Introduction: why study social movements after communism?

In spring 2016, demonstrations took place in Prague in opposition to public displays of xeno-phobia in the Czech Republic. Warsaw and other Polish cities were engulfed by demonstrations against the winning party in the 2015 parliamentary elections and its conservative policies. Anti-government protests marked Bulgarian politics in 2013–2014. These are just some examples, but there are dozens of protest events going on everywhere all the time against or in support of various causes. From the perspective of the political system as a whole, the mobilisation of the populace is believed to have contributed to the demise of the pre-1989 communist regimes in some East European countries, most notably Poland, but in a different manner also, for example, Czechoslovakia (Glenn 2003) and Romania (Nistor 2016). Social movements and mobilisation also played an important political role after 1989. In countries such as Slovakia (1998) and Serbia (2000), they were able to help topple populist leaders and dictators (Bunce and Wolchik 2011); in others, such as Hungary (2010), they helped install populist rulers aspiring to become dictators in a new post-liberal age (Greskovits and Wittenberg 2016). Although civil society and social movements in post-communist countries have often been regarded as weak, they have nevertheless existed in all of them and have evolved in different forms (see Ekiert and Kubik 2014, and later). Along with other political agents such as political parties, they have been visible actors in both supporting and resisting democratisation in the post-communist region. And even though they continue to be overlooked or downplayed in some branches of political science, it is impossible to make sense of political developments without examining social movements (Císař 2015).

Movements and mobilisations did not appear out of the blue at the end of the 1980s when the old regimes collapsed. Fully-fledged social movements, such as Solidarity in Poland, and unofficial and quasi-official platforms in other communist countries existed and received some scholarly attention even before 1989 (e.g. Holzer 1984, Bugajski 1987, Bakuniak and Nowak 1987; after 1989: Kubik 1994, Hicks 1996, Sarre and Jehlička 2007). At that time, autonomous non-state collective actors were discussed in the work of dissident (anti-regime) authors, such as Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia), György Konrád (Hungary), and Adam Michnik (Poland), and were discussed from the perspective of an embryonic or immanent civil society. Simply put, civil society presented a radical alternative to the oppressive power of the communist state. As such, the idea of civil society served more of a normative/political than an analytical function; it
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challenged the official regimes' monopoly over the many aspects of communist citizens' lives. In some contexts, such as Poland, this notion of dissident civil society turned into an open opposition (Bernhard 1993).


This chapter focuses on the most important debates in research on social movements in post-communist countries. It also looks at this research from the perspective of its potential contribution to more general research on social movement mobilisation. Post-communist Europe has in fact come to be understood as a unique ‘laboratory’ not just by students of democratisation in general, but also in other areas of the social sciences, social movement studies included.

Weak movements, democracy, and post-communist transformation

After the communist regimes collapsed, there were relatively high expectations that Eastern European populations would turn into democratic citizens participating in civil society and engaged in social and political activism (see Barnes et al. 1998). However, this never came about in reality; on the contrary, civil societies were largely overtaken by a particular advocacy-based form of activism not driven by broad participation (see Carothers 1999, Petrova and Tarrow 2007, Cisař 2013c). In terms of both political participation and group membership, Eastern European citizens displayed lower rates than citizens in established democracies (Howard 2003, Bernhagen and Marsh 2007). On the basis of the 1995–1997 World Values Survey, Howard (2003) documented that the average number of members in voluntary organisations per person in post-communist countries was significantly lower than in the older democracies and post-authoritarian countries. Low membership in SMOs, and civil society organisations generally, and the inability of these organisations to mobilise, have been regarded as indicators of weak social movements in the region (McMahon 2001, Henderson 2003). At best, they have been seen as providing a democratic façade for unresponsive governments (Ost 2000).

