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Anti-Soros rallies and blazing EU flags

Civil society and social movements between populism and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

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The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been seen as a site for permanent, though marginal tensions on the periphery of the European Union. The democratic structures of the states in the region are generally interpreted as lagging behind their Western European counterparts; institutions have remained in a transitory state halfway between authoritarianism and "real" democracy, whatever that concept might mean. Similarly, the movements have been regarded as rudimentary, aiming to fulfil their goal as guardians of the democratic establishment, and counterbalancing rising extremist populist tendencies, in accordance with the dominant visions towards civil society around the transition period. This discourse has been internalized by the movements, too, and the same views emerged on the NGO scene. The movements deliberately and openly aimed to "catch up" with their Western counterparts, and to establish a movement culture similar to that in the US or in Western Europe.

This special issue of socio.hu is based on the argument that movements and civil society in the CEE region do not, first of all, follow a linear development path, but have emerged locally, responding to both the local structural, political conditions and global developments. Within this, we can identify a new wave of (predominantly) grassroots movements of the new decade starting with the 2010s. In discussion with our colleagues from CEE, we have found striking similarities among local phenomena throughout the region.[2] These similarities include dominant narratives and issues of mobilization (such as the anti-Soros rallies, which have brought the masses to the streets in several countries from Hungary, through Slovakia to Macedonia), dominant frames (the symbolism of the EU flag as a division line in societies), or forms of protest, which primarily means the return of the grassroots mobilizations and street demonstrations as a dominant form of protest. We claim that just like the out-of-focus political events and mobilizations, such as the regular protests that took place in Macedonia on a daily basis throughout 2016, or the large anti-corruption mass demonstrations in Romania, to mention a few, and just like the regional parallels between these phenomena, which can be traced back to the structural conditions originating in the post-transitional societies, deserve more attention from the scholarship.

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2 The special issue is the outcome of the workshop, C*ivil Society and Social movements in the changing Democracies of Central and Eastern Europe,* held in May2017, at the Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. We are thankful to Alena Kluknavska (Masaryk University), Grzegorz Piotrowski (European Solidarity Centre), and Ondřej Slačálek (Charles University) for their contributions as co-organizers and the inspirational discussions.

This is the main reason why this issue predominantly includes case studies of recent developments in CEE countries. We believe that these protests, rallies, forms of transactional activism, NGO activism and new forms of populist actions (among others) communicate to each other at least as much as to transnational movements outside the region.

After a short period following the transitions of 1989, it seemed that civil society has lost its attractiveness for the international social science community in discussing the political phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, non-profit theory has occupied a central role in the academic discourses, in this region at least, focusing mainly on the different kinds of services provided by non-governmental organizatons (see e.g. Glózer 2008). The term ***civil society*** was mainly used to describe the associational activities assumed to have an impact on politics in the West, especially in the United States.[3] If Central and Eastern Europe features in these debates, it does so as a region in which civil society is weak and stagnant (Howard 2003, Ost 2011). Thus it only serves as a special CEE case in a collection of studies, if it is even worthy of examination.

Subsequent to the economic crisis, from the early 2010s on, there has been a new wave of protest and social movements, and renewed public and academic debates about civil society and the role of social movements in both the West and East (della Porta–Mattoni 2014). The Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall street movement, together with the Greek and Spanish Indignants redirected attention to more spontaneous forms of political participation and inspired debates about the role of these movements in the democratization of the exhausted democracies of the Western world (della Porta 2014, 2013, Graeber 2013, Glasius–Pleyers 2013).

