Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe – Poland in A Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

The condition and role of civil society in East Central Europe after 1989 is one of the most misunderstood aspects of post-communist transformations. The prevailing wisdom has it that the decades of communist rule destroyed foundations of civic life, dramatically diminished the capacity of the civic sphere to regenerate itself, and as a result civil society – conventionally seen as an indispensable pillar of a democratic system – has been too weak to play any significant role in shaping emerging democracy and market economy or prevent authoritarian reversals. Thus, the countries that managed to successfully democratize have done so through reforms from above, supported by powerful international actors, and without any significant input from civil society.

Ralf Dahrendorf formulated the most influential version of this argument when shortly after the revolutions of 1989 he famously quipped: "It takes six months to create new political institutions, to write a constitution and electoral laws. It may take six years to create a half-viable economy. It will probably take sixty years to create civil society. Autonomous institutions are the hardest to bring about" (Dahrendorf 1990: 42). Dahrendorf's claim was startlingly provocative, since the 1989 collapse of communist regimes was seen at that time as a heroic victory of civil society over the ossified and repressive party states. Communism disappeared not because of a defeat in a war, but was smashed by citizen movements animated by liberal ideas and longing for political and civic rights only democracy can guarantee. And yet Dahrendorf's thesis took hold.

Paradoxically, as many of the post-communist polities have been becoming more democratic and liberal, complaints about the weakness of their civil societies have been growing louder (Howard 2003; Celichowski 2004; Sissenich 2007; Bernhard and Karakoc 2007).

Most of the early empirical comparative research on civil society reaffirmed the Dahrendorf thesis. Moreover, the thesis has quickly acquired the status of received wisdom applicable to all societies and countries that emerged from the communist rule. This view persisted despite the existing evidence of considerable variance in political, economic, and social outcomes across the region, including the growing disparity in the condition of civil society (see below). The systemic weakness of postcommunist civil societies has been demonstrated mostly through an analysis of several cross-national surveys of attitudes: the World Value Survey and similar cross-European surveys. This is surprising since there is a wide range of other data that is easily available and can shed light on civil society development and transformations, such as public opinion surveys on volunteering and membership in civil society organizations conducted at the national level, registers of organizations, expert assessments, protest event analysis, and case studies. Taken together, these sources make it possible to assess the state of civil society – most importantly its activities across the region – with greater precision than cross-national surveys of attitudes alone.[1] As David Kertzer (1988: 68) once noted: "socially and politically speaking, we are what we do, not what we think."

In this chapter, we will make a number of interconnected claims that challenge the prevailing wisdom according to which the state of civil society is more or less uniform in the whole region and it is uniformly weak.[2] This diagnosis is based on four errors: (1) it

underestimates the significance of legacies of communist associationism in at least some countries of the region, (2) it minimizes the differences between the countries, (3) it does not pay enough attention to the changing nature of post-communist civil societies over time, and (4) it relies on limited and questionably empirical evidence. There is no room here to offer full empirical support for our arguments regarding the whole region, so we will illustrate our points with selected data from Poland. Since Poland had a specific crisis-driven trajectory and powerful tradition of protest under the communist rule, it is often conceived as a unique or exceptional case. In our view, however, the developments in Poland tend to reveal and magnify the phenomena and trends common to a subset of countries located in Central Europe. These countries have become even more similar to each other over the last two decades or so, following the fall of state socialism, as they have experienced massive institutional transformations and standardization as a result of accession to the European Union.[3]

This chapter is organized in three sections. First, we analyze the origin of post-communist civil societies, emphasizing the communist legacy and focusing mostly on Poland.[4] Second, we explore differences among really existing civil societies in the region along several crucial dimensions. In the conclusion, we challenge three "myths" about civil society in post-communism and assess the role of civil societies in democratization. We also provide our answers to some pressing questions of the day concerning the role of civil society in undermining the authoritarian rule and in facilitating the regime change, as well as the impact of civil society on the policies of governments and the quality of democracy, particularly after the regime change.

Origin of post-communist civil societies: inheritance, organizational expansion and recombination

Post-communist countries did not inherit from the old regime a civil society. Yet, they inherited – particularly Poland – a comprehensive and solidly institutionalized associational sphere. It included powerful trade unions and professional organizations, organized churches, and organizational representations of various groups and interests, including the youth, farmers, veterans, consumers, women, or ecologists. There were also recreational, cultural and leisure organizations, sports clubs, and many others. These organizations had large membership, massive resources, national headquarters and local branches across the country, and professional personnel with considerable organizational skills.

State-socialist countries had a distinct (politicized, bureaucratized, centralized, and comprehensive) regime of associational life that recognized and institutionalized diversity of interests. In fact, the existence of such a regime was a defining element of totalitarianism (and post-totalitarianism) and constituted one of the most fundamental institutional differences between the communist Eastern Europe and other regions or countries dominated by different authoritarian regimes (Riley and Fernández 2014). Since 1960s, mass organizations controlled by the communists became less ideological and somewhat effective "interest groups" able to lobby the party-state and extract from it various economic concessions for their members, especially in the more pragmatic and reformist countries, such as Hungary and Poland. In orthodox Czechoslovakia and East Germany or semi-totalitarian Romania and Albania these organizations still served as traditional "transmission belts" and their autonomy and capacity to represent interests

were seriously constrained. This diversity of inherited practices, which had evolved along a distinct trajectory in each country, despite the common "communist" institutional form, is one of the factors explaining the broad range of post-1989 real civil societies in the region.