In the early 1990s, Eastern Europe faced a double challenge, namely, to transform both its politics and its economy (further compounded by a state-building process in post-USSR, post-Yugoslavia, and former Czechoslovakia). While democratic institutions were expected to replace the undemocratic ones in the political arena, capitalism was to take over centrally planned economies. At the same time, economic restructuring produced groups of impoverished people who were now able to express their grievances via newly established democratic institutions. All the conditions for large-scale political protest seemed to be in place: the grievances produced by structural changes and the opportunities provided by democratisation of political institutions
(Snow and Soule 2010). Based on the logic of mainstream social movement theories, an outburst of protest was the expected outcome, but contrary to initial fears it never occurred. The strange absence of protest during the first transition decade became one of the most prominent theoretical puzzles in the transitional political economy. Why did East Europeans not protest en masse when faced with economic hardships? The academic literature offers three explanations: institutional, grievance-based, and policy-based.

From an institutional perspective, Ekiert and Kubik (1998, 2001), whose area of interest is Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and former East Germany, argue that limited access to tripartite institutions and the fragmentation of the labour movement are what chiefly account for the lack (except to some extent in Poland) of protest in these four countries. They claim that contentious politics in the early 1990s (1989–1993) was strongest in Poland owing to the country’s pre–1989 tradition of such activity. Employing a grievance-based approach, Greskovits (1998) finds possible explanations in a host of structural characteristics of post-communist countries, such as the lack of extreme inequality (the source of relative deprivation and thus grievances), a lack of an established protest culture (the source of the protest repertoire), and a lack of young people in urban areas ready to be mobilised (the social base of protest). He also cites the rise of social expenditures, which is at the heart of the third explanation. Focusing on the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, Vanhuysse (2004, 2006) adopts a policy-based approach to explain the absence of significant protest. He argues that the subdued populations in these transforming countries were the result of a ‘divide and pacify’ style of social policies, which was designed to prevent any potential social disquiet. While there were different paths across the region, such as strategic retirement, that is, laying productive workforce off the labour market, and pro-employment labour market policies, they all resulted in decreasing protest potential. It took twenty years for this patience to run out.

With the recession hitting some East European countries after the 2008 financial crisis, the growing sense of impatience started to be discussed in connection with the study of varieties of contention triggered by different configurations of political economy or capitalism (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Drawing on data from eighteen East European countries after 2007, Beissinger and Sasse (2014) claim that the recession did indeed bring about the political mobilisation of East European populations and that this mobilisation was fuelled by socioeconomic deprivation. They contend that while it is easier to endure economic hardships for an initial period of time and under conditions of optimistic expectations (such as in the 1990s), it is much more difficult to do so for a second time while simultaneously lacking prospects for a brighter future. In the same volume, Kriesi (2014) shows that extra-institutional protest mobilisation was universally triggered by the adoption of austerity policies. Most importantly, Kriesi concludes that protest has important implications for elections, an observation that draws attention to the interplay between party and protest politics.

Focusing on the whole political spectrum in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia), Cisar and his colleagues (Cisar and Navrátil 2015a, Cisar and Vráblíková 2015) demonstrated the existence of a countervailing relation between the arenas of party and protest politics, which means that issues articulated by political parties are not articulated by social movements and vice versa. For instance, while 69 per cent of protest events in Hungary in the 1990s and 2000s were related to economic issues, such issues were behind only 16 per cent of protest in the Czech Republic (Cisar and Vráblíková 2015: 12). From this perspective, the structure of party competition determines what issues are articulated in the protest field. If the party field’s main conflict line is economic left-right, extra-institutional collective action driven by economic issues is crowded out. If a socio-cultural dimension (social conservatism vs. liberalism) is what primarily defines the political party field, economic issues are more
represented in the protest field (Hungary). However, there are moments when the two fields align and become closely intertwined. Greskovits and Wittenberg (2016) show how the Hungarian right took roots in civil society after 2003 to prepare the ground for its electoral offensive in 2010, which was accompanied by extra-parliamentary mobilisation in the streets. In general, their research not only highlighted the variability of issues articulated in civil society and the interplay between them, but also the general variety of activist forms.

