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Civil Society Trajectories in CEE: Post-Communist 'Weakness' or Differences in Difficult Times?*

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Abstract

The article links previous debates on the qualities of civil society in CEE countries and its contemporary challenges with the aim to demonstrate the debate's inner differentiation but also its persevering incapacity to identify and articulate current political risks. The article critically reflects on discussions over the presumed weakness of civil society and connects them to the major contemporary challenges for post-socialist civil society in the last decade – profound political transformations driven by authoritarian elites, the 2015 European refugee crisis, and the current coronavirus pandemic. Examining the trajectories and characteristics of CEE civil societies in relation to these developments, we claim that instead of a single, homogenous CEE civil society shaped by a shared communist past, civil societies in the region are largely determined by different national political contexts. One of the few common characteristics which makes them different from their old democratic counterparts is their depoliticization, mostly in terms of their selective approach to political issues and risks.

Key words: civil society; Central and Eastern Europe; post-communism; anti-establishment; refugee crisis; pandemic

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1. Introduction

Are civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) weak or are they just different from their Western counterparts? What kind of difference do they have in common with each other, and how does it affect their capacity to face contemporary challenges? Al-

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though civil societies in CEE countries are often portrayed as weak and similar, shaped by a shared communist past, they have often developed with dynamism along divergent trajectories affected by different challenges (Meyer, Moder, Neumayr, & Vándor, 2019). This article focuses on critical reflection of the key debates over the conditions and trajectories of civil societies in CEE, connecting these debates to recent developments and contemporary challenges of post-socialist civil society in the last decade. Examining their main trajectories and characteristics in the context of recent developments, the article brings into question the thesis of post-communist weakness and homogeneity of civil society in CEE. Instead, it claims that civil societies in the CEE countries are largely determined by different national political contexts, and that it is not the heritage of the past but its distorted reflection which makes them selectively depoliticized – and thus different from their Western counterparts. In this regard, our article contributes to this Special Issue with a focus on Hungarian and Polish cases – it illustrates both academic reflections and recent developments in the region while contributing with the description of the Czech and Slovak cases.

Key debates on civil societies in CEE after 1989 may, with some distortion, be divided into three stages. In the first decade after the regime changes, the concept of civil societies entered the debate over the speed and qualities of the democratization processes. Later, after the turn of millennium, the question of the role of civil societies provoked a debate over the adequacy of a ‘Westernized’ perspective and never-ending quest for the ghosts from the Communist past (cf. Gagyí et al. in this Special Issue). Recently, and three decades after the fall of state socialism, the focus on civil societies in post-socialist countries have been influenced by three main challenges. First, the claimed divergence of CEE countries from the ‘standard liberal’ trajectories has been associated especially with political developments in Poland and Hungary (and to a very limited extent also in Slovakia and the Czech Republic), with varying consequences for each nations’ civil societies. Second, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis provided an unexpected impetus which revealed some of the characteristics of the CEE civil spheres. Finally, the current COVID-19 crisis provides us with a continuous demonstration of how civil societies work and adapt under extreme pressure.

Inquiries into the development of civil society remain important as these analyses open broader issues and help us to assess the development of our societies from a different perspective than party politics, theories of democracy or transitology. More specifically, studying civil societies – especially in difficult times – provides us with insight into the very core of our societies and helps us to assess their resilience, stability or embedded problems which politics simply do not touch (Melucci, 2001).

In what follows, we first review the major scholarly discussions over the presumed weakness of civil societies in CEE. Then, we provide an overview of recent major challenges to these societies, focusing on the authoritarian and anti-establishment tendencies in political systems, the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, and the current coronavirus pandemic situation. Lastly, we attempt to connect these challenges to the previous debates and show whether weakness can be attributed to our civil societies, and if so, what kind. Here, we also present the contributions of this Special Issue of the Czech Journal of Political Science, which address the complexity and overlapping nature of the developments in civil societies in CEE outlined above.

2. The Weakness of Post-socialist Civil Societies and its Causes

The concept of civil societies was not always 'there' – and Eastern European experience with political dissidence contributed to the return of the notion back into the social sciences. As Cohen and Arato (1992) pointed out, the rediscovery of civil society in Eastern Europe was related to the failure of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, the Czechoslovak reforms of 1968 and the rise of Solidarity in Poland. In other words, two failures paved the way for a story of successful mobilization and mass political engagement.