The associational sphere in communist Poland underwent the deepest transformations in the region. It became gradually more diverse, less controlled by the communist state, and even more pluralistic, particularly after 1956 (Ekiert 1996; Ekiert and Kubik 1999). Poland also experienced a number of political crises involving significant mobilization from below by various segments of society (workers, students, intellectuals, peasants, Catholics), culminating in the emergence in 1980 of the massive Solidarity movement and its suppression in 1981. As a result, the associational landscape of Poland was not populated exclusively by centralized mass organizations. Some pre-communist civil society traditions and even organizations (mostly in the realm of leisure, education, and culture) survived under communist rule, especially at the local level (Kurczewska 2004; Gąsior-Niemiec and Gliński 2007). They served as semi-official carriers of local traditions and provided modicum of public space somewhat sheltered from direct political interference of the communist party. Moreover, the powerful Polish Catholic church secured considerable autonomy and supported various movements and organizations. Thus, by mid-1980s, Poland had what can be described as *incomplete civil society* with a relatively numerous and a dense structure of organizations at various levels and in all functional domains. This incipient civil society was incomplete for it did not have much autonomy and was not ensconced in a legally delineated public space, protected by enforceable rights and liberties. Several other communist countries

(Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia and the Baltic states) had smaller dissident sectors of informal/oppositional/independent political, religious and cultural movements and organizations alongside the communist controlled formal associations.

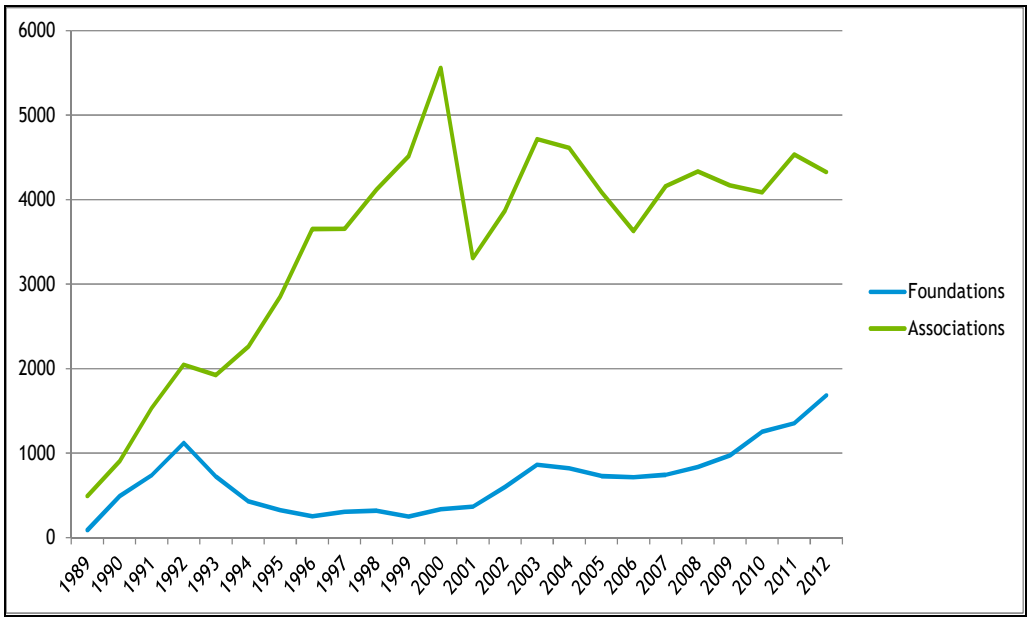
These organizational resources, both formal and informal, provided a foundation for the reformulation of civil society after 1989, as many associations previously controlled by the communist party instituted complex and, by and large, successful reforms that allowed them to adapt to new democratic conditions. They often lost a significant portion of their members and resources, frequently split into smaller organizations, and changed their names, leaders and agendas. Yet, many of these organizations survived transition to democracy and managed to protect most of the resources they had had before 1989.

More importantly, the collapse of communism spawned the organizational revolution within the domain of civil society, often initiated and sustained by generous international assistance. In the midst of mass political mobilization associated with regime change scores of new movements and organizations burst onto the public stage. These newcomers appeared mostly in sectors disallowed under communism (such as NGOs, charities or foundations), but quite a few entered the existing sectors and began competing directly with the inherited organizations (independent trade unions or new professional associations). Many of these organizations failed to secure resources and attract members and disappeared as quickly as they emerged, especially in the sectors of civil society where they faced competition from the former communist era organizations.

After 1989 the number of civil society organizations has been growing rapidly across the region and it has been particularly impressive in Poland. As figure 1 shows,

some 4000 new NGOs and some 1000 foundations have been registered on average every year.

Figure 1: Number of new associations (green) and foundations (blue) registered every year in Poland: 1989-2012 (Source: Przewłocka et al. 2013: 27)



Moreover, Polish civil society emerged as a highly diverse space representing all interests, ideological orientations and organizational forms. Its organizational growth has been balanced across all sectors of civil society. While the most spectacular growth was observed in the NGO sector, other sectors also show clear gains. Polish civil society organizations are also well distributed geographically (only 24% of all organizations are based in large cities while 20% are active in villages), and many tend to be equally dynamic on the national and local levels. The sector of NGOs and foundations is clearly stronger in western and northern Poland, while voluntary fire brigades and religious organizations are more prevalent in central and eastern parts of the country (Przewłocka

et al. 2013: 29-31). These two types of civic activity correspond, arguably, to two different forms of civicness: one more "modern" (NGOs), the other more "traditional" (voluntary fire brigades and religious organizations). It is not clear that one is "better" than other, though the literature on civil society clearly privileges the former. What we have here is not the problem of *inequality in civicness*, but rather *two different types of civic cultures* mediated by different organizational vehicles and embedded in different normative orientations. This picture of organizational effervescence is generally similar in other countries of Central Europe (Mansfeldova et al. 2004; Nagy and Sebesteny 2008; Kuti 2010).