**Varieties of activism**

After recognising the existence of different forms of activism in Eastern Europe, activism in the region was systematically mapped and its main characteristics identified (see e.g. Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2012, Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013, Ekiert and Kubik 2014). Further, conceptualisations of activism were formulated. For example, drawing on the definition of two types of activism – participatory and transactional – put forth by Petrova and Tarrow (2007; see also later), Císař (2013a) proposed seeing them as two dimensions of a new typology of political activism. As depicted in Table 13.1, the participatory dimension refers to the mobilisation capacity of political activists. It describes the capacity of activists to engage citizens in collective action, that is, to induce them to participate in politics. The transactional dimension describes the capacity of activists and their organisations to engage in ‘transactional activism’, that is, to network, cooperate, and communicate with other activists and organisations and public institutions, and make claims that bear on someone’s interests.

In effect, the two dimensions differentiate between an activism’s mobilisation and advocacy capacities. If combined, we get four basic types. Two types are characterised by relatively well-developed transactional capacity, which means that they are based on capable organisations. One of them contains the combination of high transactional and high mobilisation capacities that is typical of ‘old’ organisations such as trade unions. These organisations, representing a *participatory activist type*, are based on broader membership and are better able to cooperate, network, and communicate with their counterparts than other types, and they are recognised as legitimate partners by the political system. The second type has the high transactional capacity and low mobilisation capacity that characterise the *transactional activist type* originally described by Petrova and Tarrow, who focus on what Diani (2011) has labelled *transactions* or ‘weak organisational ties’ largely based on resource exchange and synonymous with inter-organisational cooperation, and not on ‘social bonds’ established through shared membership. In fact, focusing on post-communist countries, Petrova and Tarrow seem to draw on the well-established resource-mobilisation argument about the substituting ‘thick mobilisation infrastructures’ with their ‘thin’ versions, which are unable to tap into existing pools of potential followers (McCarthy 1987; see also Císař and Navrátil 2015b).

**Table 13.1** Varieties of activism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transactional capacity</th>
<th>Mobilisation</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>participatory activism</td>
<td>transactional activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>episodic mass mobilisation</td>
<td>radical activism; civic self-organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adopted from Císař (2013a: 142).*
As a result, this activist type primarily takes the form of advocacy organisations (Flam 2001, Fagan 2004, 2005, Toepfer and Salamon 2003, Fagan and Carmin 2011, Ekiert and Kubik 2014). Issues associated with the environment and with human and civil rights and freedoms usually form the basis of transactional activists’ political demands (Čísař 2013b).

The third type, episodic mass mobilisation, is defined by a high mobilisation capacity and low transactional capacity. Protests of this type are able to win strong popular support for a period, but they are unable to sustain themselves over time and translate their mobilisation success into a lasting organisational legacy. The last type involves a combination of low mobilisation and low transactional capacities and includes two sub-types: radical activism and self-organisation. Although radical right-wing and left-wing activism is based on the active involvement of devoted activists and organisational platforms, these are unable to mobilise anything close to a wide following, while at the same time they either fail or refuse to take the path of institutionalisation, that is, the path of organisational capacity-building that is a precondition for a high advocacy capacity. Self-organisation does not mobilise many citizens and, like mass mobilisation, does not survive organisationally over time. Local, small-scale, and informal protests would belong under this type (see Jacobsson 2015b and later). Five different types of activism can therefore be distinguished (see Table 13.1).

Movement activism explained? Three diffusion debates

Foreign involvement in the development of social movements and mobilisation in Eastern Europe is widely covered in the literature. The link between exogenous funding and the emergence of transnational activist networks is explained from three distinct perspectives: The advocacy model argues that, after the fall of communism, American foundations began to search for citizen representatives to be supported by their pro-democracy civil society-building programmes and they found them in professionalised organisations that started to emerge right after 1989 (Carothers 1999). There is a broad consensus that by signalling to East Europeans that formally registered and more or less professionally managed organisations are most likely to actually receive funding, they helped professionalised advocacy organisations to spread across the region (McMahon 2001, Fagan 2004, 2005, Aksartova 2006, Čísař 2013c). In this sense, they created connections, that is, brokered between their home country’s model of civic life, based on advocacy organisations, and post-communist states, and by favouring funding for officially registered advocacy groups contributed to the spread of this model. While in the first half of the 1990s, the US and US-based private foundations were the most important brokers, though individual European states and foundations also played a role, they had scaled down their programmes by the end of the decade. At that time, the European Union (EU) overtook their role as the primary source of funding, and as a result the ‘Americanisation’ of activist groups was replaced by their ‘Europeanisation’.

