

## The weakness of postcommunist civil society reassessed

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**Abstract.** During the last two decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that civil society is structurally deficient in postcommunist countries. Yet why have the seemingly strong, active and mobilised civic movements of the transition period become so weak after democracy was established? And why have there been diverging political trajectories across the postcommunist space if civil society structures were universally weak? This article uses a new, broader range of data to show that civil societies in Central and Eastern European countries are not as feeble as commonly assumed. Many postcommunist countries possess vigorous public spheres and active civil society organisations strongly connected to transnational civic networks able to shape domestic policies. In a series of time-series cross-section models, the article shows that broader measures of civic and social institutions are able to predict the diverging transition paths among postcommunist regimes, and in particular the growing gap between democratic East Central Europe and the increasingly authoritarian post-Soviet space.

**Keywords:** civil society; postcommunism; democratic transition; democratic consolidation

Many of the formerly Communist societies had weak civic traditions before the advent of Communism, and totalitarian rule abused even that limited stock of social capital. Without norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement, the Hobbesian outcome of the Mezzogiorno – amoral familialism, clientelism, lawlessness, ineffective government, and economic stagnation – seems likelier than successful democratization and economic development. Palermo may represent the future of Moscow. (Putnam 1993: 183)

### Introduction

During the last two decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that civil society is structurally deficient in postcommunist countries (Ely 1994; Lomax 1997; Staniszkis 1999; Civil Society Forum Bratislava 2009). Early studies of ‘social capital’ conducted in the 1990s found comparatively low levels of social trust, community engagement and confidence in social and political institutions across Central and Eastern Europe, while more recent analyses by Howard (2003) and Bernhard and Karakoç (2007) have shown low levels of voluntary associational membership and weak unconventional participation (Rose et al. 1996; Rose 1999). The picture of even the most successful postcommunist countries that arises from the literature is one of ‘democracies without citizens’, in which elites have succeeded in institutionalising democratic procedures, protection of basic civic rights and multiparty competition, but failed to counter a paucity of associational life, volunteering at the grassroots level and weak participation in the

institutions of representative governance. Weak civil society spells trouble for these new democracies. Warning of the dangers to democratic consolidation, prominent scholars have pointed to declining legitimacy of democratic institutions, disenchantment with liberal values and the growing popularity of populist and radical right parties (Ramet 1999; Minkenberg 2002; Kopecky & Mudde 2003). The ascendancy of such parties to government now raises legitimate concerns regarding the sustainability of democracy in the postcommunist world (Rupnik 2007).

Yet in this article, we challenge the conventional wisdom regarding the weakness of postcommunist civil society by pointing to a number of paradoxes. First, the events of 1989–1991 were commonly considered as the indisputable triumph of civil society over monolithic communist regimes: why, therefore, have the seemingly strong, active and mobilised civic movements of the transition period become so weak after democracy was established? Second, given that communist regimes did not simply repress independent social and political organisations, but actively built their own associational structures, what happened to these structures during and after the transition period? And finally, if civil society matters for democratic consolidation but is uniformly weak, why are there diverging political trajectories across the postcommunist space, with post-Soviet regimes lapsing into authoritarian rule while those of East Central Europe have largely maintained core democratic institutions?

We suggest that these paradoxes are easily resolved once we depart from the consensus that civil society is uniformly weak across the postcommunist world. Because existing studies have focused exclusively on surveyed membership in voluntary associations, at the expense of other dimensions of civic life and types of data, they have neglected the myriad ways in which citizens organise to defend their interests, reaffirm their identities and pursue common goals in postcommunist societies. We argue that once scholars open their eyes to a wider range of data and sources, it can be shown that a number of postcommunist countries have developed vigorous public spheres and active civil society organisations strongly connected to transnational civic networks able to shape domestic policies. Further, we show that the diversity in patterns of civil society development, which reflects the region's historical legacies, political trajectories and cultural traditions, is increasingly mirrored in diverging democratic transitional outcomes among postcommunist regimes, and in particular the growing gap between democratic East Central Europe and the increasingly authoritarian post-Soviet space (Ekiert et al. 2007). As a result, there is no postcommunist 'exception': diverging democratic trajectories among postcommunist countries are reflective of prior civic legacies, just as they are among new democracies in other world regions (Diamond & Plattner 2015). Due to these diverging legacies, democracies in Central and Eastern Europe are unlikely to follow the trajectory of post-Soviet regimes towards fully authoritarian rule: even if in some cases there are aspects of democratic 'backsliding' (Bermeo 2016).

### **The weakness of postcommunist civil society thesis**

By the late 1990s, scholars from a range of disciplines appeared to have reached a consensus on the systemic weakness of civil society in postcommunist Europe (Dahrendorf 1990; Bernhard 1996; Howard 2003). Some considered this to be a direct legacy of communism, arguing that 'the lack of civil society was part of the very essence of the all-pervasive

communist state' (Wedel 1994: 323). Others attributed it to the weak civic traditions that predated communist rule (Putnam 1993). Still others argued that while the legacy of communism was undoubtedly negative, it was compounded by the manner in which the post-1989 democratic transformations occurred: pacted transitions which privileged elite negotiations at the expense of popular forces, and in which the organisational leadership of emerging popular movements was lost to the new state bureaucracies and party hierarchies, while structural adjustment and austerity led to widespread withdrawal from associational life (Bernhard 1996; Lomax 1997; Howard 2003). Thus, the 'rebellious civil societies' that challenged communist governments subsequently became enfeebled as a result of factors inherent in the nature of the dual economic and political transformation occurring across the postcommunist space.

Notwithstanding this assessment, however, since 1989 most countries of the region have experienced steady democratic consolidation. Outside of Central Asia, fewer than 15 per cent of postcommunist regimes are now considered 'not free' according to the ratings published by Freedom House (2014). In fact, in a number of postcommunist polities, the quality of democracy is very high, with many countries in Central Europe and the Baltics exhibiting better ratings on indices of corruption, public service delivery and business regulation than their counterparts in Southern Europe (Bertelsmann Foundation 2012; World Bank 2013; Transparency International 2013; Doing Business 2014). If it is true, as argued among others by Shils (1991), Diamond (1999) and Rosenblum and Post (2002), that civil society is an indispensable element of the development and consolidation of democracy worldwide, how can we explain the fact that democracy has flourished in parts of the former communist bloc despite the apparent weakness of the associational sphere and passivity of citizens described by scholars?

