a challenge they have to face (Piotrowski, 2013). For instance in the ‘Platform for the Hungarian ATTAC Association³ – January 2002’, one of the points (11th) says: “significant part of the domestic entrepreneurial and financial capital – as usual at the peripheries – is extremely greedy and without restraint, in certain regards expressly cynical and anti-social. These groups find their political representatives of interest-enforcement in the political parties, too.”⁴ In many cases the activists explain the lower numbers of mobilized participants by not only being active in the peripheries, but also being peripheralized by other – Western – activists.

Factors affecting social movements in the region

There are few main challenges that are common for the various social movements in Central and Eastern Europe. One of the most common is the already mentioned *low level of mobilization* within the society. Regarding civil society, some authors point to the decline in mobilization after the enthusiastic time of the 1989 changes, social participation or trust towards social institutions that are (Howard, 2003) used for mobilizing people by the populist and right-wing political parties (Kalb and Halmai, 2011).

Another challenge for social movements in Eastern Europe is the problems they have with universalizing their claims that can be exemplified by the failure of the Global Justice Movement in the region (Krzemiński, 2006; Piotrowski, 2013). GJM failed to frame local issues and problems and to link the struggles with their counterparts from other parts of the world. Most of the mobilizations have a *local character* and nation-wide campaigns are rare. In the rare examples of social movements active in smaller towns, it is either for a local conflict (for example over environmental protection of a certain area) of a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) nature, or is it an action of a group coming from a big city. In the cases of environmental protests at Zengő peak (in Hungary in 2004, see Kerényi and Szabó, 2006) or in the Rospuda valley (in Poland in 2007/2008, see Piotrowski, 2015), local

³ ATTAC – association to promote the Tobin tax on financial operations, was one of the most widely known groups of the Global Justice Movement in the early 2000s and a number of local chapters were established all over the world (Kolb, 2004).

⁴ Source: http://www.attac.hu/cikk.php?id_article=96.

citizens were neutral or even against the activists protesting for environmental protection of the area. Many of the groups are focused on problems in their neighborhoods rather than on national or regional policies that might cause these problems and the significance of urban movements is growing (Jacobsson, 2015).

Most of the social movements in Central Eastern Europe are *limited to big cities*, mostly capitals. Metropolitan areas provide both the proximate population necessary for protest actions and the audience to receive the claims of the movements that require from both sides (the activists and their audience) a set of cognitive tools and cultural capital in order to be part of the cultural and political exchange social activism is. Some of the movements are strictly connected with urban life: critical masses (McDonald, 2006) focus on problems of urban transportation and gather cyclists who riding together in big groups paralyzing the traffic. And because most people getting involved in social movements in Eastern Europe are young, proximity to high schools and universities determines the area of action. Also being an activist as well as the recipient of a protest action requires a specific set of cognitive tools and cultural capital to fully experience it.

Another of the challenges is the process of *professionalization* of some of the collective actors and the third sector in particular, when groups move from grassroots mobilization to rank-and-file organizations. Because of the dominance of the NGO model (with financing coming from big business, national governments and supra-national bodies, such as the EU) many groups become economically dependent on grants. According to the critics (academic, but mostly of activists functioning in other types of groups), competition over resources allegedly leads to de-radicalization of the groups and de-politicization of their claims (for cases of environmental protection movement see Fagan and Carmin, 2011). The system of competing for grants for particular projects makes it more difficult for these groups to run long lasting campaigns. Grassroots social movements tend to be more independent and this autonomy is regarded as one of their main virtues; cooperation with actors is thought to undermine this independence. These independent social movements are occasionally antisystemic (sometimes inspired by anarchism), resulting in rejection of political parties as potential partners. Coalitions are formed within the same types of groups, with occasional support of marginalized extra-parliamentary political parties.