The Europeanisation model describes the impact of accession on social movements and interest organisations in candidate countries (e.g. Carmin and VanDeveer 2005, Stark et al. 2006, Čísař and Vrábliková 2010, Fagan and Carmin 2011, Buzogány 2011, Čísař and Vrábliková 2013, Bruszt and Vedrés 2013). This impact has been felt and studied from three perspectives. First, the accession requirements exerted a transformative impact on the domestic political opportunity structures of post-communist states, opening up new possibilities for social movements and their strategies of influence. Second, SMOs have been progressively influenced by their increased reliance on European funding, which since the end of the 1990s forced them to become more formalised and professionalised (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, Čísař and Vrábliková 2010, Bruszt and Vedrés 2013). Third, the accession of post-communist countries to the EU provided local SMOs with a new level of policymaking, thus opening for them a transnational political opportunity.
structure to be utilised, albeit to a limited extent, in their multi-level political strategies (see Císař and Vráblíková 2013).

The electoral model can be seen as a continuation of the aforementioned advocacy model. The electoral model captures the variety of forms of mobilisation relating to elections that emerged in eight post-communist countries from 1996 to 2005 and resulted in the replacement of undemocratic political leaders with representatives of the democratic opposition, even though this had only a limited long-term impact in many of them (Bunce and Wolchik 2010). This wave of election-related protests swept across Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. These ‘colour revolutions’, as they are commonly called, and their aftermath have become an important topic in the study of post-communist mobilisation and social movements (e.g. Beissinger 2007, Ó Beacháin and Polese 2010, Bunce and Wolchik 2011, Petrova, 2014, Ishchenko 2015). According to Bunce and Wolchik (2010), the diffusion of electoral model of activism was facilitated by the structural similarities between post-communist countries, the self-interest of the opposition forces in these countries and their common goal to topple authoritarian leaders, the closed domestic political opportunity structure, the existence of (at least) semi-competitive elections, and transnational networking. The latter in particular has been thoroughly analysed, and it was found to have been facilitated by Western and regional agencies and donors, which played a role in this model very similar to the one they played in the advocacy model in the beginning of the 1990s (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). They acted as resourceful brokers, forging connections between previously unconnected social sites, and helped produce ‘messengers of revolution’ by training activists who, after completing their mission in their home country, often became involved in educating activists in another country (Petrova 2014). Ultimately, this training was not only passed on to other post-communist activists, but some Eastern European activists even trained future leaders of the Arab Spring.

Movement activism lost? Three co-optation debates

Democratic co-optation

The inability to mobilise people meant that SMOs in Eastern Europe were forced to rely on external – mostly American and EU – sources of funding. One group of scholars has pointed out this reliance on external patronage as the reason for the general weakness of social movements and their co-optation by donors and political elites (McMahon 2001, Fagan 2004). According to this narrative, by providing institutional support external donors not only directly influenced agendas pursued by these organisations, but also redirected their activities away from the domestic mobilisation of their constituencies to (transnational) grant-seeking (Mendelson and Glenn 2002, Henderson 2003). Instead of empowering and making these organisations able to become means of participation, patronage created in them dependency and caused them to be trapped in an endless vicious circle of grant applications. According to the harshest critics (McMahon 2001), these programmes actually prevented East Europeans from creating indigenous social movements, and imposed on them instead a particular organisational pattern that was inimical to the idea of popular movements.