Yet, the differences in timing, rates of emergence, and sectoral composition of civil societies across the region have been considerable. They reflect – first of all – the political conditions in each country. The organizational growth was instant and most dynamic in countries that experienced early and successful transition to democracy. In the authoritarian post-communist countries the associational revolution was either comparatively smaller or nearly absent. Today, it is estimated that Russia has around 226,000 registered NGOs, while Belarus has 2,600, Uzbekistan – "unknown," and Turkmenistan - 100 (NGO Law Monitor).

The revamping of legal and regulatory foundations of civil society was crucial as well. In the 1990s, all countries of East Central Europe began a major overhaul of legislation pertaining to rights of assembly, freedom of association, public gatherings, non-profit status, etc., in order to create a civil society friendly legal environment. Major legislative acts were introduced in rapid succession and were changed and amended frequently. In Poland fundamental guaranties of freedom of assembly and associations

were secured in 1989 and 1990 and enshrined in the 1997 Constitution. The acts regulating civil society activities inherited from the old regime were amended and new legislation relating to charitable activities and volunteering was introduced, creating civil society friendly legal environment and financial incentives. Similarly, Hungary had eight major legislative acts regulating functioning of foundations between 1987 and 2003. By 2003 there were 19,700 foundations in Hungary, but only 363 in Czech Republic the country of similar size and level of development (Lagerspetz and Skovajsa 2006). This difference reflects the different requirements and incentives provided by law in these two countries. In contrast to the developments in Central Europe, in the authoritarian countries the legal rules were used to restrict the public space and curtail activities of civil society organizations. The recent changes in registration procedures and restrictions on financing civil society organizations from abroad in Russia illustrate well this trend (Chebankova 2013; Greene 2014).

In organizational terms civil society in Poland and civil societies of other Central European countries are dense, diverse and not significantly different from civil societies in some established European democracies.[5] Yet, differences between new member states of EU and other postcommunist countries, particularly the post-Soviet states are massive. In authoritarian countries such as Belarus the inherited associational sector is dominant while the emergence of new organizations is highly constrained. Similarly, the level of institutionalization of the new civil society sectors varies. In fully consolidated democracies civil societies are highly institutionalized and enjoy the legal protections, but in authoritarian and hybrid regimes new civil society operates more as a "dissident" social movement network that is mobilized in response to major state violations of legal

or electoral rules, or governmental efforts to change existing regulation in a more authoritarian direction. So-called "color revolutions" that occurred in several countries or the recent wave of protests in Russia and Bulgaria are good examples.

In sum, the actual emergence of post-communist civil societies has been a combination of two processes: the institutional adjustment within the inherited associational sphere and the emergence of the new organizations and sectors. These two developments, rapid and sustained in some countries such as Poland and rather anemic in others, resulted in the *recombined civil societies.* Their features in each country are shaped by the type, speed and outcome of democratization, but also by specific institutional incentives and historical traditions. Thus, the claim that postcommunist civil societies had to be created from scratch, in all their dimensions, is obviously incorrect. On the other hand, the conversion pattern of the inherited sector of civil society and robustness of organizational effervescence has shaped divergent trajectories of civil society developments across the postcommunist world.

Post-communist civil society – one or many?

Jacques Rupnik once noted that: "the word 'postcommunism' lost its relevance. The fact that Hungary and Albania, or Czech Republic and Belarus, or Poland and Kazakhstan shared a communist past explains very little about the paths that they have taken since" (Rupnik 1999: 57). This observation applies to the civil society sphere as well. Civil societies in the post-communist world differ along several dimensions and this diversity is shaped by a variety of factors (Ekiert and Foa 2012). One of these conditions is the country-specific communist inheritance in the associational sphere and uneven intensity

of organizational effervescence that followed the collapse of communist rule discussed above. Post-communist countries differ also due to the different historical traditions of civil society, dating back to their emergence as nation states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, differences in civil society's density among European countries must be at least partially attributed to their specific cultural traditions and legal regulations and cannot be derived solely from the characteristics of their previous political regimes. Finally, civil societies are shaped by increasingly divergent contemporary political conditions. Thus, post-communism produced an entire range of civil society types, some of which are assertive and robust while others are anemic and severely constrained by their respective states.

In contrast to studies of public opinion, evaluations produced by expert panels emphasize considerable variance in civil society condition and capacity across the post-communist region. The World Bank Governance Index shows that in the new members of the EU – particularly in Estonia, Poland, and Slovenia – civil society's organizational composition and its role in providing citizens with voice and the capacity to make their states increasingly accountable is not much worse than in Western Europe. It is actually better than in some, e.g. Italy and Greece (World Bank 2013). USAID 2012 report on the sustainability of civil society organizations also documents diverse and diverging paths of civil society development. The ex-communist members of European Union score on average 2.7, with Estonia (2.0), Poland (2.2), and Czech Republic (2.6) leading the pack. The countries of Eurasia (Russia, West NIS, and Caucasus) score 4.4, and the five states of Central Asia score, on average, 5.0 (The 2012 CSO). Freedom House's experts rating the strength of civil society on a scale ranging from 1 to 7 confirm growing

diversification in the region. The average score for new EU members in 2012 was 1.95, with *Poland achieving the highest result of 1.50*. For the Balkans the average score was 3.04, and for the Eurasian States – 5.28, with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan sharing the dubious privilege of achieving the lowest possible grade of 7 (Freedom House 2013).[6]

In short, a systematic comparison of really existing post-communist civil societies shows different patterns of transformation, diverging paths of organizational expansion, and growing intra-regional disparities. These civil societies differ from each other along at least four crucial dimensions:

- Constitution of public space and the access of civil society organizations to policy making
- Forms of civil society, its composition and organization
- Patterns of civil society's behavior
- Dominant normative orientation of civil society actors

Constitution of public space

The constitution of public space in a given country is determined by many factors, among which the relationship between civil society and the state is most important. The state and its agencies define the parameters of public space by issuing laws, building (or not) institutions, protecting or disregarding rights and liberties and implementing policies that can either constrain or empower civil society organizations. The health, composition, and capacity of civil society depend on these institutional strictures. They vary across the formerly communist space and thus generate different types of civil societies.