Many of grassroots social movements have *strong ties with subcultures or countercultures*. This process began in the mid-1980s and continued over the years, linking radical ecologists, anti-militarists, anarchists, squatters but also for example skinheads with music scenes and subcultural environments, such as punk rock. This linkage has two consequences: it challenges the reaching of broader audiences and making movements' claims more visible. The second consequence is that it encloses social movements within their own environment (Greil, 1990). What often becomes most important is the orthodoxy of following principles rather than a strategic or pragmatic pursuit of policies or social change. It is also often the reason for not cooperating with other actors in the social sphere, such as political parties, which are the 'enemy' for subculturally oriented groups. For many actors being an activist becomes a lifestyle choice (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Strict expectations towards newcomers result in a large turnover of participants and small numbers of activists.

Because of the socialist path and its rejection by the post-transitional elites, *being defined as leftist became problematic* in Eastern Europe. Because of the anti-communist sentiments, many types of left-oriented groups, such as the autonomists, have not emerged or are marginal in Eastern Europe. Struggles over the hegemony of language can be observed on the left-right axis. The same situation obtains with economic and social claims: right wing parties and groups have developed a broad range of claims that would be more appropriate for leftist movements in other contexts. This often leaves the social movements' scene in the region distorted, as some parts (on the left side) seem to be missing.

How does post-socialism affect mobilization

On the assumption that Eastern European equals post-socialist, one of the main questions is what can be defined as post-socialism, and what are its key characteristics. The whole debate could be summarized by a question posed by Caroline Humphrey: 'Does the category 'postsocialist' still make sense?'

Studying social movements, the relation to the previous regime and its ideological content seems to be the most important factor of post-socialism. Models of contestation of the late 1980s and early 1990s have created a specific model for contentious politics in the region that was a departing point for further developments. The post-1989 reality and the introduction of the NGO model, further developments connected to processes of Europeanization and the diffusion of some social movements into the region (such as the Global Justice Movement) all have their roots in the relation to the formerly existing socialist regimes but also protest cultures, some of which developed during the anti-communist struggles.

Some researchers suggest a limited time frame for the changes and transition period in Eastern Europe countries, claiming – as Steven Sampson (2002) – that we can no longer speak of postsocialism in the region, suggesting instead the term *post-postsocialism*, as an acknowledgement of the fact that the countries are not changing anymore at the rate they used to, even if their histories and past experiences still have a significant influence on peoples' lives. Nevertheless the main discussions on social movements associate the characteristics of social mobilizations in the region listed before with the post-socialist transition. The processes connected with EU-enlargement that affected almost all countries in Eastern Europe (through direct expansion, changes in legal codes or by diffusion of social movement practices) are an imminent part of the post-socialist context (Fagan and Carmin, 2011).

Because of the aforementioned notion of peripheralism of Central and Eastern Europe, some of scholars make comparisons between the post-socialist condition and post-colonialism. As Katherine Verdery phrases it: "Just as postcolonial studies examines the representations of the 'self' and the 'other' in the colonial encounter, we might further explore the history of such representations in the socialist and capitalist worlds – each holding up the other as its nemesis, the image of all that can be evil. This imaginary has some postcolonial parallels in Western Europe's 'Orientalist' constructs and images of the 'savage'. We need to understand better how reciprocal images of 'the West' were made and propagated in both the communist and the colonial environments." (Verdery, 2002: 17). This argument deserves a closer

consideration, especially in the context of the national independence rhetoric of some of the activists and social movement entrepreneurs, in particular in the context of discussions of diffusion of certain movements, tactics etc..

Today, more than 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the impact of postsocialism on social movement activists is obviously smaller. Some sociologists (Sava, 2015) are suggesting the emergence of a 'second generation' of activists in the region: focused on local issues, postulating the withdrawal from the post-politics towards more ideologized (both leftist and right-wing) actions. The rise of urban social movements and initiatives and the emergence of numerous movements that are not only focused on direct action and confrontation but more on community- and identity-building as well as organic work suggests a paradigmatic shift within social movements in Central and Eastern Europe.