In this article we employ a broad, realistic and empirically sensitive notion of 'civil society', which, following Diamond (1999: 221), we define as

the realm of organised social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules [and which] involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable.

Given the emerging consensus that civil society is a multidimensional and interactive phenomenon (Bermeo & Nord 2000; Merkel 2002; Anheier 2004), we assume that existing civil societies differ along at least four crucial dimensions: the quality of the public sphere; civil society's composition and organisation; its interaction with other institutional domains and actors of the polity; and the normative orientation of civil society actors. Specific dimensions or sectors of civil society in various countries may exhibit different levels of development and different qualities and thus their impact on democratisation (or the improvement of democracy's quality) may vary considerably. Accordingly, only multiple data and multiple methodologies can generate substantive knowledge about civil society and the way in which it shapes political outcomes (Riley & Fernandez 2014).

Taking a broader sample of indicators, we argue, makes it possible to build a picture of civil society that better reflects the richness and diversity of citizen activity across

postcommunist countries, and also to understand the diverging trajectories of post-1989 political and economic developments. We show that it is possible to resolve the paradox of ‘weak’ postcommunist civil society and steady democratisation by showing the strength of civil society across a number of postcommunist regions, thereby reaffirming the importance of civil society for processes of democratic transition more generally across the world. Finally, we demonstrate via a series of time-series models that our alternative civil society indicators measured at the start of the transition period are predictive of success or failure at democratisation in the following decades. There is, therefore, no postcommunist ‘exception’: civic legacies have determined outcomes in the postcommunist world, just as they have done among transitional regimes in the world as a whole (Hale 2016).

### **Assessing civil societies in the postcommunist world**

Conceptually and empirically, how should scholars go about assessing comparative civil society? The civil society literature suggests at least four principal mechanisms linking aspects of social and civic life to democratic transition and consolidation. Pluralist theories of democracy, for example, following in the tradition of Robert Dahl (1961), stress the representative role of civil society groups and organisations in setting the agenda of democratic politics, thereby ensuring outcomes that reflect a sufficiently wide spectrum of public opinion. This view suggests the density of *civic organisations*, and in particular membership of organisations such as labour unions, business groups or groups that represent salient social issues, competition among organisations and normative pluralism as indicators of the health of democratic life (Putnam 2002).

On the other hand, a tradition in political culture dating back to Alexis de Tocqueville sees civic organisations as mechanisms of democratic socialisation – ‘schools of democracy’ – where citizens are socialised into the *norms* of democratic life such as debate, negotiation and compromise, and therefore has lain greater emphasis on the presence of civic *values*, such as tolerance, trust and independence (Tocqueville 2004; Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

A related, third tradition in behavioural political science sees the role of civil society organisations as a means of holding politicians to account through acts of direct *contestation*, for example, organising mass demonstrations when politicians renege on campaign promises, are exposed in corruption scandals or violate constitutional norms. If this is how civil society affects political outcomes, then we ought to measure the propensity of citizens to engage in ‘contentious’ activities, such as strike, petitions and boycotts, rather than more passive membership in associations, which may not have the same effect upon institutional accountability (Norris 1999, 2002).

Finally, there is the view associated with Jürgen Habermas that a constitutive part of vibrant civil society is a *public sphere*, a forum in which diverse public opinions can engage one another, and an overlapping consensus emerges regarding the best policy options (Habermas 1989 [1962]; Calhoun 1993). Such a mechanism leads us to focus on legal guarantees ensuring equal access to the public domain as well as on civic participation in the media, both as readers and as contributors to the public debate, for example by writing letters to newspapers, running Internet blogs or attending local town meetings, as well as the legal guarantees that allow public communication to flourish.

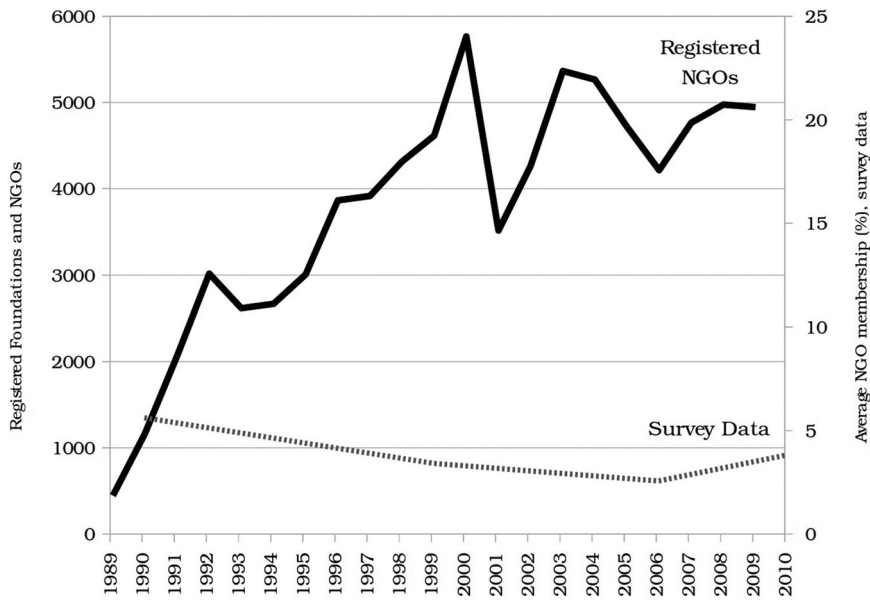


Figure 1. Growth of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and foundations in Poland: Surveyed membership versus officially registered organisations.

Source: Surveyed NGO membership data from the European Values Study, Waves 2–6, 1990–2010. Average rate of respondents declaring membership in the following civil society organisations: arts and cultural associations; youth and sports; labour unions; political parties; professional associations. Registered number of NGOs and foundations from official statistics.