Although none of the postcommunist countries has a regime that prohibits all activity by autonomous organizations of civil society, some states, such as Belarus,

Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan come close to such an extreme regime type. The situation of independent civic actors in these countries resembles the period of 1970s and 1980s in Central Europe when civil society was not totally suppressed, but rather severely constrained and repressed by "friendly" means. In fact, these countries have an incomplete "dissident" civil society, resembling the pre-1989 situation in Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary.

A less extreme authoritarian condition exists in several other countries of the region. There, civil society organizations are allowed to exist, but their activities are subjected to arbitrary restrictions. Some organizations, especially newly created NGOs are marginalized while others (often with ex-communist pedigree) are rewarded with special relations with the state, including state financing. So, state corporatism – combined with arbitrary restrictions of specific civil society sectors in such areas as registration procedures, funding, types of activity allowed, and international contacts – is the norm. In Russia, for example, such restrictions have been increasingly severe even though, as several authors argue, the Russian civil society is far from being dead, as evidenced by persistent protest waves of the last several years (Aron 2013; Beissinger and Sasse 2013; Greene 2014; Smyth et al. 2013).

Finally, in the countries that entered the European Union, the rule of law protects civil society actors and their actions quite effectively and civil society organizations are often supported and financed by the state and external sources. In general, the situation in Central Europe is not that different from the situation in quite a few established democracies of the "Western" part of the continent. In many new member states, certainly in Poland, civil society organizations are formally incorporated into policy

decision-making and governance, especially at the local level. These organizations are also routinely involved in lobbing and sometimes engage in contentious actions to influence policy making both locally and nationally, although their effectiveness still does not match that of their counterparts in Western Europe (Gąsior-Niemiec 2010; Petrova 2007).

The diversity in constitution of public space in the postcommunist world is well documented. For example, according to the Bertelsmann analysts, "association/assembly rights" are of the highest quality (scores 9-10) in all eleven ex-communist members of the EU, while all of the thirteen post-Soviet states scored only 8 or less (in the total set of 129 analyzed "transforming" countries, only 25% of them achieved the highest score of 9 or 10). Also, protection of civil rights under the rule of law is assessed to be much firmer in the seventeen countries of post-commuinist Europe than in the whole set of countries undergoing transformations (Bertelsmann 2015).[7] In 2015 Freedom House used a 16-point scale to assess "Associational and Organizational Rights" in 195 countries and 15 territories. The mean score for the 210 political units of the world was 7.34. It is much higher for the countries of East Central Europe: 11.6. It is, however, quite dismal for the post-Soviet Eurasia: 1.8.[8]

To summarize, in several post-communist countries – mostly in Central Europe – the formation of fully-fledged public spheres was possible due to the development of solid democratic guarantees of the rule of law and creation of the civil society friendly regulatory environment. In such countries civil society has become stronger, more diversified, incorporated into governance procedures, and politically consequential than in the fully or semi-authoritarian regimes, predominant among the countries that emerged

from the Soviet Union. As a result, in East Central Europe – most definitely in Poland – civil societies are secure, organizationally diverse, relatively well funded from both domestic and external sources, and effectively connected to transnational civil society networks.

Dominant forms of civil society, its composition, and organization

Although the differences in the guaranties of rights and liberties and in the predictability and friendliness of the institutional environment constitute the crucial dimension of diversity across the region, forms of civil society organization and levels of institutionalization differ as well.

Countries of East Central Europe entered regime transition with an "old fashioned" associational domain based on centralized trade unions and professional organizations embedded in state-corporatist arrangements. As noted before, the crux of the post-1989 change was the transformation of this old associational sector *combined* with the emergence of a diverse NGO sector and other social organizations prohibited by the old regime, including religious and nationalist associations. The pace and extent of this process varied significantly across the region, as the state corporatist arrangements remained influential in some countries, while in others they began to whither away.

One of the most important dimensions of civil society recasting was the waning of trade unions. Although this trend is not limited to the region, the decline of union membership in post-communist countries has been faster than in the countries of Western Europe or US. This is due to three sets of factors: country-specific, system-specific, and global. The most important factor is system-specific: the changing role of trade unions in post-transformation economies. Under state socialism, union membership was essentially

automatic, with density close to 100% as unions were charged with distributing many in-kind benefits. The high membership figures under the old regime do not indicate the ability or willingness to self-organize and engage in policy battles. It is also important to remember that the declining union membership reveals a shift from corporatist strategies of interest representation and the endorsement of a neo-liberal model by many post-communist states.

Yet, the trade union movement did not collapse entirely. While the levels of union membership in East Central Europe declined significantly over the last twenty-five years, the resultant level is not drastically different from the European average.[9] The political influence of the unions is no longer founded on mass membership, but on their organizational strength, the tradition of union-state relations, and the relationship with the parties of the left (if they are strong) (Sil 2013). Polish trade unions, for example, are numerically weak and divided, but they are vocal and sometimes quite effective in opposing changes in government welfare or labor policies. Again, the most significant dividing line across the post-communist world runs between the new EU members from East Central Europe and the majority of the post-Soviet states, but in a recent study, the Russian labor sector is shown to be more effective than it is usually assumed (Sil 2013).