With the above-mentioned arguments and discussions, the question whether there is a specific characteristic of social movements in Eastern Europe remains open. In many cases the inspiration, repertoire of action and organizational models for the movements in the region came from Western Europe and Northern America that could be one of the reasons for the movements' underdevelopment in terms of numbers. Some of the specificities of modes of activism in Eastern Europe could be partially explained with the socialist past and to some extent to the post-socialist transformation. What is characteristic is that social movements in Central and Eastern Europe have few stable structures and the movements' scene is weaker than in other, more developed movement environments. This results in a more dynamic picture and structure of grassroots activism making research on the topic far more interesting.

How to study social movements in Eastern Europe?

Since the 1970s, international research on social movements has studied how the political context affects movements' developments and their possibilities to influence society. This is particularly the case within the theoretical approach that focuses on "political opportunity structures" (e.g. Kitschelt, 1986; McAdam, 1996). Within this approach, it is often stressed that institutionalized politics create both opportunities and constraints for social movements, affecting their prospects to mobilize and influence politics and society. The factors identified as most crucial for whether movements succeed or not, are the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the state's capacity and propensity for repression, and the existence of conflicts amongst political elites, which potentially can lead to alliances between elite representatives and movement actors (McAdam, 1996). The changes in Political Opportunity Structures had a significant impact on the emergence and the shape of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe, especially at the time of the transformation of 1989.

There is, however, new research coming on the complex and sometimes even unexpected relations between movements and state actors, which urges movement scholars "to focus more on seeing how state, movement, and social groups and actors overlap and forge relationships, how those relationships shift, and how the arenas and institutions in which they are working shape them and their actions (e.g. Goldstone, 2003). Later years' international theoretical developments within social movements

research can help to bridge the above-mentioned shortcomings in previous research. Researchers have lately shown a growing interest in the actual “outcomes” of movement mobilizations: for instance, political decisions and changes in public opinion or norms, but also changes in the routines and priorities of institutionalized political actors or the movements themselves (Bosi and Uba, 2009; Amenta et al., 2010). To use and develop these theories on social movement “outcomes” can thus be a fruitful strategy to identify the actual impact of movement activities and for understanding how social movements and institutionalized political actors mutually impact on each other.

In this issue the articles included touch upon all the points mentioned in this paper and cover almost the whole geographical region. In her piece, Ágnes Gagyí not only critically reflects on the discipline of social movement studies and the non-critical application of its principles to the social movements of the region. She also suggests including time and spatial shift to be included in the analysis of Eastern European social movements. Elżbieta Ciżewska-Martyńska in her paper points to the need of examining local histories of social struggles in analyzing contemporary social activism. Her suggestion is to look at the category of ‘anti-politics’ coined by dissidents from Eastern Europe (on the examples of Václav Havel, György Konrád and Jacek Kuron) to show not only longevity of the idea, but also that contemporary social movements can refer to regional heritage and roots. The other group of the papers relate to the characteristics of the activists themselves, whether it is their processes of politicization or socialization. The article by Nóra Lantos and Anna Kende deals with the experiences and developments of young members of the leftist LMP party and right-wing Jobbik in Hungary and looks for the factors that facilitate the political socialization of young people. Rudolf Metz presents the use of grassroots movements as incumbents of political parties in the Hungarian context and the dynamics within this process. Other papers reflect upon the relations between social movements and grassroots initiatives and political parties, whether it is the process of capturing social movements and their development towards political parties described in Dániel Mikecz’s paper based on a Hungarian case study. The paper by Olga Lavrinenko describes and analyzes the dynamics of protests against fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2010 and 2014 and the relations between these dynamics and the emerging civil society.

Finally, Oksana Dutchak describes attempts of alliance building in order to achieve stronger bargaining power by the Ukrainian labor movement.

In some cases the articles in this issue are first attempts to present some of the cases but the value of this issue goes beyond case presentation. The methodological plurality of approaches to the topics mentioned shows that social movement research in Eastern Europe is not only thriving, but also innovative and critically self-reflective and by editing this issue we are aiming at raising the voice of young social movement researchers from the region to contribute to more general discussions on social activism in Eastern Europe.

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