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The Study of Protest Politics in Eastern Europe in the Search of Theory

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Spectacular and sometimes tragic in their consequences, waves of contention have swept Eastern Europe since the end of the Second World War with remarkable regularity. From the initial armed resistance through manifold forms of everyday disobedience to spectacular outbursts of rebellious anger, the people of Eastern Europe have periodically challenged reigning regimes. Protest under communism came from oppressed and voiceless social groups challenging powerful authorities through weakly institutionalised mobilisations that in turn provoked extremely repressive responses from the state. After 1989, protests have become routinised, highly institutionalised and organised by political movements and civil society organisations. Today, contention is a constant feature of post-communist politics generating a high number of significant protest events.

Western theory of contention and protest politics in Eastern Europe

There is a large, diverse social science and history literature on protest, contention and oppositional activities in Eastern Europe both before and after 1989. We review the scholarship on the later period, focusing in particular on its theoretical trajectory. The goal is to identify and briefly characterize the main stages in the development of the

literature on protest in Eastern Europe and to trace down mutual influences between this literature and theories of contentious politics developed in the Western social sciences.

There are four distinctive stages in the scholarly literature on post-1945 protest in the region. They correspond roughly to the four historical phases of contention. A series of early rebellions against the new communist rule across the region constitutes the first stage. Largely descriptive analyses of this period are interspersed with theoretical strands inspired by the idea of totalitarianism and some elements of collective behaviour and mass society theories (Zinner 1962, Baring 1972, Lewis 1958).

The second phase is marked by the emergence of dissident movements, counter hegemonic discourses and open political opposition, rooted in the defeat of communist reformers of the Prague Spring and made possible by the Helsinki Accords of 1975.¹ The rise and defeat of the Solidarity movement in Poland was its central event. Scholars studying the second phase at that time (and often later) rely mostly on case studies and employ several broad interpretative approaches popular in the social science of the period: historical and political sociology, political anthropology, and critical Marxism combined with the resurrected concept of civil society (see also Cisar in this volume). Their work is informed by a broad liberal stance centred on the idea of pluralism and inalienable human rights and freedoms.

¹ The Helsinki Accords (or Helsinki Final Act) were signed on 1 August 1975, at the conclusion of the first Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. They legitimated the post-Second-World-War borders of Europe. The 35 signatory states (including the Soviet Union and all its satellite states, except Albania) agreed, *inter alia*, to respect human rights and basic political freedoms. From that point on, the Soviet Bloc governments had a much more difficult time suppressing political opposition (dissident movements) that would invoke the Accords when faced with persecution.

The revolutions of 1989-1991, treated here as the third phase in the history of post-1945 contention in Eastern Europe, were massive upheavals across the entire region leading to the collapse of communist regimes, the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, and the emergence of new nation-states. These revolutions immediately attracted scholarly attention and have never ceased to fascinate scholars representing various disciplines and theoretical orientations (Ash 1990; Mueller, Gehler, and Suppan, eds. 2015; Eisenstadt 2015; della Porta 2014), including the practitioners of game theoretic approaches to contention (Kuran 1991, Lohmann 1994, Opp 1994). Existing analyses range from micro-level studies of protest participation to sweeping accounts of regional dynamics of contention, and there is a bifurcation between studies of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the overthrow of communist regimes elsewhere.

Finally, in the fourth phase, stretching from 1989 to today, the entire range of contentious behaviours characteristic of modern political regimes have appeared. Researchers who study this period come from all disciplines and employ all theoretical and methodological approaches of contemporary social science, with its classic division between rationalist, institutionalist, and culturalist schools of thought and use all contemporary theories of contention (Lichbach 1995, 1998; McAdam et al 1996). As contention in the region has become normalised so have ways of studying it.

Thus, until the end of 1970s, the study of contention in Eastern Europe was largely disconnected from Western theories of social movements, revolutions, and protest politics. Communism was considered to be a system *sui generis*, its politics unique, and best understood through the prism of a totalitarian paradigm. While most of the earlier works are to a large degree descriptive in nature, some of them echo distinct theoretical

claims derived from the theories of collective behaviour (Smelser 1963), mass society (Kornhauser 1959), or totalitarianism that were influential roughly up to the mid-1960s.

During the 1980s but particularly after 1989, the field of study of East European contention expanded rapidly, as several distinct patterns of contention, characteristic of the increasingly divergent sub-regional situations, have emerged. Data and research opportunities have become widely available and all major theoretical orientations proposed in the field of contentious politics have made their appearance. Some authors have embedded their empirical work within other theoretical frameworks, including critical Marxism, comparative politics, historical and political sociology, or political anthropology (Ost 1990, Bernhard 1993, Ekiert 1996, Kubik 1994). At the same time, a new wave of scholars (mostly younger historians from the region) has entered the newly opened archives and proposed novel, sometimes revisionist, historical analyses of the past and current cases of protest (McDermott and Stibbe 2006, Paczkowski 2003, Kamiński et al 2004).