The relationship between the inherited associational sphere and the new, post-transition civil society sectors is not the only source of difference between post-communist civil societies. Another is the nature of state-civil society relations. We observe here two distinct patterns: pluralist and corporatist, whose geographic distribution does not always conform to sub-regional divisions. In Central Europe, Poland is the example of predominantly pluralist relations while Slovenia and Hungary are

largely corporatist, with other countries falling between these two poles. Countries in other sub-regions, especially those with authoritarian regimes, have restored state-corporatist forms. These patterns shape the rate of organizational growth, privilege certain types of organizations, and influence forms of competition and intensity of contentiousness instigated by civil society organizations (CSOs).

Post-communist civil societies differ from each other also in terms of the form of institutionalization and the level of centralization. Persistence and relative significance of informal groups while common, is especially pronounced in less democratic and authoritarian countries. Social movements and sporadic popular mobilizations are the most consequential forms of civil society activity in such countries, while in post-communist democracies formal organizations, NGOs, unions, and professional organizations dominate. What is also common to all post-communist civil societies is the decentralization of their organizational structures and patterns of action. The fragmentation and lack of centralization, characteristic of many civil society sectors is a feature that makes the situation in post-communist countries different from the historical patterns observed in the West. This may be, however, a more general feature of contemporary civil societies, not a specific trait of post-communism.

The politics of identity penetrates post-communist civil societies unevenly. In some countries, especially those with ethnic and religious divisions, the salience of collective identity influences the matrix of civil society organizations and their activities more prominently than in others. It is reflected in a more influential role of religious or nationalistic organizations and movements and higher visibility of conflicts among organizations representing various identities. The distribution of identity-related tensions

and conflicts does not conform to sub-regional divisions. The difference between Poland and Czech Republic may be as significant as it is between Poland and Ukraine.

In sum, civil societies in post-communist countries are dissimilar and diverse, across time and space. Their structures and strategies depend on many factors, the type of political regime being most decisive. The condition of civil society in authoritarian countries such as Belarus resembles the situation known from the post-totalitarian phase of communism. There is an *official sector* of state-controlled labor unions and other mass organizations and there is a *dissident civil society* engaged in the struggle against the non-democratic regime. In the countries that entered the European Union, civil society is quite diverse and vibrant and not much different from its counterparts in many countries of the old EU. But even there civil society has several features that may be unique for the postcommunist condition. First, many sectors of post-communist civil societies are *not centralized* to the same degree as they are in the Western or Northern Europe. A good example of this difference is the sector of women's organizations (Regulska and Grabowska 2013). Second, many voluntary civic activities are organized in an *informal manner* via networks of neighbors, circles of friends, etc. In fact, post-communist civil societies of East Central Europe are not passive or organizationally anemic; but they are often structured differently than in the West and their activities may easily escape attention of some Western observers (Kubik 2013).

Patterns of civil society behavior

To understand civil society's role and evaluate its "strength" – understood as a pillar of democracy – in a specific country it is imperative to examine the activities of various groups of actors. To learn about them we need to focus in particular on politically

relevant forms of action such as lobbying and protest. Studies of public opinion, aimed at determining membership in voluntary organizations or rates of volunteering are insufficient (see e.g. Bernhard and Karakoc 2007); so are data from NGO registers used to determine the density of civil society. In general, instead of measuring civil society's "strength" by counting the number of organizations per capita or accepting the declaration of survey participants at the face value, we need to assess the rate and form of civic engagement in political and public life, and the effectiveness of linkages with other areas of the polity (Bermeo and Nord 2000).

One way to study this engagement is to focus on contentious politics. In some countries collective actors are more prone to challenge authorities and to employ contentious forms of behavior to pursue their interests. In others, cooperation between the state and civil society is extensive, often institutionalized, and the level of political contention is lower. Such patterns are shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by legacies of past interactions between the state and society. Accordingly, one can distinguish between *contentious* and *accommodating* civil societies. During the first decade of transformations Poland had a contentious civil society, while most other countries had significantly lower level of contention. This trend flipped in recent years (Szelenyi and Wilk 2013). As Figure 2 shows magnitude of contention in Poland measured as the number of protest days declined significantly, although the number of protest events has not showed a similar consistent decline (Figure 3). This simply means that protests in Poland are today smaller and shorter than those at the beginning of post-1989 transformations.[10] Other countries such as Hungary or Bulgaria have become more contentious than Poland.

Figure 2: Declining magnitude of protest in Poland

(number of protest days yearly)