Although Central and Eastern Europe was not an exception in terms of political turbulence and intensified protests, its movements have largely been neglected by mainstream social movement studies, and the broader political and social science. CEE countries experienced the largest mobilizations in their contemporary modern history as democratic independent countries during the past few years. The Hungarian protests concerning media freedom, the internet tax, or education, including the series of demonstrations in 2017 in support of the Central European University that has been under attack from the government, brought tens of thousands of people to the streets. In Romania, a wave of protests swept the country, driven by various issues from environment protection (the Rosia Montana gold mine) to anti-austerity protests and new, massive involvement in protest action, as introduced by Gubernat and Rammelt in this issue. Similar protests events occurred throughout the region: the anti-governmental demonstrations in Bulgaria in 2012–2013, discussed in this issue by both Tsoneva and Stoyanov–Sayfutdinova from different perspectives; the Ukrainian Euromaidan in 2013; the protests in Bosnia in 2013–2014; demonstrations against the planned regulations of the Polish government; the recent developments turning Macedonian politics upside down. These demonstrations were significant in terms of their numbers and impacts compared to their Western or Eastern counterparts, which has refuted the traditional understanding of CEE "apathy" (Petrova–Tarrow 2007, Piotrowski 2013).

Even though there have been different structural processes that were dominant within the region of Central and Eastern Europe, the period after the global economic crisis, has brought about a new turn for social movements, even though it did not entail the crisis of the welfare state, as some authors point out (Gagyi

3 See the debates about the decline of civil society in response to Putnam's *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capita*l (1995).

2015, 2017, Stenning–Hörschelmann 2008). Around the time of regime change, human rights and libertarian issues were under focus from civil society and the NGO world (Gagyi–Ivancheva 2013), as was also pointed out by Ondřej Slačálek and Eva Svobodová in this issue. At the same time, economic issues were not directly associated with the movement or civil sector within the literature on social movements. This has changed essentially in the 2010s, when economic issues also emerged among the traditionally articulated political cleavages, and anti-austerity issues attracted masses to the streets in several countries in the region that had been out of sight, from Romania through Bulgaria, to Czechia.

The debates about civil society and social movements also re-appeared in the region, in the scholarly and in public debates (e.g. Antal 2016, Vandor et al. 2017, Shevtsova this issue). Probably the most well-known "example" of public debates and policies is the Putinist government's attempt to label civil organizations as foreign agents. This might be the most extreme policy action against civil organizations, but it is not the only one in the region. After the Hungarian government carried out several attacks on Hungarian CSOs (Torma 2016), the Hungarian parliament also passed legislation that obliges civil organizations to label themselves as "foreign-funded organizations" if they receive a certain amount money from foreign sources.[4] The Polish government initiated the National Freedom Institute, aimed to conduct the distribution of public funds among civil society organizations, controlled by governmental forces.[5] The infamous anti-Soros campaigns in Hungarian and Macedonian politics (among others) affected not only the Open Society Foundation but organizations supported by them, while anti-immigrant sentiments that infiltrated the region with the migration crisis were also fuelled by the political and media elites, and led to widespread and popular hate campaigns that the traditional political establishment had no responses for (see Slačálek–Svobodová).

These policies highlight the fact that there are certain similarities and striking parallels between policy agendas in the region. Democracy has its problems in the West, as the growing disappointment, lack of representation, the international environment is increasingly harsh towards human rights implementation (Carothers–Brechenmacher 2014, Open Democracy 2016) and nationalist populism is spreading (Mudde 2016), although Western countries are still considered to be stable democracies.

In Central and Eastern Europe, however, after a short period of institutional or procedural democracy, governments are increasingly authoritarian (see Csillag–Szelényi 2015, Varga–Freiberg–Inan 2012, Ágh 2014) However, it is not a unified trend; in some cases, the hopes for democratization appeared just recently. According to Shevtsova or Stipic (this issue), this is the case in Ukraine or in Bosnia Herzegovina. It is as important to emphasize that there are important developments in the social movement sector or in the organized civil society of some countries, and to highlight that even in these cases, countries are fighting with populism, authoritarian traditions, politics and economics wired with interpersonal relations, and are falling into corruption.

The mass movements of the United States and Southern Europe which attracted the attention of scholars were undoubtedly seen as a result of the economic crisis in 2008 (della Porta 2015). As Spöri and Jaitner

4 Except for some forms of organizations, such as sport and religious associations and foundations, and except for European Union funds received through the Hungarian governmental institutions.