Revolutions of 1989 and 1991

The revolutions of 1989 came largely as a surprise, yet the intensity of surprise varied amongst scholars (Tarrow 1991). Those who observed Poland and the activities of underground Solidarity were arguably less startled, as they studied the country where an accumulated legacy of rebellions had earlier culminated in the Solidarity movement (1980-1981) and where, since 1981, manifold clandestine activities had periodically led to eruptions of open protest (Ash 1983, Bernhard 1993, Cirtautas 1997, Ekiert 1996,

Kubik 1994). The 1988 wave of strikes, that constituted the decisive factor pushing the communist authorities to enter a path of negotiations (Paczkowski 2015), did not materialise spontaneously; it was preceded by years of patient organising and massive clandestine work on cultural, political, and even economic levels (with underground publishing houses and networks of distribution).

The literature on 1989 is thus divided into two strands. The more prominent one continues the tradition of earlier approaches to contention in the region (descriptive/historical and interpretative). Its theoretical competitor draws on the approaches to contentious politics that are inspired by game theory. Historians, historically minded sociologists and political scientists, and journalists are most influential in the literature on Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, where the revolutionary wave of protest in 1988-1989 came as the culmination of years of contentious challenges to the communist monopoly of power, often emanating from the domain of culture. These writers emphasise historical legacies and reconstruct long-term trajectories of resistance and rebellion, but primarily provide detailed accounts of multiple oppositional activities by the Polish Solidarity or the Czechoslovak Charter 77 and a constellation of organisations associated with them. The widely read works range from witness accounts (Ash 1990, Gwertzman and Kaufman 1991) to more systematic and comparative accounts (Banac 1992, Stokes 1993, Joppke 1995, Stark and Bruszt 1991). This tradition of analysing the 1989 revolutions as a complex social and cultural phenomenon with long historical roots continues not only among historians (Kenney 2003; Pleshakov 2009; Sebestyen 2010; Mueller, Gehler, and Suppan, eds. 2015), but also among social scientists (Eisenstadt 2015, della Porta 2014).

On the other hand, for the students of other countries, particularly East Germany, where the end of communism is usually associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the element of surprise and rapid mobilisation have become phenomena needing explanation. It is no wonder, therefore, that this literature is dominated by models designed to explain individuals' calculus to join or not join the unanticipated but rapidly rising tide of contention.

However, the studies written within the rationalist paradigm are not uniform. They differ in their choice of concepts, issues, modelling techniques, and the robustness of empirical verification. For example, Kuran (1991) offers a model based on the modified assumptions of the rational choice school in which he distinguishes between private and public preferences (the latter are "for show") and analyses the dynamic of simulating support for the unwanted regime that he calls preference falsification (hiding private preferences). Once the first challengers publicly express their discontent "there comes a point where [one's] external cost of joining the opposition falls below his internal cost of preference falsification" (1991: 18). This is a person's "revolutionary threshold." As a growing number of people cross their individual thresholds and join a "revolutionary bandwagon," the protest wave gathers strength. But in addition to individual calculations, Kuran emphasises also the mobilising power of internal and external factors that are beyond actors' control (for example, the Gorbachev's liberalization) that served as triggers setting off the revolutionary bandwagon, mostly in East Germany.

Karklins and Petersen (1993) set out to "explain how individual citizens made their decisions to demonstrate against their powerful governments, ... why the regimes

failed to suppress the demonstrations, and ... why the process occurred so rapidly and thoroughly” (1993: 588). To answer these questions, they build a model of strategic game played by the people and the government. What is particularly important in the model is that the “masses” are not seen as an homogeneous entity, but rather as a set of distinct groups, dissidents, students, workers, and party supporters, each of which has a different tipping point beyond which its members are ready to demonstrate (assumption very similar to Kuran’s). Individuals’ calculations of protection and prediction (for example, the probability of the regime’s fall) are central to their model of the situation construed as an n-person assurance game. The models are then tested with empirical data from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, and China (a negative case).

Lohmann produced a detailed study of several waves of mobilization mostly in Leipzig, East Germany, using painstakingly collected empirical evidence and a sophisticated “dynamic threshold model [that] interprets a sequence of mass protest activities as an informational cascade” (1994: 49). Similar to Kuran and Karklins and Petersen, she emphasizes the significance of heterogeneity within the set of potential protesters. In her conceptualisation there are four categories, ranging from anti-status quo extremists to pro-status quo extremists. Lohmann manages “to show that individual participation decisions may depend on changes in aggregate turnout over time because people extract benefit-cost information from turnout numbers” (1994: 91).