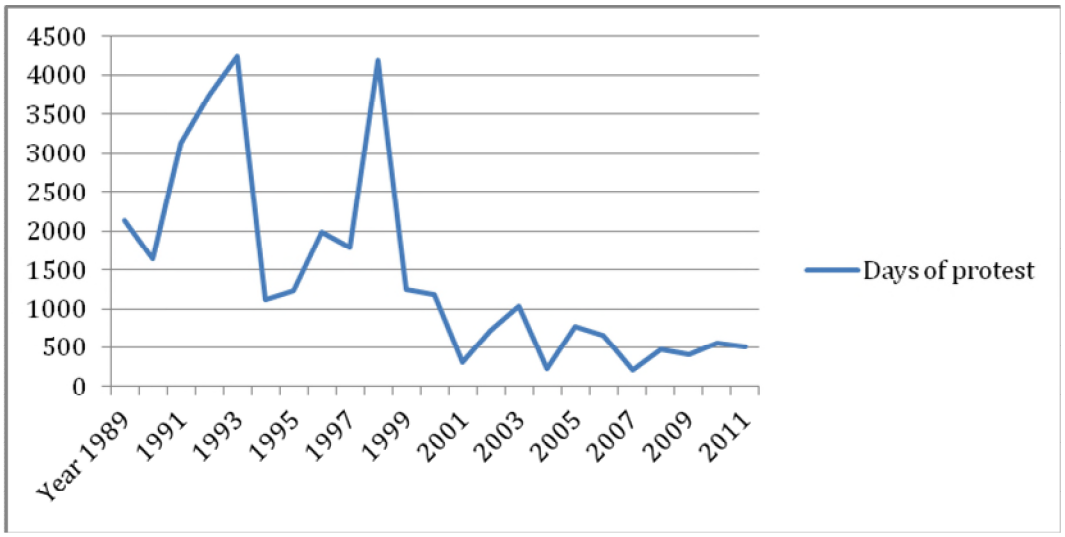
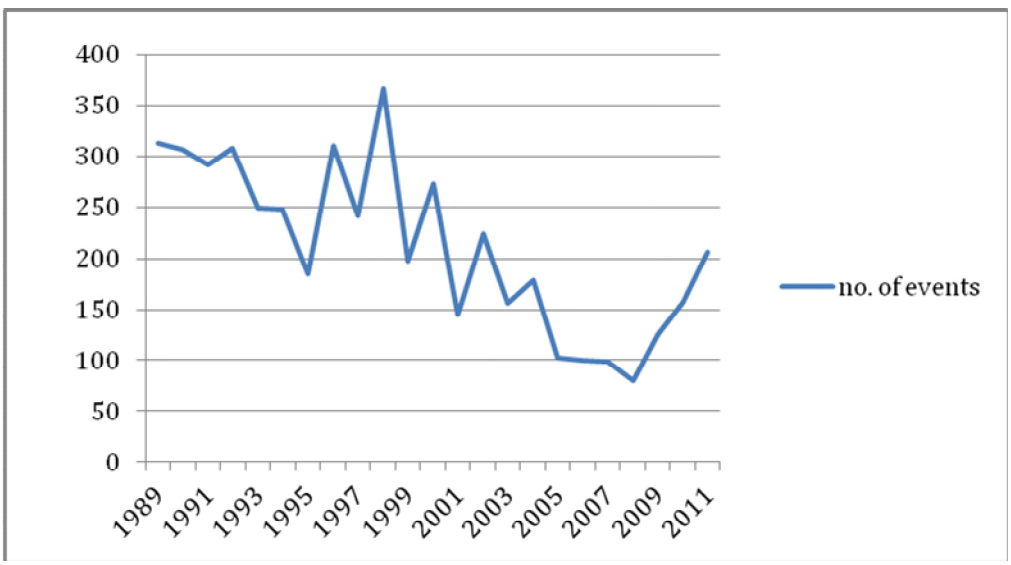


Figure 3: Number of protest events in Poland

(number of events yearly)



What explains the changes in the dominant mode of civil society's behavior? The most important factor seems to be the type of the country's political regime (authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and democratic) and its specific features, such as the structure and consolidation of the party system. In countries where the party system works well both as an aggregator of interests and the mechanism of political pressure on the government, the political role of civil society is predominantly complementary. In unstable party contexts, for example in Poland, civil society tends to become supplementary. In the post-communist world the supplementary function predominates, for two distinct reasons. One is the general decline of political parties that post-communist Europe shares with many other countries. In the post-communist EU members, party systems are not fully consolidated and are sometimes volatile; as a result civil society actors often take on the role of policy-articulating protagonists in contentious disputes with the government. Second, in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries, periodic waves of protest and "dissident" type of activities replace the non-existent or weak interest representation via political parties (Russia, Ukraine, and countries of Central Asia).

Although post-communist civil societies are no stranger to political involvement, due to the lack of clear alternatives to a market economy and democracy, civil society actors rarely engage in anti-systemic mobilization. We called this phenomenon *contentious reformism* in our study of the early years of Polish democratic consolidation (Ekiert and Kubik 1999), but it is quite common across the region. During the first 15 or so years of postcommunist transformations civil societies in the region have been by and

large liberally minded and moderate, both in their demands and dominant strategies of action. In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, the bulk of "dissident" civic actions have focused on securing political freedoms and expanding the public sphere whereby citizens can (safely) engage their governments. In democratic countries, most organizations have been supportive of liberal democracy and market economy and focused their actions on improving the mechanisms of representation and governance.

Dominant normative orientation

Several countries of the region, particularly those with autocratic or weak democratic regimes, experienced waves of popular mobilization, triggered by outrage directed at corrupt politicians, rigged democratic procedures, inept administrations, and sluggish economic growth. By far the most spectacular wave of protests came to be known as *color revolutions*: Serbia's *Bulldozer Revolution* (2000), Georgia's *Rose Revolution* (2003), Ukraine's *Orange Revolution* (2004), and Kyrgyzstan's *Tulip Revolution* (Hale 2005; Beissinger 2007; Tucker 2007; Bunce and Volchik 2011). They were often organized around the principles of social justice and political rights, recently reinvigorated in Russia, where protestors challenged Putin's regime in the name of "honor, decency, dignity, and conscience" (Aron 2013: 64).

The normative and political orientations in the post-communist world have begun to change since 2006-8. Reformism anchored partially in a neo-liberal consensus is fading away and distinctly populist and sometimes radically right-wing parties and movements have become more visible. The growing numbers of people are turning to them for ideological explanations and organizational vehicles needed to channel their rising discontent and frustrations triggered by the world-wide economic crisis and a series

of political scandals, often related to political corruption.