From the moment of transition from state socialism towards democratic capitalism, the concept of civil society became a buzzword connected to the successful and complete transition from the authoritarian state towards democratic settings. Many saw a civil society (and its freedom) as a litmus test of democratic transition (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Shortly after the revolutions of 1989, a number of studies started to empirically assess the structure and vitality of civil societies in CEE. Most of them were driven by the more or less implicit expectation of a link between the fall of state socialist regimes and the renaissance of politically engaged citizens defending their rights and freedoms, participating in groups and movements, and seeking to manifest their preferences and ideas in a public space (Dahrendorf, 1990; Arato, 1991; Ekiert, 1991; Gellner, 1991; Bernhard, 1996; Rose et al., 1996; Ekiert & Kubik, 1998; Rose, 1999).

One of the major concerns of these studies was the exploration of the specific strengths and weaknesses of these civil societies. The thesis of 'weakness' of civil societies in CEE became common sense among the researchers of civil participation and most often denoted the overall low level of formal individual civic engagement, and the small number of formal civil society organizations and their weaker position vis-à-vis the state. Thus, civil societies in CEE countries were implicitly or explicitly considered as doing much worse than their Western counterparts (Bernhard & Kaya, 2012; Ekiert & Foa, 2012; Howard, 2003, 2011; Kaldor, 2003; Newton & Monterro, 2007).

Two broad groups of factors were used to explain the structure and the quality of post-communist civil societies – external and internal. External factors were largely discussed in the studies of the organizational and resource mobilization aspects of civic activities. Here, mostly the effects of foreign resources and the US and EU development programmes were explored and evaluated. The results of these studies conformed to the 'weakness thesis' of the previous wave of research: foreign aid was identified as having a destabilizing and politically suppressive effect on local civil societies, as the interests of donors prevented civil actors from becoming more politically autonomous (or even radical) and emancipated from political elites and at the same time from becoming embedded in local communities and grass-root initiatives (cf. Aksartova, 2006; Baker & Jehlička, 1998; Carothers, 1999; Fagan, 2004; Flam, 2001; Jacobsson, 2012; McMahon, 2001; Mendelson & Glenn, 2002; Narozhna, 2004).

Discussions about internal factors affecting civil societies build on three main arguments. The first and the most general approach might be characterized as claiming that it is the experience of Communism and structural effects of authoritarian rule that prevents

civil societies from flourishing and becoming strong in advocating the interests of citizens. This was most typically illustrated by Howard (2003, 2011) who pointed out that the comparatively low levels of individual engagement in post-communist civil society organizations (CSOs) might be explained as the outcome of the legacy of mistrust of communist organizations and the persistence of informal social networks – both being the heritage of the former regime (Howard, 2011, p. 139).

The second argument points at the cultural patterns in post-socialist societies that have their origins historically much earlier than state socialism. Thus, types of political activity in CEE that are different from the West are not a result of communism but rather result from different traditions, symbols and ideas about society and politics. These pre-socialist patterns were further strengthened with the rise of socialist states and then triumphed when their representatives – the pre-1989 dissident elite – became part of the new political class. Sometimes a label of ‘non-political politics’ or ‘anti-politics’ is used to describe the general ethos of normality of distance from institutionalized politics, political parties and policy-making in general. The conception of civil society and politics of CEE dissidents, most notably Václav Havel and Gyorgy Konrad, was based on principles of non-politics, ethics and anti-authoritarianism (Rupnik, 2010; Smolar 1996). The mainstreaming of their discourses (together with anti-communist resentment) has constituted an obstacle for politicization of various issues and social problems in CEE societies and represented a pathology for democratic politics (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Renwick, 2006; Tucker et al., 2000). According to Ost:

The opposition rejected the state not just because it could not win there, but also because it did not want to win there. It was inspired by the same radical views of politics that inspired the new left in the West. This opposition did not want to possess power so much as to abolish it. It was, before all else, anti-authoritarian (Ost, 1990, p. 2).

Other authors pointed to the impact of the so-called ‘discourse of anti-politics’ on the democratic politics of post-communist countries. This concept was put forward by dissidents and privileged parallel ways of doing politics – apart from political parties and institutions. According to Linz and Stepan (1996): ‘*In fact, most of the values and language of ethical civil society that were so functional to the tasks of opposition are dysfunctional for a political society in a consolidated democracy*’ (p. 272).