5 www.hfhr.pl/en/national-freedom-institute-act-helsinki-committee-in-poland-issues-statement

(this issue) argue, in Central and Eastern Europe, the situation is more complex. Although these new protest waves have some roots in the crises, it seems they are more likely to originate in multiple crises of economics and more importantly, politics. Thus, these movements, while they have claims concerning austerity policies, cannot be interpreted as anti-austerity movements.

As anti-austerity movements, movements in Southern Europe were clearly an expression of the disappointment in the whole political and economic elite. On the one hand, it is true that in CEE countries, disappointment in the elites is even stronger than in other parts of Europe, this disappointment tends to transform into political passivity than into movements (see, e.g. Oross–Róna–Szabó this issue, Grönlund–Setälä 2012). On the other hand, certain groups are ready to act, and when they do, their movements in many cases can be understood only in relation to national politics as having a strong anti-government, or oppositional characteristic. This anti-government characteristic is due to the attempts of close political (and sometimes discursive) opportunity structures by those in power. By closing opportunity structures, politics strengthen the political polarization of these countries. While most of these countries are polarized by "default" (see Stipic, Stoyanov–Sayfutdinova, Tsoneva, this issue) and political elites might only react to this default status, their policies result in further polarization and as such, foster protests, since no official forms of voice are left to the opposition.

The oppositional characteristic and the disappointment in political elites leads to a twofold expectation: local actors always expect (or fear) that protests will affect the voting behaviour of the masses. In some cases (as in Macedonia recently) this might be true, but as Stoyanov and Sayfutdinova show, it is unlikely to be the case. Instead, this expectation turns the core of these movements into political parties, which usually backfires: distrust in politics causes the masses to turn away from the new parties as well, staying passive in party politics or in voting.

The strong involvement of party politics and polarization leads to another feature of these movements: while oppositions try to search for powerful allies, governments present these allies as a threat to national sovereignty. The multi-governmental framework of the European Union serves as an excellent ground to these discourses, which might be why movements frame the European Union as a main reference point and as a potential ally in their fight for democracy.

The interplay between distrust, protest, new party formation and electoral behaviour might contribute to another important aspect of CEE societies: the sharp differentiation of civil and political society. The continuous cycle of distrust (in the old elites), protest, new party formation and distrust (in the new parties) on the one hand gives easy-to-use tools to the elites to discredit any new actor, accusing them of striving for power and maintains this unrealistic expectation of a separated, pure civil society (Gerő–Kopper 2013). Furthermore, some recent conflicts in Bulgaria reflected on the contentious perception of protests within a controversial and politically overheated civil society, but also drew division lines between citizens and anti-citizens, based on their (supposed) attitudes towards democracy, as discussed by Tsoneva in this issue.

This pure civil society, or social movement sector, is often presented as a unified one, which is fighting against authoritarian and populist forces. However, as this issue highlights, this view is far from reality. The

once-oppositional forces might be accused of corruption or elitism by the same protesters as before (see Stoyanov–Sayfutdinova); the groups expressing their views through different forms of participation strive for different values and lifestyles, including non-democratic ones (see Oross–Róna–Szabó or Gubernat–Rammelt for lifestyle mobilizations); donors and their professionalized partner organizations might prevent new actors from strengthening (Shevtsova); political groups continuously fight to create the dominant identity of the nation (Stipic).

Thus, the main problematique is not the weakness, or absence of civil society, as the Western-oriented political science and political sociology put it. The main challenge that civil society and social movements face is that they are caught in between the need for mass mobilization for the sake of democracy (while this mass mobilization is based on an alienation from politics, with anti-elitist attitudes), and national, ethnic identities. Thus, if new actors emerge from the protests and want to widen their opportunities for change, they might turn to (nationalist) populism again. Which might be seen as an adequate choice in the short term, but in the long term, it clearly contradicts the aims formulated by protesters.

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