This turn to the right is well documented.[11] It is, however important to remember that the acceptance of right-wing, populist ideologies is very uneven across the post-communist region. In some countries, such as Ukraine, Bulgaria, Latvia, and Hungary, the number of potential supporters of far right parties and movements is the highest in Europe. But in Poland, Estonia, and Slovenia it seems to be more moderate, actually lower than in Italy and Portugal (Derex Index 2010). Our own work on protest politics in Hungary and Poland provides additional evidence for significant disparities. While since 2008 in both countries there has been a noticeable increase of protest actions organized by right-wing groups and the public space has become more saturated with right-wing rhetoric, the pace of growth and the extent of popular support for these types of ideology has been much more extensive in Hungary than in Poland.

In sum, although in many countries of the region there has been the rise of right-wing radicalization, coalescing around the slogans of national purification, opposition to the EU, and return to "true values," anti-systemic and anti-democratic organizations still have been marginal in most places and civil societies remain, by and large, moderate in their normative orientations. Despite social and economic cost of post-communist transformations and the recent economic crisis, political extremism on the right or left has been surprisingly subdued. Thus, the Weimar scenario remains unlikely.

Conclusions

There are three persistent myths about post-1989 civil societies in former communist countries. We challenge them all. First, as we have shown post-communist civil societies

were not built from scratch. To a significant degree they were based on associational spheres inherited from the old regime and on the organizational traditions going back to the pre-communist period.

Second, some comparative analyses of European civil societies suggest that a new type of civil society emerged in post-communist countries. It is supposedly different from the continental, Anglo-Saxon, or Nordic types and its roots are in the common communist past and the specific nature of 1989-91 revolutions (Archambault 2009). We argue the opposite. There is no convergence to a single model. To the contrary, there is a growing divergence in sectoral composition, behavior, normative orientations of civil society actors, and the dominant type of relations between them and their respective states. These differences reflect not only long standing historical traditions of various sub-regions of the former Soviet bloc and contrasting outcomes of postcommunist transformations, but also new divisions of the European space generated by the EU enlargements.

Finally, we also challenge the well-established myth that postcommunist civil societies are systemically weak. While strength or weakness are not very useful categories, we have shown above that some civil societies in the region have dense and comprehensive organizational structures, operate in a relatively "friendly" institutional and legal environment, and have some capacity to influence policy making on local and national levels. In other postcommunist countries, especially those that reverted to various forms of authoritarian rule, civil societies are often organizationally weak and politically irrelevant. Civil society actors are excluded from routine consultation and governance and come together to influence politics only in extraordinary moments of

rage triggered by economic downturns or gross violations of laws and constitutional provisions by their states.

To conclude, we wish to return to two questions dominating debates on civil society. Is civil society necessary to undermine the authoritarian rule and to facilitate the regime change? What is the impact of civil society on the policies of governments and the quality of democracy, particularly after the regime change? Experiences of post-communist countries shed much light on all these questions.

In general, we agree with Philippe Schmitter (2010) that the role of civil society in precipitating the regime change is not significant (see also Kotkin 2013). Except for Poland, there is no convincing evidence that *organized* civil society contributed to the collapse of communist regimes. In 1989, however, several countries in Easter Europe experienced cascading cycles of mobilization that tipped the balance of power and contributed to the collapse of the old system. As a result, several countries of Eastern Europe had consequential civil societies (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, the Baltic states) *around the time of regime transition* and a comparative study shows that the strength of civil society at that period is associated with the higher quality of liberal democracy, the faster and more robust post-transitional economic recovery, and the lower level of social inequality years later (Bernhard and Kaya 2013).

The experience of post-communism shows that civil society does play an important role in the consolidation of democracy. After twenty-five years of massive transformations civil societies in the post-communist region of Europe have come a long way, building their organizational capacity and ability to influence both policymaking and politics. In many countries, in Poland perhaps most prominently, civil society

organizations have been shaping political and economic developments through contention, voluntary activities, and assorted consultative arrangements. For example, Polish trade unions and farmer organizations were able to defeat or delay many economic and social reform projects and policies. In other countries civil society organizations resisted authoritarian reversals and electoral fraud (color revolutions) and made rulers more accountable even in countries that have become authoritarian (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Case studies and anecdotal evidence demonstrate the impact of civil society organizations on the design and implementation of specific policies (labor, environmental, human rights, minority rights, women rights, etc.).

What is most striking, however, is the disparity of paths and outcomes. There are three types of situations in the post-communist space. Under authoritarianism – in such countries as Belarus, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan – independent civil society organizations are persecuted, numerically weak, poorly institutionalized, and often resemble the incomplete dissident civil societies of the pre-1989 era (Kendzior 2012). In semi-authoritarian regimes – Russia and Ukraine being the best examples – independent citizens' activities via NGOs have been often subjected to harassment and governmental interference (Lanskoy and Suthers 2013), but social movements have managed to make their mark on public life via waves of protest actions. Moreover, many authoritarian governments have learned to live side by side with their (often truncated) civil societies and effectively manage the several crucial aspects of their mutual relations (Krastev 2011; Greene 2014). It is not the end, but rather the institutionalization of a situation in which civil society actors remain inconsequential in shaping most if not all policy outcomes.