The same issue was highlighted by Tucker et al. (2000) in their account of the utopian features of Czech post-1989 politics:

Non-political politics is impossible in a modern representative democracy. In the absence of political parties, a government would have to negotiate individually with each member of parliament who may at any moment secede from a governing coalition. Such a situation would lead to political instability, difficulties in changing a status quo, and lack of predictability in political decisions (pp. 445–446).

The third argument leaves aside the nature of state socialist societies and looks at the processes of transition and democratization after 1989. Bernhard (1996) identified four

key factors that are responsible for the weakness of new civil societies in CEE countries. While two of them (post-totalitarian reality and social transformation) seem to belong specifically to the process of transition from communism, the other two (demobilization of civil society after the regime change and transfer of leading civil society figures into state administration) are related to the democratization process in general (Bernhard, 1996, pp. 311–321). Similarly, Howard also highlights the disappointment of citizens with the evolution of post-communist societies (Howard, 2011, p. 139). It has been suggested that although there was an initial wave of civic engagement through collective action aiming at regime change in 1989, the people, who won their freedom on their own, have been treated like children and as though they must be taught how to use it correctly (Buden, 2013, p. 37). This applies not only to transitologists and other political scientists who created the phenomenon of ‘post-communism as a transition to full-scale democracy’, but also to the early elites and politicians of the newly democratic states who actively tamed the initial wave of engagement. The processes of demobilizing the CEE societies started soon after 1989 and were meant to restore the ‘standard’ functioning of political and economic institutions. The aim was to prevent potential radicalization of citizens and movements in the streets after the fall of the socialist regimes, which could threaten political institutions from working in a rational and standardized way (Krapfl, 2009). Thus, the initial engagement of citizens in public affairs was stifled, which discouraged them from further participation. These practices of prevention of participation through non-institutional channels also continued after the initial phase of political transition: policymakers succeeded in dealing with the situation of the most ‘dangerous’ and potentially mobilizing social groups (such as unemployed miners or steelworkers) by providing them with selective incentives through social policies in order not to protest (e.g. early retirement for miners, pro-employment policies for youth etc.) (Vanhuysse, 2006).

3. Weakness or Difference?

Assessments of CEE civil societies simply as ‘weak’ did not go unnoticed by academics, both from the West and within the region. Generally, the concept of civil society and its application in CEE were critically assessed. It has become increasingly ‘self-evident’ that civil society research should focus mostly on the analysis of the organizational activities and collective processes outside the areas of the state and the market, while studying activities on the individual level mostly through the lens of political collective action (membership, recruitment, mobilization). This epistemological approach has implied normative positions regarding the assessment of non-organized elements in the sphere of civil society.

When applied to the analysis of CEE societies, it has been argued that CEE civil societies are weak (or, at least, weaker than those in the West), as there is a lower level of organized participation followed by civil privatism of the citizens (Howard, 2003; McMahan, 2001). However, applying the concepts of ‘social movement societies’ (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Rucht & Neidhardt, 2002), which assumes frequent mass engagement and frequent mobilization, the activities of social movements and other collective actors have been

challenged by at least three streams in social research: by anthropologists re-conceptualizing the civil society, by students of social movements applying the concept of transactional activism, and by political scientists inspecting new forms of individual political participation.

The first, and probably the earliest, is represented by social anthropologists who pointed at various meanings and realities of the concept of civil society and promoted 'elusive usage of civil society, in which it is not defined negatively, in opposition to the state, but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life' (Hann, 1996). In doing so, assessment of the vitality and strength of civil society by means of studying only NGOs means studying representations of 'an impoverished view of social life' (Hann, 1996, p. 20). In his case study of a Hungarian border village, Hann goes one step further claiming that not only did a civil society exist here during socialism, but it was the material prosperity resulting from reformist socialist policies which enabled its existence (Hann, 1992, p. 163). Furthermore, some researchers pointed out that some aspects of organizing in socialist societies outperformed the civil activities after 1989, even according to 'Western standards'. The case study of a Czech environmental organization founded in 1979 illustrated that its original emphasis on volunteerism and participant interaction vanished during the transition, which forced its adjustment into a professionalized, grant-seeking model of environmental NGOs (Carmin & Jehlička, 2005).