### *The organisational structure of civil society*

First, we should consider the organisational structure of civic life in postcommunist democracies. Studies of civil society in postcommunist Europe have tended to rely on surveys of voluntary activity in which respondents have been asked to report the different kinds of association in which they participate (Rose et al. 1996; Howard 2003; Bernhard & Karakoç 2007). Yet while comparative survey data from the European Social Survey or the European Values Survey have shown a consistently low level of reported group membership, with little or no change over time, official registries from within individual countries show a phenomenal growth of listed groups and organisations (Mansfeldova et al. 2004; Nagy & Sebesteny 2008; Kuti 2010). In Poland, for example, the number of registered nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) grew by 400 per cent from 1989 to 1994, while surveyed membership remained flat (Figure 1). While the growth in registered NGOs leveled after that point, it has remained strong in the subsequent years, with an average addition of some 4,000 new NGOs, and 500 foundations, every year, across all types or organisations, in all regions of the country (Klon/Jawor 2013; GUS 2014). The development of civil society organisations has been distributed across the entire range of localities and not restricted to major urban centres.

Perhaps this trend is unique to Poland and other East Central European countries such as Hungary or the Czech Republic (Kuti 1996, 2010; Mansfeldova et al. 2004; Nagy

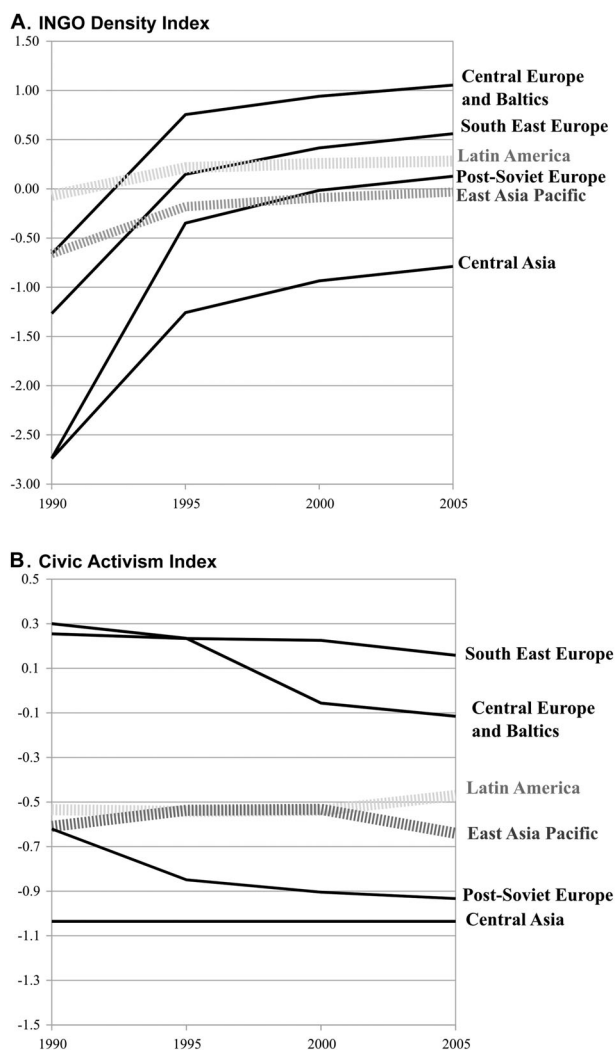


Figure 2. Civil society sub-indices, by postcommunist sub-region, 1990–2005.

Notes: Includes comparison with medium-income democratising regions: (a) INGO membership, per 100,000 (standardised scale); and (b) participation in boycotts, demonstrations and petitions (standardised scale). Indicators standardisation based on global country sample, with mean 0 and standard deviation 1.

& Sebesteny 2008). Yet further evidence of civil society organisational growth across the region can be adduced from data on membership of international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs). A measure of per capita membership of INGOs, for example, is reported in the *Global Civil Society Yearbook* (London School of Economics 2003), and shows a massive surge in civic organisation among postcommunist societies in the period from 1990 to 2003 (Figure 2). In 1990, the average level of membership of INGOs in postcommunist Central European and Baltic states was a mere 5.5 per 100,000 population; by 2003 this level had reached 57.8 per 100,000. This not only matched the 1990 level of Western Europe (52.1 per 100,000 population), but surpassed the contemporary rate of

*Table 1. Average 'active membership' of civic organisations, 1995–2012*

	Average memberships, 1995–2008	Average memberships, 2005–2008	Average memberships, 2010–2014	Change (abs.)
Bulgaria	1.75	1.38	–	–0.38
Poland	–	4.50	5.23	+0.73
Romania	5.75	2.00	3.93	–1.82
Russia	2.25	2.38	1.43	–0.82
Slovenia	4.50	8.38	7.28	+2.78
Ukraine	1.50	3.13	1.92	+0.42
Germany (East)	7.75	5.13	6.46	–1.29
Moldova	4.25	6.00	–	+1.75
Serbia	2.50	2.88	–	+0.38

Note: Average rate at which respondents say they are 'active' members of the following organisations: religious associations, sports clubs, cultural associations, trade unions, political parties, environmental associations, professional associations, humanitarian groups.

Source: World Values Survey (2014: Waves 3, 5 and 6 [1995–1998, 2005–2008, 2010–2014]).

24.9 per 100,000 in the Southern European countries of Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. During the first decade and a half following the collapse of communism, Central Europe thus rapidly overtook Southern Europe in terms of the density of INGOs. Despite the critique that many such associations existed to absorb international grants rather than reflect citizen priorities, there is a clearly visible – and widening – gap between regions of the former communist bloc, with a clear divide emerging between post-Soviet Europe and the other former Eastern bloc countries. However, while membership of local NGOs here is negatively associated with democratisation, other measures of organisational capacity show a different result. Such a gap is also evident in other measures, such as the annual audit of civil society strength for Europe and Eurasia, the CSO Sustainability Index (USAID 2011).