An alternative view has identified external patronage as a source of the political autonomy of SMOs in the post-communist semi-democratic and democratising regimes that were unable to provide indigenous support for many types of SMOs, especially those focused on ‘new politics’ issues such as the environment and human rights (Aksartova 2006, Císař 2010, Císař and Navrál 2015b). Owing to the somewhat conservative political culture and the lack of a conscious constituency in East European states, the autonomy and often the very existence of these SMOs
was ensured only by the availability of external resources. According to this argument, although foreign patrons steered local organisations towards professionalisation and formalisation, these changes were not necessarily accompanied by co-optation. SMOs dependent on foreign support became relatively effective advocates capable of challenging the prevailing social norms not in spite of but rather because of their foreign dependency, which liberated them from the domestic political and cultural context non-conducive to their goals (Stark et al. 2006, Vermeersch 2006, Cisař 2010). We can call this process a particular type of democratic channelling.

**Authoritarian co-optation**

This similar process, but one animated by explicitly non-democratic forces, has been analysed in relation to hybrid regimes, especially Russia. In this case, the co-optation effect was not the unintended by-product of the original intention to empower civil society, as in the case of Western-based donors, but was the primary goal of state strategies aimed at containing protest. In his seminal study of Russian protest, Robertson (2010) differentiates between coercive strategies used to limit protest by the imposition of repressive conditions and measures intended to channel protest in another directions. While direct repression involves deploying police forces and exercising strict control over the protesters on the ground, channelling means diverting the attention of the potential supporters of the protests by controlling visual, print, and even electronic media.

These channelling strategies put in place to quash the political articulation of social problems achieve this by introducing a firm distinction between acknowledging these problems as something to be dealt with by legitimate authorities and the politicisation and ‘misuse’ of these problems by political forces inimical to the establishment. In other words, while the regime accepts the existence of problems, it at the same time tries to scare citizens away from actively articulating them. It leaves no room for either autonomous political action or any action challenging the elite. Political action is on the contrary monopolised by public officials, who interpret any protests as a direct challenge to their monopoly over the definition and resolution of problems.

Robertson also points out that additional strategies have been used in post-Soviet Russia that all originated in the style of politics practised in the preceding non-democratic Soviet regime. Thus, this repertoire consists of organising pro-government protest events to demonstrate the legitimacy of power holders. The post-Soviet authorities also used blame-shifting (from the very top to the lower levels of decision-making), partial concessions, and protest bureaucratisation. For example, Vladimir Putin has employed the first-mentioned tactic by seeking to blame his own ministers and officials for errors and mismanagement and offered at times almost miraculous solutions to them that were duly publicised in the official media. Under Putin, this repertoire of strategies has been expanded by the addition of long-forgotten Brezhnev-style tactics of preventive detention.

These strategies have resulted in efforts by the state to acquire broader discretion over which groups and activists can operate in Russia. In this context, the law on foreign agents (2012) has even made international headlines and has generated a large public outcry (see e.g. Turbine 2015). The two processes discussed in this chapter thus came head to head in the case of post-Soviet Russia. Transactional activists supported from abroad were directly challenged by the authoritarian Russian state. The regime was well aware of the liberating effect of foreign money, which gave at least some autonomy to the supported activist organisations. Although they might have been perceived as donor-dependent and co-opted, in the eyes of Western-based researchers, they in fact enjoyed comparative autonomy within their immediate local environment. It was for this reason that the state made efforts to sever their transnational connections and fully co-opt their activities by starving these organisations out.
**Consentful contention**

The third co-optation debate strives to navigate away from the distinction between the manipulative external environment, be it international donors or the authoritarian state, on one hand, and independent movement actors on the other, and not to focus primarily on ‘dissentful’ varieties of contention (see Cheskin and March 2015a). While the first two debates contend that social movements often use contentious strategies to challenge authorities, scholars engaged in the third debate seek to distinguish also the less visible consentful strategies of claims-making. In other words, the fact that there is not very much visible protest action in Russia does not mean there is no action. On the contrary, some very important citizen action may be taking place on the local level or in areas that are no direct threat to the power holders in the centre. Distinguishing such practices challenges the simplified picture of ‘Russian-style civil society as bad and undemocratic’ (Cheskin and March 2015b: 267).