The second critique of the weakness thesis focused on the assumption of the primacy of mass collective action as a constitutive feature of the civil sphere. It suggests that there has been an increase in collective civil actors in CEE societies that are less socially embedded but more focused on cooperation (or conflict) with other CSOs or with political elites and institutions, and more powerful in promoting public interest agendas and bringing broader social change than the community and grass-root organizations. Consequently, the concept of transactional activism (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Císař, 2010, 2013) has been developed in the post-communist context, where the apparent lack of mass social movements and popular mobilizations has been overshadowed by the plurality of CSOs that focus not on mobilizing citizens but rather on promoting their own interests, while working with professional staff and being economically dependent on external and mostly institutional resources (e.g. EU grants, foundations, public funding etc.).

It is precisely because of their economic independence in politically and culturally restrictive national contexts that transaction activists succeed in pursuing different political goals and advocating various interests that were neglected in existing socio-political settings (e.g. the environment, minority rights etc.). In other words, the prior research emphasis on building social bonds among citizens via organizations is being replaced with a focus on developing and maintaining an organizational infrastructure of civil societies (through transactions and relations among collective civil actors etc.) (Diani, 2003; Baldassarri & Diani, 2007). Several studies (Císař & Vráblíková, 2010; Císař & Navrátil, 2015; Mazák & Diviák, 2018) empirically identified and illustrated key aspects of this 'new' form of political activism in the CEE societies: these were, most importantly, advocacy activities, transnational cooperation, building closer relations with other CSOs in the field, and strong dependence on public funding.

The third line of argument focuses on the engagement of individual citizens. The traditional account of civic engagement puts an emphasis on active citizen involvement in extra-institutional activities through collective action, and focused on individuals' contribution to civil society events, structures and processes (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Norris, 2002), often privileging membership in formal advocacy-oriented organizations and policy-related initiatives. However, while for example Latin American countries after the late 1970s experienced large-scale mobilizations and protests, in CEE the lack of extreme inequality, lower level of urbanization, absence of a tradition of violent struggles, and existing social protection created a context in which citizens were not pushed into collective protests (Greskovits, 1998, p. 85). It has also been suggested that the absence or unavailability of vehicles for collective action (organizations, movements, networks) may push citizens to avoid 'voice' and choose 'individual exit' – absenteeism, abstention or negative voting may constitute important forms of social and political participation in post-socialist countries (Greskovits, 1998, p. 74).

Furthermore, it was not necessarily an unavailability of collective actors but their forms and actions which contributed to the parallelism of individual and collective engagement. On the one hand, fragmentation and political framing of trade unions as a heritage of the Communist past – even if the trade unions were one of the most important actors for regime change in 1989 – led to the pacification of large conflicts in the sphere of the economy (Ekiert & Kubik, 1998). On the other hand, the gap between the elite transaction networks of the NGOs, which privileged certain parts of the political agenda, and citizens, led to their mutual distancing, withdrawal from certain thematic fields of civic activity and preference for individualized participation (Navrátil, 2018).

This is further supported by the evidence of relatively high participation of citizens in non-advocacy CSOs (Navrátil & Pospíšil, 2014). Consequently, we may observe individual advocacy engagement in the form of financial support for groups, campaigns, or projects and active individual citizenship (ethical consumerism, charity giving, writing letters to public officials etc.) (Navrátil, 2018). In fact, this is not so different from the developments in the older Western democracies, where the arrival of new means of communication, the widening repertoire of political participation, and the coming of the digital age changed the tools of citizen coordination profoundly and offered new opportunities for individual political engagement (Internet activism, political consumerism, e-donations etc.) (Norris, 2001; Micheletti, 2003; Zukin et al., 2006; Shirky, 2008; van Deth, 2012).

4. Contemporary Situation and Challenges

Two decades after the fall of state socialism, the process of building stable democracies and 'hypercapitalist' or 'privatized' societies (Jacobsson, 2015) was accomplished. The next wave of empirical research into civil societies in CEE has, in the last ten years, indicated that there are still differences between post-socialist countries and older democracies, but these are often smaller than the differences between the post-socialist countries themselves (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013, p. 3). One of the main arguments of the earlier

wave of research – the thesis of NGO-ization and co-optation of activism through external funding – has been replaced by efforts to assess all varieties of social and political activism and their varying trajectories. The research has demonstrated how different repertoires are rooted in CEE, how civil society actors adjust their framing according to varying political and cultural contexts and deal with funding opportunities (Jacobsson, 2013; Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2013; Zakharov, 2013). In other words, after two decades of development, the picture of civil society seems to have grown fuzzier with large regional differences, and less focus on a few theoretical concepts.