Finally, even comparative survey measures of organisational strength do not paint as uniformly bleak a picture as is sometimes portrayed. Revisiting this issue with the benefit of the more recent 2005–2008 and 2010–2014 waves of the World Values Surveys, the data do not support the hypothesis that civil society has undergone any recent weakening in postcommunist Europe (Table 1). Confirming the comparison of WVS and PCOMS data in Howard's (2003) analysis, East Germany exhibits a downward shift, with a decline in organisational membership over the decade; also on a clear downtrend is Romania. On the other hand, in other cases, voluntary associational membership has clearly increased, and there is no clear pattern among postcommunist states overall. Average rates of voluntary membership have increased by a third in Ukraine and also increased substantially in Slovenia. As these changes are from a very low base, these relative shifts should not be over-interpreted; but at any rate they do not suggest widespread civic disengagement or 'stagnation' in postcommunist Europe.<sup>1</sup> Rather, they indicate a diversity of civic trajectories that is consistent with the diversity in political outcomes.

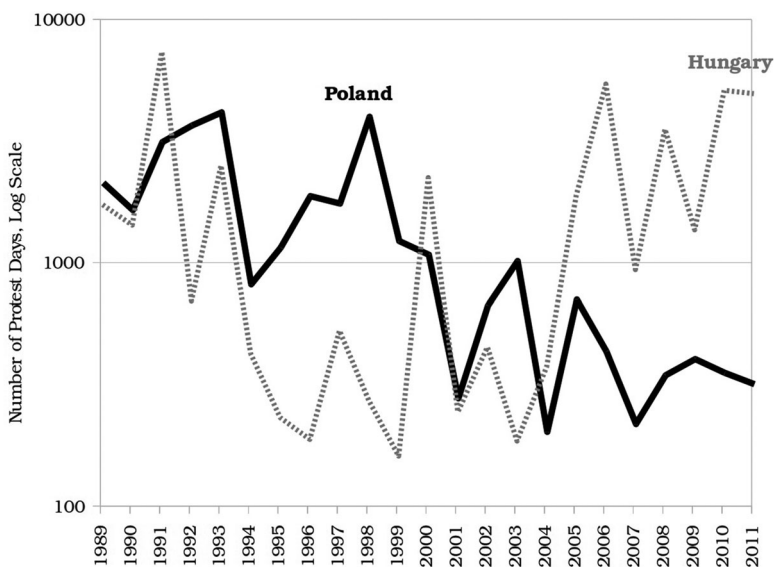


Figure 3. Protest days in Poland and Hungary, 1989–2011.

Source: Data from the project on ‘The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: Hungary, Poland, South Korea and Taiwan’, coordinated by Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik and Jason Wittenberg.

### *The behaviour of civil society actors*

Second, as observed by Bernhard and Karakoç (2007), studies of civil society have tended to focus on apolitical aspects of associational life, such as membership in voluntary organisations, to the exclusion of the active political behaviours, such as participation in demonstrations, strikes or petition, which are more directly relevant to explaining institutional outcomes. A greater focus on protest activity would also be consistent with a long tradition in behavioural political science focusing upon elite-challenging activities (Norris 1999, 2002; Dalton 2008), as well as empirical studies linking expressive values and democratic outcomes (Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

In their study of contention during initial years of political and economic transformations, Ekiert and Kubik (1998) noted striking differences among four Central European countries in number of protests sponsored by civil society organisations. They argued that while some civil societies in the region could be described as ‘accommodating’, others were clearly ‘confrontational’ and characterised by frequent strikes, demonstrations and other contentious activities. These trends tend to persist over time, suggesting that specific traits of civil society behaviour are reproduced and persist for relatively long periods. Data for contentious behaviour in Poland and Hungary illustrate well this regularity, while also showing incremental change. Poland registered an overall decline in protest activities, while Hungary shows an increase in contention after 2004 (Figure 3).

Other data suggest that participation in contentious events, such as demonstration or strikes, has fallen since the 1989–1992 period in all postcommunist countries, though this may largely reflect the unusually heightened level of contention induced by the transition



process. A de-emphasis on the more confrontational forms of civic activism is most evident in the post-Soviet countries and East Central Europe, and less so in Southeastern Europe (ILO 2013). Thus, both the least and the most democratic postcommunist countries registered the steepest drops in contention. It is also important to note that in non-democratic countries of the former Soviet bloc there are recurring waves of civil society mobilisation. So-called ‘coloured revolutions’ mark periods of the heightened political crisis usually centred around contested elections. These are cases of rapid mobilisation and emergence of civic movements that are followed by demobilisation, organisational atrophy and passivity of civil society actors (Bunce & Wolchik 2006; D’Anieri 2006; Hale 2006; Kuzio 2006). Not surprisingly, in the least democratic postcommunist countries there is a much lower level of sustainability of civic activist movements, even following the periods of significant public mobilisation.

### *The normative orientation of civil society actors*

Third, in addition to their behaviour, the values of civil society actors matter greatly in determining the political outcomes of their activities. The structural characteristics of civil society such as its density or sectoral composition are not crucial for facilitating democracy, but the goals and objectives of civil society actors are. In recognition of this, a distinction is sometimes made between liberal and ‘illiberal’ civil societies: Berman (1997) provides a notable example in the case of Weimar Germany where a dense and vibrant civil society ultimately contributed to the fall of democracy and facilitated the rise of the Nazi regime. In addition, values and preferences may determine whether civil society develops along programmatic or clientelistic lines – that is, whether civil society organisations exist to defend citizen rights, work for public good and advance the rule of law and democratic process, or simply as a means of extracting material rents for their leaders and members from the state and local administration (Auyero 2000; Piattoni 2001).

There is no systematic data to assess the normative orientations of civil society organisations similar to, for example, party manifestos analysis (Klingemann et al. 2006). While specific groups of organisations are commonly associated with distinct ideological positions (e.g., trade unions, NGOs or religious organisations), surveys may be the only means to assess the normative orientation of specific civil societies. One of the most longstanding indicators of the liberal commitment of civil society actors is the degree to which citizens possess a normative commitment to democracy (Almond & Verba 1963). Public opinion surveys often solicit the view whether democracy is a ‘good’, ‘very good’, ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ way to run the country (World Values Survey 2014). As Figure 4 shows, the normative commitment to democracy is evidently weak among the post-Soviet states, yet it stands almost as high in Southeastern Europe, as is the cases in Southern and Western Europe. Central Europe, meanwhile, fits somewhere in-between the two. In terms of change over time, affective support for democracy has also consolidated in the post-Soviet countries, albeit from a very low starting point.