The main asset of distinguishing examples of consentful strategies of claims-making is that doing so captures the variegated forms of citizen coordination that may exist under semi-democratic conditions. While the scholars who are interested in this form of claims-making do not dispute the existence of mechanisms of hard and soft repression listed by Robertson, they also want to take into account examples of ‘non-dissentful’ contention, which is less visible and not aimed against the state authorities (see Fröhlich 2012 and the contributions in Cheskin and March 2015a). While a clear-cut black and white distinction between the powerful state and movements drives us to see the end of action autonomy and independent contention whenever some form of state repression is employed, this approach makes it possible to see also the ‘grey zones’ in which co-optation ‘allows a certain level of challenge and contention’ (Cheskin and March 2015b: 267).

In order to see this, it is important to distinguish between explicitly political and social forms of activism. While the former may be steered, cut down, and manipulated by hybrid regimes, the latter can flourish and even provide the population with valuable services. In a nutshell, consentful contention overlaps with service provision much more than with advocacy. In this respect, while this new approach can bring a much-needed nuance to the study of forms of social activism, it may be less interesting to social movement scholars, since they have traditionally been interested in acts of (political and/or cultural) dissent and advocacy for or against social change. One can welcome the contribution of consentful contention scholars for the light this approach sheds on the hard-to-see civic activities in contemporary Russia (and other hybrid regimes) without necessarily embarking on conceptual stretching. Consentful contention and movement action are two different concepts that relate to two different phenomena.

**Conclusion: movement activism found?**

Focusing explicitly on movement actors, recent additions to the literature on East-European social movements include studies that indicate a revival of movement activism, although probably not exactly in the expected form. In response to the 2008 financial crisis, the post-accession depression, and the recent migrant crisis, there has been a visible mobilisation of nationalist forces across East European countries (Greskovits 2015). Some authors even claim that the thin liberal façade that national political cultures in countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic erected in the EU accession process has withered away in the years since accession (Dawson and Hanley 2016). As Greskovits and Wittenberg (2016) have demonstrated in the case of Hungary, civil society activism can be supportive of not only democratic development, but also populist and illiberal forces.
On the other hand, some scholars have identified recent examples of ‘islands of positive deviations’ where a more progressive form of political activism can be observed inside an environment that is otherwise becoming more and more conservative. According to this view, while there have been debates about the (non)existence of truly participatory social movements in Eastern Europe, they have tended to be overly focused on organised forms of activism on the national level. However, some research on East European cities has shown that grassroots movements are able to emerge in urban settings in relation to disputes over public spaces, non-corrupted urban planning mechanisms, or opposition to gentrification (see Kerény 2010, and most notably Jacobsson 2015a). This type of research suggests that ‘local, grassroots-driven, small-scale, low-key forms of activism – such as much of urban grassroots activism – represent an important component of post-socialist civil society as well as an important new phase of post-socialist civil society making’ (Jacobsson 2015b: 275).

Urban centres in Eastern Europe have also served as fertile ground for various subcultures and subcultural movements, which to some extent overlap with urban movements, most notably squatters (see Kurti 2003, McKay et al. 2009, Cisař and Koubek 2012, Polanska and Piotrowski 2015). In this respect, post-socialist cities seem to be a space of substantial contention, but one that has so far been somewhat cut off mainstream research on social movements. Only recently have efforts been made to explicitly connect the two fields (Cisař and Koubek 2012, Jacobsson 2015a). When some of the debates summarised in this chapter (see Table 13.1) are applied to urban activism, it is often interpreted as the manifestation of self-organisation (and radicalism) in an urban context, examples of which include squatters, bike activism, environmentalism, tenants’ movements, and rehousing initiatives to combat homelessness.

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References


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