Furthermore, another series of case studies of post-socialist civil societies painted an even more counter-intuitive picture of what has been going on recently: many CEE cities and urban areas became laboratories of the conflict between advanced processes of neoliberal transformation and its consequences (including commercialization of public spaces, gentrification, fragmentation and privatization of the public sphere, cronyism and oligarchic behaviour). It is in the urban spaces where the growing discontent of younger generations with the neoliberal revolution has spilled into more or less formal networks, initiatives and groups (Jacobsson, 2015; Polanska, 2015; Bituštková, 2015). These recent grassroots activities seem to cast doubt on the previous sceptical voices on the passivity and withdrawal of post-socialist citizens from public affairs. However, how have our civil societies dealt with recent major challenges?

4.1. Shifting Political Grounds in CEE

Recent political developments in CEE countries suggest that both political conflicts and actors are going through significant transformations. Anti-establishment and authoritarian political shifts in the region in recent years have caused distinct reactions from governments to autonomous civil society (and have transformed its political opportunities), and at the same time produced different responses from civil societies to these changes and reactions.

In Poland and Hungary, the rise of nationalism, social conservatism, anti-communism and authoritarianism led to profound changes in the structure of the political competition and even in the polity. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party won the majority of seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, which was followed by his second and third electoral victories in 2014 and 2018. Raising issues of national sovereignty, using strong anti-EU rhetoric, making constitutional changes, concentrating executive power, and attacking liberal civil society by the Orbán government have ultimately resulted in what researchers describe as an illiberal turn away from liberalism and pluralism towards authoritarian rule (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Buzogány, 2017). At the same time, the country saw the rise of the extreme-right party Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), one of the most successful extreme-right parties, which combines electoral representation with extra-institutional mobilization and which has been contesting elections in Hungary over the last decade (Pirro, 2019). In Poland, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the majority of seats in the 2015 parliamentary elections, after which it began consolidating power by attacking key institutions (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019).

The Czech and Slovak republics, however, have witnessed somewhat different processes – here, entrepreneurial and social populist political movements have not aimed at such deep political transformations. In the Czech Republic, the ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) movement, led by the owner of the biggest agrochemical company in the country, Andrej Babiš, entered government in 2013 and subsequently won the parliamentary elections in 2017. The party, using an anti-political technocratic discourse, has become the most successful new Czech political party since the fall of communism (Havlík, 2019). In Slovakia, the extreme-right party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) – managed to attract enough votes to enter parliament in the 2016 and 2020 elections, becoming a strong oppositional party building on anti-minority and anti-establishment sentiments (Kluknavská & Smolík, 2016). In 2020, the populist party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities Party (OLaNO) won the parliamentary elections in Slovakia, capitalizing on the widespread discontent with the governance of the country with a promise to clean up politics (Deegan-Krause, Haugton, & Rybář, 2020). Investigation of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018 revealed close links between business, judges and politicians, which made anti-corruption one of the most important issues for voters (Deegan-Krause, Haugton, & Rybář, 2020).

These changes have produced different responses from the side of civil societies in each of these countries. In the Czech Republic, the responses were driven partly by the opposition parties but mostly by the new non-partisan civic initiative 'A Million Moments for Democracy'. This initiative organized mass public demonstrations against Prime Minister Babiš and his government, combining existing anti-communist sentiment (Babiš was accused of cooperation with the secret police during the Communist era) and a critique of his political, economic and media power and resulting conflicts of interest (BBC, 2019).

In Slovakia, the aftermath of the contract murder of a journalist who investigated cases of high-level corruption, associated influence peddling and organized crime led to creation of a social movement called 'For Decent Slovakia', which organized the largest public demonstrations since 1989 (Láštic, 2019). A string of protests in several cities across the country turned into mass anti-government demonstrations in March 2018. Because Prime Minister Robert Fico did not explain the ties of some of his close advisors to Italian organized crime, the protests led to Fico's resignation as well as the resignation of the Interior Minister and Police President (Láštic, 2019).