Postcommunist civil societies demonstrate stronger evidence of consolidation in the degree to which they are viewed as ‘programmatic’ in purpose and serving civic goals, rather than ‘clientelist’ and serving the needs of either donor organisations or the state. Taking the degree of trust that survey respondents express for the civil society organisations of their country, in Central Europe, the public’s evaluation of the civic sector is now comparable to

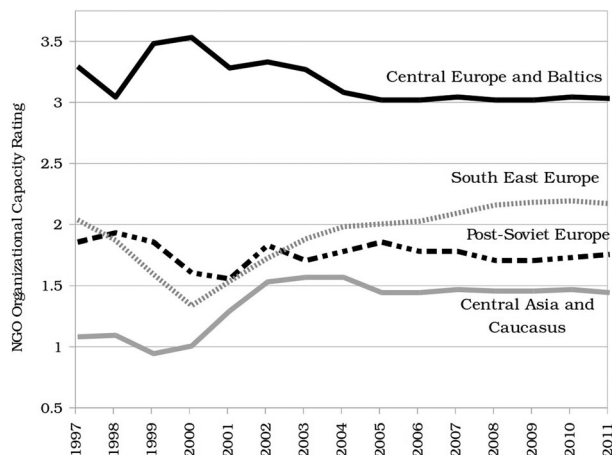


Figure 4. NGO sustainability index, 1997–2011.

Source: CSO Sustainability Index, USAID. Country coding: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia (Central Europe and Baltics); Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia (South East Europe); Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan (Central Asia); Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine (Post-Soviet Europe).

that found in Southern and Western Europe, and notably ahead of either the Balkans or Central Asia, where clientelism and cooptation may be greater (Figure 5).

### *The public sphere*

Finally, while constitutional guarantees of rights and freedoms are critical to new democracies and post-transition countries and are reflected in various comparative rankings (Bertelsmann Foundation 2012; Freedom House 2014), empirical research on postcommunist civil society has paid little attention to the ‘public sphere’, understood as the discursive space in which individuals and groups can discuss matters of collective interest and, where possible, reach common accord on important public matters (Habermas 1989 [1962]; Clemens 2010). Calhoun (1993) characterises the public sphere as ‘an arena for debating possible social arrangements’ without which the citizen ‘lacks opportunities for participation in collective choice, whether about specific policy issues or basic institutions’. We may expect the quality and consolidation of the public sphere to play a particularly important role in conditions such as those faced by postcommunist regimes, where the success of transition depends on the ability of citizens to understand the new ‘rules of the game’, including voting rules, the platforms of the major political parties, the process of privatisation and new citizen rights granted constitutionally.

A sense of the extent of civic debate and exchange is given by examining indicators of the strength of the public sphere, such as the per capita rate of daily newspaper circulation, or the proportion of the public who consider themselves to be ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ interested in politics (respectively, UNESCO and the World Values Surveys). With regard to newspaper circulation, some parts of the postcommunist space, such as Central Europe and the Baltic states, fare substantially better than the Southern European states of Italy, Spain, Portugal

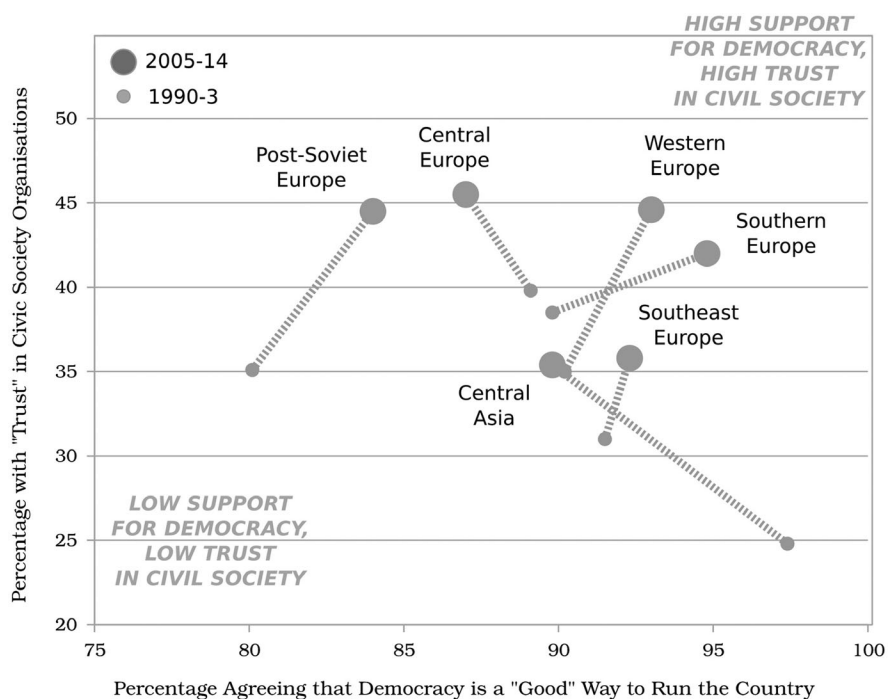


Figure 5. Changing civic attitudes, shift from early 1990s to 2005–2014.

Source: Survey items from the European and World Values Surveys, Waves 2–6, 1990–2014.

and Greece, which are in turn comparable with post-Soviet Europe and substantially better than Central Asia. Looking at the data for self-reported interest in politics, postcommunist civil societies even appear to be in the lead, as the sub-region with the highest level of political interest is Central Europe and the Baltic states, followed secondly by Western Europe. Notably, in all postcommunist regions, political interest is greater than in the Southern European states of Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. While political interest appears to have declined since the heady years of the transition, it is notable that levels remain comparable to those of Western Europe.