The most dynamic and sustained growth of civil society has occurred in the democratic states of post-communist Central Europe, although in terms of numbers of organizations these civil societies are not as strong as in the older democracies of Western Europe, particularly its Northern tier. There are, however, several areas, including the legal architecture of public sphere or transnational networking, in which some Central European civil societies do not differ much from their West European counterparts and are ahead of such South European states as Greece, Portugal or Italy. In some countries, people have already developed an intimate sense of closeness with civil society actors. In Poland (but also in Romania, and Hungary) people declare that they "share the values or interests" of civil society organizations and "trust them to act in the right way to influence political decision-making" more often than the average citizen of EU (European Commission 2013). They also acknowledge that civil society organizations have a significant impact on policy making in their respective countries.

And, finally, two thoughts on the current challenges facing civil societies in the region. The political and economic crises that have engulfed the world since 2008 have clearly influenced the situation of civil societies. The relationships between the state and civil society in many countries have become tenser as the governments have become less responsive to civil society demands or more repressive. In this climate many civil society organizations have resorted to contention and embraced right-wing populism as their political program. Years ago Bela Greskovits marveled over the patience of East European publics subjected to massive and often painful social and political transformations. Given the recent intense wave of protest that swept the post-communist countries, one may ask: *is the end of this patience coming*? Beissinger and Sasse, who

confronted this question heads on, answer: it depends. “In Tolstoyan fashion, those ‘happy’ countries that continued to experience economic growth in the midst of global crisis were all little affected by protest, while those ‘unhappy’ countries that experienced significant economic contractions were all ‘unhappy’ in their own ways, displaying quite varied protest responses to economic decline,” they conclude (2013: 363-4). But recent protests in Poland (the country least affected by the economic crisis in Europe) may foreshadow a new cycle of popular mobilizations triggered by the reduced capacity of many European governments to satisfy their publics’ expectation and thus buy social peace.

The second issue is arguably most important. *Do we observe the end of moderation in the behavior and ideological orientation of civil society actors?* The recent upsurge of political radicalization, extremism, and aggressive rhetoric is uncontestable. But these developments are unevenly distributed throughout the post-communist world and while some countries in Easter Europe record the highest intensity of right-wing sentiment on the continent, some others, like Poland, do not differed at all from the West and their civil societies are far less “extreme” than in other regions of the world (for example, the Middle East). In short, many post-communist civil societies, including Poland, made considerable progress in building autonomous institutions and securing their role in shaping policy decisions of their respective states. This is not the universal condition but a truly significant one. Surprising progress has been made even in the countries that failed to move to or consolidate democracy.

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[1] The most recent and truly comprehensive large-n study concludes that there is no evidence that civil society in the post-communist world is weak or underdeveloped compared with the other regions of the world. See, Bernhard et al, 2015.

[2] This chapter is the expanded and revised version of the paper that was published in the *Journal of Democracy* (25, 1, 2014). We are grateful to a number of colleagues who over the years worked with us on various projects and countries and who will find many of these ideas familiar. In particular we would like to thank Michael Bernhard, Roberto Foa, George Soroka, Bela Greskovits, Jason Wittenberg, Sunhyuk Kim and Michal Wenzel.

[3] In this study, 11 former countries of the Soviet Bloc that are now members of the EU constitute East Central Europe. They include: The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia (2004 enlargement), Bulgaria and Romania (2007) and Croatia (2013). When we write about Central Europe we exclude from this definition Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania. "Eastern Europe" is the largest subset we write about. This region is used in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index we occasionally

cite. In addition to the eleven countries of "East Central Europe" it includes: Albania, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

[4] Following Diamond we define civil society as "the realm of organized 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... it 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." (Diamond 1999, 221).

[5] For example, Italian civil society had some 221,000 organizations in 2005 (Mastropaolo 2008, 43). Poland, a country significantly smaller (38.2 million versus 59.3 million population in 2010), with much shorter duration of democracy and EU membership, has more than 100,000 organizations (Przewłocka, Adamiak and Herbst 2013, 23). The methods of collecting data and counting civil society organizations vary broadly, so the actual figures should be taken with a grain of salt. The point is, however, that relative to their total populations, the sizes of Polish and Italian civil societies are not dramatically different.

[6] For a comprehensive analysis of the state of civil society in Central Asia see Ziegler 2015.

[7] Bertelsmann Transformation Index ranks countries on the scale from 1 to 10 on various dimensions of "democracy status." In the 2014 ranking, only 10 out 129 analyzed countries (8%) achieved the highest score (9 or 10) on the civil rights scale (component of political participation: rule of law). Out of 17 countries of Eastern Europe 6 achieved such a score (35%). None of the 13 post-Soviet Eurasian countries scored that high (Bertelsmann 2015).

[8] The authors' own calculations based on the Freedom House data available at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-aggregate-and-subcategory-scores#.VeW2S7xViko. Accessed September 1, 2015. On the countries included in East Central Europe in this study see footnote 2. Central Asia includes: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

[9] This becomes particularly clear when the outlier Scandinavian countries are removed from the sample, and the comparison is focused on the European nations that have a legacy of authoritarian rule, such as Portugal, Germany, or Spain (Visser 2006). According to Visser (2006, 45), in 2001 the union density in Poland was 14 (not much different from Spain (16.1) or Switzerland (17.8)), while in Slovakia it was

36.21, in Czech Republic 27.0, and in Hungary 19.9. See also http://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Compare-Countries.

[10] There are, however, exceptions. A comparison of Polish and Czech women's movements shows that some sectors of civil society in Poland are still more prone to participatory, contentious actions than their counterparts in other countries (Korolczuk and Saxonberg, 2014). Also Płatek and Płucienniczak study on far right mobilizations (in this volume) shows a contentious face of Polish civil society.

[11] Evidence can be found in the modest increase in the identification with the right political ideologies captured by the World Value Survey (Melzer and Serafin, 2013). For works analyzing the earlier period see Kopecky and Mudde, 2003 and Ost, 2005.