Civil society responses to the rising authoritarianism in Poland and Hungary are explored in the articles in this Special Issue. Looking at Hungary, Márton Gerő, Pál Susánszky, Ákos Kopper and Gergely Tóth examine how civil society organizations react to the closing opportunity structures, in particular to the closing space as the government tightens the legal and funding opportunities for CSOs. Many organizations have made strategic decisions depending on their perception of the situation. Perceiving the environment at the national level of governance as increasingly hostile, CSOs often withdrew from their cooperative ties with political authorities and from doing research and oriented themselves more towards raising awareness, taking a watchdog role, and engaging in publicity on issues with the aim of changing public opinion. Maintaining the focus on Hungary, Ágnes Gagyí, Márton Szarvas and András Vígvári examine three case studies aiming to expand and complement the picture of Hungarian civil society, going beyond

the government's attacks on major CSOs and showing segments of local societies actively organizing to negotiate the process of post-socialist development.

Moving the focus to Poland, Grzegorz Piotrowski examines present-day discussions on the topic of Polish civil society in the light of recent political changes revolving around the concepts of illiberal democracy, populism and (neo)conservative backlash. He claims that recent developments in the civil society, namely a shift towards more confrontational campaigns and changes in the structure of the sector and its financing, have resulted in a new landscape of civil activities in Poland.

Furthermore, while there are some recent studies of the situation of conventional CSOs, much less is known about the development of trade unions in the changing CEE political landscape. In the next article, which takes a comparative approach, Maciej Olejnik fills this gap and argues that the first formations of the populist governments in Hungary (2010–2014) and Poland (2015–2019) led to the emergence of a new version of corporatism, which he denotes as a patronage corporatism in both of these countries. His study illustrates empirically how providing selective incentives and support to some actors on the part of the government may effectively co-opt one part of civil society (trade unions) and split, intimidate and weaken the other – the 'troublesome' ones.

4.2. Refugee Crisis

The number of refugees arriving in Europe increased significantly during the year of 2015 as a result of the violent conflicts in Syria, Libya and some other countries in parts of Africa and the Middle East (UNHCR, 2015). This quickly turned into a critical policy issue and a highly polarized public debate in most European countries (Bansak, Hainmueller, & Hangart, 2016; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Crawley & Skleparis, 2017; Horsti, 2016; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, & Wodak, 2018). This new conflict divided both political elites and civil society and produced an environment where new coalitions coalesced and where new mobilizations and counter-mobilizations occurred. The arrivals sparked a wave of anti-immigrant mobilization by radical and anti-Islam groups, but at the same time also led to demonstrations both supporting refugees and opposing xenophobia and intolerance.

Interestingly, the initiative, timing, and polarity of mobilizations related to refugees differed across European countries. While in old democracies such as Italy, Greece and Spain the major initiative was taken by the advocates of solidarity (Andretta & Pavan, 2018), the CEE countries witnessed dominant mobilization by those espousing refusal to accept immigrants. This situation produced different logics concerning mobilization and counter-mobilization over the refugee question. In some countries, the solidarity mobilization reacted first and spoke for a humanitarian approach, while the counter-mobilization built on ethno-nationalist and exclusionary ideas. In other countries, including CEE, the dominant mobilization came from the anti-immigrant movement backed by the government, while the solidarity mobilization only reacted to these anti-refugee initiatives. However, the extent of these types of mobilizations differed considerably between countries. Differences in the levels of counter-mobilization were observed in countries where the anti-refugee camp dominated organized protest, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In Slovakia, the number of refugee-related public events was much lower than in the Czech Republic. In both countries, about two-thirds of the events were against migrants and migration in general, while about one-third voiced support for the refugees (Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2019). While anti-refugee mobilizations were distributed rather evenly across the country, pro-refugee mobilizations dominated in the capital cities. It was the pro-refugee side which organized as a countermovement, as typically their events were organized as counter-events which attempted to confront rallies organized by the anti-refugee groups. Also, the repertoire was the same – demonstrations dominated. Most of the events in both countries were organized by formal groups and organizations, and only a minority of them were run by informal networks or individuals. It was quite typical that in both countries the anti-refugee camp was dominated by political parties and movements, while pro-refugee events in both countries were dominated by civil society actors. Still, most of the civil society activities concerning the refugee crisis consisted of field work and assistance, and service provision for refugees (often in Hungary and Serbia). In Poland, the situation was quite similar: both the Catholic Church and nationalist and extreme right movement organizations, backed by the government, mobilized against refugees; however, their efforts provoked a strong reaction from some civil society organizations (Narkowicz, 2018). In fact, the crisis revealed a significant tension within a civil society field created (again) by the conservative government strategy. By various means, the government suppressed CSOs helping refugees in Poland while supporting those CSOs which aimed at ‘helping at the source’ – abroad (Follis, 2019).