Measures of cognitive mobilisation therefore do not indicate any deficiency in postcommunist Europe. Indeed, even the earliest wave of the World Values Surveys, conducted before the transition during 1982 in communist Hungary and in 1984 in a sample site in Soviet Russia, show an equally strong commitment to political debate, suggesting that the high levels of media consumption and political interest are reflective of a deeper tendency in the former communist bloc. At that time, the proportion claiming to be ‘very’ or ‘quite’ interested in politics was also exceptionally high: 66 per cent in Hungary and 61 per cent in the Soviet Union. For comparison, the most recent figures are 37 per cent in both France and Italy, and 44 per cent in the United Kingdom. In addition, for the Hungarian survey, the public were also asked how often they spent discussing politics with their friends, to which 67.8 per cent claimed to hold such discussions on a ‘frequent’ or ‘occasional’ basis. This would suggest that far from exhibiting political disillusionment or withdrawal, ‘cognitive mobilisation’ was already a feature of the late communist era and has

survived into the transition period. Contingent aspects of the communist experience may explain why the initial level was much higher than in the West, including the legacy of mass literacy or the confrontation with an official ideology, yet suggest little evidence of uniform weakness or political disengagement.

### **Estimating the impact of civil society on democratic consolidation**

Does it matter that previous studies of civil society have tended to focus largely on narrow measures of declared membership in voluntary associations at the expense of other dimensions of civil society structure and activity? We believe that it does. Having noticed the variation in the organisation and strength of civil society across postcommunist countries on a range of dimensions, we here show how variation in democratic transition outcomes can be explained by initial variation in civic strength, reporting a series of cross-national time-series regressions in which we use as our dependent variable the level of democracy, and as our independent variables, a battery of civil society indicators, socioeconomic controls and the dependent variable for democracy lagged by ten years, or two five-year panels ( $t_2$ ).

As a dependent variable, we use the combined score of the Freedom House indices for political rights and civil liberties, which are then inverted to produce a 12-point scale ranging from 2 (full dictatorship) to 14 (full democracy). Panels are arranged on a five-year basis, with independent variables set to a lag of ten years to reflect the realistic duration required for social changes to exhibit an effect upon political institutions. The lagged dependent variable, the country's Freedom House score from ten years prior, is included, as the extent of earlier liberalisation will naturally determine the trajectory of future reform, and we wish to control for potential endogeneity between earlier democratisation and the existing development of civil society. Second, we include a control for log gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, again lagged by ten years, for the earliest studies have shown a significant positive effect of economic development upon the emergence of democracy as well as the likelihood of adverse shifts away from democratic government (Przeworski & Limongi 1997). A control is also included for ethnolinguistic and religious fractionalisation, taken from the Alesina et al. (2003) dataset, which has been widely argued to affect the likelihood of successful transition (Horowitz 1993). We then include each of four measures of civil society development, lagged by ten years – an index of protest behaviour taken from the World Values Survey; membership of voluntary organisations, again, taken from the World Values Survey; an index of the strength of the public sphere (combining daily newspaper circulation per 1,000 with the surveyed level of 'interest in politics'); and connections to international NGOs from the *Civil Society Yearbook* (London School of Economics 2003; World Values Surveys 2014). Dummy variables for geographic regions (as defined by World Bank classifications) and for postcommunist European Union accession are also included.

In order to show that civic legacies have patterned democratisation in the postcommunist world as they have done elsewhere, regressions are conducted across three sub-samples of the data: first, across countries experiencing democratic transition; second, across all countries; and third, across ex-communist regimes only. We present these sequentially. First, Table 2 shows results from an initial set of models, in which we restrict the sample to all polities in which there was a movement from 'not free' to either 'party free' or 'free' on

Table 2. Cross-national times-series regressions (1) on democracy: All countries experiencing regime transitions, 1989–2005 (dependent variable: combined Freedom House score for political rights and civil liberties [2–14, with 14 = full democracy])

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Combined Freedom House score, lagged (10-year)	0.496*** (0.061)	0.512*** (0.056)	0.457*** (0.073)	0.533*** (0.054)	0.391*** (0.082)
Voluntary associational memberships, lagged (10-year)	0.9 (1.589)	–	–	–	–0.292 (2.353)
Newspaper circulation/Interest in politics, lagged (10-year)	–	0.694* (0.278)	–	–	0.55+ (0.303)
Participation in boycotts, petitions and demonstrations, lagged (10-year)	–	–	0.7** (0.228)	–	0.531* (0.26)
INGO density, lagged (10-year)	–	–	–	0.298+ (0.166)	0.098 (0.195)
Log GDP per capita, lagged (10-year)	0.567* (0.239)	0.033 (0.217)	0.461 (0.311)	0.125 (0.198)	0.458 (0.363)
Ethnic-religious fractionalisation	0.786* (0.326)	0.045 (0.302)	0.518 (0.398)	0.46+ (0.269)	0.435 (0.419)
Middle East and North Africa	–0.684 (0.599)	–0.544 (0.567)	–0.504 (0.614)	–0.429 (0.59)	–0.704 (0.702)
Latin America and Caribbean	1.575** (0.513)	2.24*** (0.562)	1.722** (0.533)	1.937*** (0.537)	2.143** (0.712)
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.796 (0.528)	0.943+ (0.507)	0.272 (0.628)	0.429 (0.479)	0.669 (0.861)
South Asia	–0.138 (0.844)	0.411 (0.757)	0.037 (0.806)	0.04 (0.716)	0.059 (0.846)
East Asia and Pacific	2.006** (0.66)	1.91** (0.616)	2.355*** (0.672)	1.677** (0.606)	2.262* (0.889)
European Union accession	3.215*** (0.55)	3.402*** (0.594)	2.874*** (0.558)	3.73*** (0.605)	2.729*** (0.625)

Notes: Five-year panels. Base region (excluded) is the ex-communist region. \*\*\* Significant at the 0.001 level; \*\* significant at the 0.01 level; \* significant at the 0.05 level; + significant at the 0.1 level.

the Freedom House indices during the period 1980–2010. Our guiding hypothesis is that liberalisation of autocratic regimes often begins with the initiative of reformist elites, but after this point, there is an opening in which civil society can help facilitate a transition to fully democratic rule: where civil society is sufficiently robust, such a transition ought to be more likely; where, by contrast, civil society groups are co-opted, clientelistic or simply absent, popular pressure upon reforming elites to deliver further liberalisation is weaker (Przeworski 1991).