While in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland the refugee crisis was, in terms of numbers of incoming refugees, not really a crisis, Hungary experienced a massive influx of asylum seekers in 2015. It seems that, again, most of the civil society initiatives in Hungary consisted of helping refugees directly on site and providing various types of assistance (coordination of volunteers, provision of food, legal advice, medical assistance etc.). As Dániel Mikecz suggests in his work in this Special Issue, some of the aid organizations also focused on training and education, and informed the public about issues related to migration, while others campaigned and lobbied in efforts to promote advocacy activities, stressing the importance of their role and responsibility. Mikecz in his article investigates the role of the morality of solidarity movements with a special focus on how refugee aid organizations articulated their claims in terms of issues, forms and frames of solidarity during the migration crisis in 2015. He finds that the goal of refugee aid groups was in particular mitigating anti-refugee sentiments among the public, which were multiplying in a hostile environment reinforced by the government’s anti-migrant campaigns.

4.3. Coronavirus Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as an unprecedented international public health crisis. It started in China in late 2019 and has since rapidly spread worldwide, with the first cases in Europe reported between January and February 2020. The governments in Central and Eastern Europe reacted quickly by adopting various measures including declaring a state of emergency, imposing lockdowns, requiring physical and social

distancing and even closing their borders, to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus in their countries.

In the Czech Republic, schools and universities had to close (but continued teaching online), public events and gatherings were cancelled, shops were closed (with exceptions such as grocery stores and pharmacies), and free movement was limited with exceptions for travel to/from work and trips ensuring basic human needs such as shopping for food. The Czech government also made it compulsory to wear a face mask in public spaces (Tait, 2020). It also temporarily re-introduced internal borders, barred access to the country to foreign nationals (with some exceptions) and forbade Czech citizens from leaving the country (with the exception of cross-border workers). Additionally, anyone returning to the country had to observe a mandatory two-week quarantine at home. At the same time, debates and policy initiatives were launched to help the citizens and firms economically hurt by the quarantine.

In Slovakia, the government adopted similar measures, including requiring a face mask in public, to tackle the crisis. One notable exception in Slovakia, however, was mandatory state quarantine for all people coming back to the country, i.e. the obligation to be isolated in one of the state quarantine facilities for the time necessary to carry out a laboratory test for coronavirus. Authorities also closed off several Roma settlements in eastern Slovakia and deployed soldiers to take samples for testing after reports of multiple coronavirus cases. Such actions increased worry among some civil society organizations about further exclusion, stigmatization and discrimination of these marginalized groups (Romea, 2020).

Though both Poland and Hungary also rapidly responded to the spread of coronavirus with similar measures, the governments at the same time tried to politicize and take advantage of the pandemic to secure more political power. In Poland, despite restrictions undertaken as a result of the coronavirus, the government, led by the Law and Justice Party, pushed for presidential elections to take place in May, dismissing concerns about free and fair elections, health risks, the quality of voting or the constitutionality of such a vote (Klajn, 2020). In Hungary, concerns were raised at the end of March 2020 when the Hungarian parliament voted to accept the government's request for the power to rule by decree without a set time limit. Under the new legislation, the government was able to suspend the enforcement of certain laws and people who publish what was deemed as untrue or misrepresented facts could face prison (Bayer, 2020).

Civil societies in these countries have reacted to the coronavirus crisis and measures undertaken by the governments in different ways and have even found new forms of mobilization and civic involvement. In both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, civil society has mostly focused on service provision in areas that needed to fill the gaps left by the state. Besides non-profit organizations, informal grassroots networks and communities have often started initiatives and coordinated via online platforms and social media. There have been neighbourhood initiatives helping the elderly or disabled people with aid and shopping, universities sending their medical and pedagogy students to volunteer in hospitals, groups of psychologists offering free therapy, and organizations helping homeless people or teaching children in socially excluded communities. One of the core issues was sewing face masks at home. Since both governments made coronavirus mask-wearing compulsory but did not provide them to citizens, people mobilized to sew and distribute homemade

masks to comply with this rule and to help those who could not get the masks themselves (Tait, 2020). Numerous initiatives and online groups, for instance ‘Whole Czechia Sews’ or ‘We Sew Masks in Brno’, were established, with thousands of members, including individuals, small firms, cafeterias and theatres sewing and distributing masks to health professionals and social provision facilities which were in short supply of protective gear.

As a result, civil society and non-profit organizations, particularly in the social service and healthcare provision sectors, gained more public and media attention, which in the future may lead to a better evaluation of their activities and may highlight their importance. Also, a new wave of volunteering may strengthen participation in the civil sectors in years to come. However, as the governments mostly focused on providing financial assistance to commercial subjects and no such initiatives for non-profits emerged during the crisis, some non-profit organizations who are heavily dependent on either donors or public subsidies may face economic obstacles in the future. Also, some advocacy groups, such as the organizers of mobilizations against the prime minister in the Czech Republic, may be losing momentum, as the state of emergency interrupted a series of protests for an indefinite amount of time.

In Poland and Hungary, the consequences of laws passed with the pretence of mitigating the coronavirus might be rather harmful to civil society. For instance, Law and Justice tried to use the coronavirus pandemic to put forward its political agenda in Poland, particularly laws criminalizing sexual education and restricting access to abortion. While in the past such attempts were met with large protests (marches with black umbrellas), as Piotrowski in his article in this Special Issue points out, currently the demonstrations would be in violation of social distancing measures, with possible penalization (Klajn, 2020). The new legislation in Hungary has also caused deep concerns among many CSOs as it gives Viktor Orbán new power to silence or intimidate his opponents, including journalists and human rights activists. Such measures further close the space for CSOs struggling for survival, adding to the processes that may eventually lead to de-democratization of the political system, as Gerő et al. in their article in this Special Issue argue. Moreover, as disinformation and misinformation about the coronavirus spread rapidly, in some instances amplified by political actors, such trends may have profound consequences for those civil society organizations which inform the public about the situation and help to fight the spread of false narratives.

5. Conclusion

This article looked at key debates over the role and developments of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe and connected them to recent challenges. Which connections have we identified and explored? From today’s point of view, it seems that the initial focus on the historical weakness of post-socialist civil societies in terms of numbers of participants and organizations missed the point of the subsequent risks and potential of CEE civil society in two major regards. First, it took all post-socialist civil societies as a single case of the post-communist condition. Second, it failed to capture the real challenge of

our civil societies – not the passivity of citizens but their mobilization by authoritarian politicians and nationalist-conservative movements.

As our article and the other contributions to this Special Issue reveal, there is no homogenous civil society condition in CEE. On the contrary, the civil societies in each country deal with significantly different political landscapes, utilizing opportunities to restrain and control the political elite on the one hand, or choosing between co-optation and abeyance on the other. One of the current challenges for civil societies in CEE that we identified as particularly important is associated with anti-establishment and authoritarian political shifts and hostile reactions of governments to autonomous civil society. Happening particularly in Hungary and Poland, we have witnessed these trends emerging and deepening in challenging times during both the refugee and coronavirus crises. This suggests the immense importance of political context for civil society and its condition.

Moreover, both the Polish and Hungarian cases seem to contradict the traditional connection between civil society mobilization and democracy vitality. It has been illustrated not only how authoritarian regimes in Poland and Hungary gained their momentum in the streets and squares, relying on civic networks and extra-party structures (e.g. Greskovits & Wittenberg, 2016; Minkenberg, 2017), but also how they mobilize support even when in office. It was precisely this capacity which enabled the conservative regimes to pressure the oppositional part of civil society to adapt or vanish.

At the same time, there are some common underlying trends in all CEE countries. After several decades of capitalist transformation, a significant part of civil society conformed to neoliberal model – it became NGO-ized while substituting many functions performed by the state to soften the ‘path of economic globalization’ (Kaldor, 2003, p. 9) or the ‘post-socialist integration of Eastern-Europe to global capitalism’ (Gagyí et al. in this Special Issue). This meant especially working in the shadow of the state in the sphere of service provision, and selectivity of agenda in advocacy activities which has limited civil society actors’ social embeddedness. The former denotes dealing with problems on the ground without asking political questions. The latter relates to the pre-occupation with political rights and freedoms, financial transparency and watch-dogging against the ghosts of the totalitarian past. This left the civil society in CEE quite an easy prey for both technocratic political managers and for anti-communist conservatives when they seized political power. Despite the numerous (and often somewhat hidden) struggles of the past, present and future, depoliticization of civil society in CEE, in the sense of its selectivity of political issues, may be in its most fragile – and defining, at the same time – moment.

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