The coefficients in Table 2 indicate that membership of voluntary associations – the most popular measure of civil society strength – is not a significant predictor of democratic transition. Indeed the size of the coefficient does not exceed the standard error, and is negative when included with other civil society variables (model 5). On the other hand, all of our supplementary measures of civic strength are significant predictors of the degree of a country's democratic transition. Consistent with the recent focus of behavioural political science upon protest activity (Norris 2002; Dalton 2008), civic participation in protest strongly predicts successful democratic consolidation, both uniquely (model 3) and in combination with other civil society indicators (model 5). Meanwhile, consistent with the arguments of Paxton (2002) and Levitsky and Way (2006), the density of international civic activism also predicts future democratic consolidation (model 4). Following the results of the regressions, a one-standard deviation increase in protest behaviour at  $t_{-1}$  is associated with a 0.7-point increase on the 12-point Freedom House scale, while a one standard deviation increase in initial INGO participation is associated with as much as a 0.298-point increase in subsequent democratic consolidation. Public information (newspaper circulation and interest in politics) is also a significant predictor of subsequent successful transition (model 2).

It is possible that in choosing to select only countries undergoing regime transition, the regressions in Table 2 introduce sample bias, particularly if there are either authoritarian regimes or failing democracies that possess strong civil institutions. Table 3 therefore shows results from the second of these three sets of models, conducted across the entire sample of countries for which there is available data, including both consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes which have not experienced transition.

Once again, participation in protest activities, such as petition, boycott and demonstration, continues to predict successful democratic consolidation, both uniquely (model 8) and in combination with other civil society indicators (model 10). The coefficient for INGO density (model 9) here is more significant than in the reduced-sample regressions of Table 2, which may reflect the fact that in many low-income emerging democracies, such as Rwanda or South Sudan, INGOs are the only effective agencies engaged in monitoring respect for human rights and accountability in government (Levitsky & Way 2006). The coefficient for voluntary associational activity is also positive and significant here (model 6).

Finally, it might be argued that the attributes requisite for democratic transition are conditional upon the attributes of the former regime, and specifically upon whether we are treating a transition from communist rule or from some other form of authoritarianism. Because transition from communism is a dual transition that requires the development not only of a democratic polity, but also of a viable market economy, certain kinds of civic organisation (e.g., NGOs involved in providing micro-finance to small businesses or expertise in business administration) may have a particular role to play in ensuring the

Table 3. Cross-national times-series regressions (2): All countries, 1989–2005 (dependent variable: combined Freedom House score for political rights and civil liberties [2–14, with 14 = full democracy])

	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Combined Freedom House score, lagged (10-year)	0.619*** (0.045)	0.687*** (0.037)	0.538*** (0.054)	0.672*** (0.036)	0.457*** (0.062)
Voluntary associational memberships, lagged (10-year)	2.222* (1.05)	–	–	–	1.267 (1.334)
Newspaper circulation/Interest in politics, lagged (10-year)	–	0.388* (0.15)	–	–	0.068 (0.303)
Participation in boycotts, petitions and demonstrations, lagged (10-year)	–	–	0.699*** (0.163)	–	0.542** (0.187)
INGO density, lagged (10-year)	–	–	–	0.401*** (0.107)	0.248+ (0.132)
Log GDP per capita, lagged (10-year)	0.728*** (0.165)	0.36* (0.15)	0.705** (0.217)	0.414** (0.14)	0.69** (0.224)
Ethnic-religious fractionalisation	0.487* (0.219)	0.06 (0.191)	0.475* (0.226)	0.243 (0.174)	0.441+ (0.236)
Middle East and North Africa	–1.354** (0.41)	–0.265** (0.389)	–0.657 (0.422)	–0.194*** (0.359)	–1.165* (0.456)
Latin America and Caribbean	0.472 (0.318)	0.503 (0.328)	0.982** (0.347)	0.674* (0.29)	0.889* (0.375)
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.425 (0.395)	0.187 (0.37)	0.093 (0.478)	0.1 (0.339)	–0.162 (0.532)
South Asia	–0.049 (0.613)	0.245 (0.516)	0.323 (0.573)	0.02 (0.49)	–0.045 (0.586)
East Asia and Pacific	0.291 (0.412)	–0.162 (0.364)	0.836* (0.419)	0.113 (0.333)	0.576 (0.447)
European Union accession	1.884*** (0.323)	1.63*** (0.332)	1.862*** (0.28)	1.951*** (0.333)	1.961*** (0.3)
Constant	–3.165*	0.275	–1.794	–0.564	–1.032

Notes: Five-year panels. Base region (excluded) is the ex-communist region. \*\*\* Significant at the 0.001 level; \*\* significant at the 0.01 level; \* significant at the 0.05 level; + significant at the 0.1 level.

Table 4. Cross-national times-series regressions (2) on democracy: Ex-communist regimes only, 1989–2005 (dependent variable: Combined Freedom House score for political rights and civil liberties [2–14, with 14 = full democracy])

	(11)	(12)	(13)
Combined Freedom House score, lagged (10-year)	0.783*** (0.133)	0.695*** (0.085)	0.733*** (0.09)
Voluntary associational memberships, lagged (10-year)	–1.866 (1.644)	–2.4 <sup>+</sup> (1.279)	–2.337 <sup>+</sup> (1.356)
Newspaper circulation/Interest in politics, lagged (10-year)	–0.227 (0.487)	–	–
Participation in boycotts, petitions and demonstrations, lagged (10-year)	1.114* (0.484)	1.286** (0.377)	1.287** (0.386)
INGO density, lagged (10-year)	–0.245 (0.24)	–	–
Log GDP per capita, lagged (10-year)	0.257 (0.62)	–	–
Ethnic-religious fractionalisation	0.465 (0.874)	–	–0.11 (0.635)
Years under communist rule (0–74)	–0.04 <sup>+</sup> (0.023)	–0.034 <sup>+</sup> (0.018)	–0.027 (0.021)
Constant	3.324 (5.718)	6.667*** (1.463)	6.01*** (1.611)
N	61	68	65
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.681	0.668	0.682

Notes: Five-year panels. \*\*\* Significant at the 0.001 level; \*\* significant at the 0.01 level; \* significant at the 0.05 level; <sup>+</sup> significant at the 0.1 level.

viability of the consolidation process. Table 4 reports results conducted just across the sample of former communist regimes, following the same model specifications as those of earlier regressions. As almost all such regimes are in Europe and Central Asia, dummy variables for geographic zone are not included, and instead a variable is included for the number of years spent under communist rule, which some scholars have suggested is an important explanation for variation in postcommunist civic cultures (Darden & Grzymala-Busse 2006; Bernhard & Karakoç 2007).

Across the sub-sample of former communist states, we find again that participation in boycotts, petitions and demonstrations are significantly positively associated with future levels of democracy, whereas membership of local voluntary associations has a significant yet negative association (models 11 and 12). The size of the coefficient estimates is broadly comparable to earlier models; restricting to the sub-sample of former communist regimes, however, reduces their significance by inflating standard errors. Initial levels of INGO density and newspaper circulation are less useful in predicting transition in postcommunist cases than among transitional regimes more generally (Table 2) due to an absence of INGOs and uniform newspaper circulation at the outset of transition, though, civic trajectories have diverged after this point. Finally, consistent with the arguments of Bernhard and Karakoç (2007) and Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006), the amount of time spent under communist rule predicts success or failure at democratic transition, though, only weakly ( $p < 0.1$ ) after inclusion of civic variables.



These coefficients imply that the focus of the weakness of civil society literature upon levels of membership in voluntary association is not only limited in its understanding of civil society, but also misguided in its implications for democratic consolidation across the region. The non-robust and sometimes negative effect of voluntary membership upon democratic transition shows that it is not ‘social capital’ *per se* that is beneficial for democracy, but rather, the kinds of civic behaviour which reinforce the support for and functioning of democratic institutions, such as protests which ensure political accountability, or the connections to international civil society which ensure the transmission of liberal norms, the monitoring of human rights and the financial resources that allow civic organisations to provide an effective check upon the behaviour of elected politicians and salaried public officials (Berman 1997; Inglehart et al. 2005). In these regards, as we have seen, there is variation across the postcommunist space such that in a number of regions, in particular Central Europe, Southeastern Europe and the Baltic states, civil society actors do have the resources and structures necessary for making democracy work.

### **Conclusion: Civil societies in postcommunist Europe**

Though the collapse of communism may seem a relatively recent event, it is now further behind us than was the collapse of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy when Almond and Verba published *The Civic Culture* in 1963. Today, as then, we are faced with the same paradox: the persistence of democratic institutions in the face of apparently weak participation in civil society organisations registered by survey data. Just as Almond and Verba distinguished different dimensions of civic orientation, we suggest that scholars should take into account different dimensions and measures of civil society. As a result, postcommunist civil societies do not appear as uniformly feeble. Some possess vigorous public spheres and an active associational life, with civil society actors influencing policy outcomes on local and national levels. Moreover, after examining the different dimensions of civil society organisation and behaviour we find no evidence of deterioration over time as the decline of older organisational forms is balanced by the arrival of new organisations and expanding ties to international civil society.

By pursuing a multidimensional strategy for analysing the constitution of civil society and civic behaviour – that is, by measuring organisation and behaviour of civil society actors along a range of different dimensions and using a range of different sources rather than by a single concept or instrument, such as the number of voluntary associations – we have been able to present a picture of postcommunist civil society that is more complex and more interesting than that represented by earlier literature. It is evident by the extent to which prior studies of civil society have tended to be narrowly focused on just one dimension of civic life – typically membership in voluntary organisation – and on a limited set of data sources – typically public opinion surveys. Furthermore, we are forced to abandon any simplistic generalisations regarding the ‘weakness’ of postcommunist civil society or its ‘demobilisation’ following democratic transition as many individual indicators tell a contrary story.

By consequence, we can begin to resolve some of the paradoxes highlighted at the start of this article. The seemingly strong, active and mobilised civic movements of the transition period did not become weak after democracy was established, but rather have

subsided into more routinised forms of organisation, representation, contention and political debate. The associational structures of the communist era have indeed somewhat weakened, but they are still there, and are being steadily supplemented with new domestic and international organisation, networks and ties. And the diverging political trajectories across the postcommunist space do indeed reflect different civic endowments at the start of the transition era, but these civic legacies should be understood multidimensionally in terms of the public space, normative orientations, modes of behaviour, and organisational structure that different parts of the postcommunist space have inherited from their past and modes of transition. Interestingly, the pattern of institutional performance and civil society organisation and behaviour in the Europe of the first decades of the twenty-first century, resulting from this analysis, bears some resemblance to that in the Europe of the first decades of the twentieth century (Ekiert & Ziblatt 2013). And as the experience of communism is succeeded by new processes of European integration and development of transnational civil society, this legacy will be increasingly submerged under new patterns of civic and associational life, different again from both the recent and distant historical record; such that the term ‘post-communist’ will become steadily redundant as a means of describing political reality.

If the analysis of this article shows that civil society legacies matter in postcommunist Europe, this carries important implications for emerging democracies more broadly across the world. Contrary to the ‘weakness of postcommunist civic society’ literature, Central and Southeastern European countries entered the transition era with robust civic institutions, and have maintained their lead. Meanwhile, in the post-Soviet zone, average indicators are comparable to those found in many Latin American and Asian societies. That democratic transition has largely been maintained in Central and Southeastern Europe, yet stalled in other postcommunist regions, shows that there were no ‘short cuts’ to democracy. Civic legacies made possible democratic transition in postcommunist Europe, and regardless of the policies of external actors, will prove the ultimate precondition for success, or failure, at attempts at democratic transition elsewhere.

## Note

1. However, in accordance with the view that totalitarian societies were particularly devastating in terms of their impact upon ‘private’ civic life involving religious, recreational or social activities, the areas of civic association which have seen the fastest recovery in the postcommunist era are precisely in apolitical organisations such as sports clubs, cultural groups and (apart from Romania) religious organisations.

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