Opp (1994, 1998) offers the fourth influential rational choice model that he tests by using survey data. The central puzzle that drives the analysis does not concern the protest participants, but rather the actions of the tyrannical regime. Opp asks why the powerful and oppressive regime failed to prevent the challenge in 1989, and why it had

been successful earlier. The main tool such regimes rely on is repression, and Opp shows that its impact on the probability of protest is not linear; the intensification of repression may actually encourage people to protest under certain circumstances. To argue this, and in contrast to other rational choice scholars, Opp and his colleagues (see Opp, Voss, and Gern 1995) assume that incentives such as public goods incentives, moral incentives (“moral indignation”), and social incentives (social pressure within friendship networks) matter, under certain circumstances, in mobilising people for collective protest action at least as much as selective benefits. One of the key findings of this study is that the perception of the changing political environment in the Soviet Bloc had a powerful influence on the potential protesters (1994: 129).

While rational choice explanations (CARP) are prominent in the literature on 1988-89 in East Central Europe, works belonging to another research program, Synthetic Political Opportunity Structure (SPOT) are increasingly present as well.² These include the authoritative study on the role of protest in the breakup of the Soviet Union by Beissinger, who – relying on the method of event analysis – produced an exhaustive study “on the role of the contentious event in the politics of nationalism” (2002: 11) and the way the nationalist mobilisations contributed to the collapse of the Soviet system. Gorenburg (2003) used this approach to analyse minority ethnic mobilisation in the Russian federation, Glenn (2003) to examine 1989 in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and

² Since the 1970s, two research programmes have come to dominate the field of study on contentious politics: Synthetic Political Opportunity Theory (SPOT) and Collective Action Research Programme (CARP), as they were dubbed by Lichbach (1998). SPOT’s dominant tenor is structuralist and historical (its leading scholars are Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam), while CARP focuses on individual decisions and relies on rational choice and game theory. See also Lichbach (1995).

Vladisavljević (2008) to determine the contribution of popular mobilisation to the fall of communism and the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Post-1989 contention: empirical access, theoretical embarrassment of riches, and diverging regions

Freedom of research that followed the fall of state socialism has attracted to the region scholars from all corners of the social sciences. They expanded the disciplinary range of the study of East Europe and often engaged in productive collaborations with the earlier generation of area studies scholars. In what has become a multi-stranded literature on the post-1989 protest politics of the region we detect three approaches that had earlier helped to interpret contention in Eastern Europe.³ First is the line of thought indebted to critical social science, inspired by Marxism. It has produced studies on labour unions and working class protests, and on the “losers” of post-communist transformations more generally. The second broad school belongs to comparative politics, as it focuses on the *role protest plays in the consolidation of post-communist political regimes* and on the interaction between institutionalised and contentious forms of politics. Scholars belonging to the third group study *bottom up, popular mobilisation among specific groups and sectors of the post-1989 society*, ranging from ethnic minorities, ecologists, to women and LGBT people. Their work is often anchored in the tradition of political and historical sociology, and political anthropology.

Critical social science

Researchers continuing the tradition of critical social science often study what may be called a *puzzle of low working class contentiousness*. Why do workers in post-communist countries, often experiencing detrimental changes in their professional and private lives, not protest more vigorously? There are several explanations. Greskovits compares Eastern Europe and Latin America, observes that the transformations in the former were accompanied by less violence and contention, and concludes that the main reason for that East European “patience” is that:

“Communism left behind societies lacking in the structural, institutional, and cultural factors associated with violent collective action. The lack of extreme income inequality, the smaller number of marginalized poor, the relatively lower degree of urbanization of the population, and the absence of recent, violent experiences with coups and riots may all have contributed a stabilizing influence under post-Communism” (1998: 85).

Vanhuyse emphasises a different set of factors to explain the relative quiescence of workers: high levels of exit into the informal economy, the decline of unionised jobs, the ineptness of union leadership, ideological “delusions” (such as the attraction of illiberal and populist ideas), but primarily well-designed governmental strategies of “divide and pacify” (2006: 137).

Crowley, Ost and their colleagues argue that the main cause of labour weakness is its “own anti-union ideas, or what might be called a crisis of class identity, that

contributes powerfully to union weakness” (2001: 7) and see this crisis as a legacy of state socialism, under which labour unions functioned mostly as “transmission belts” of communist party power. Bohle and Greskovits (2012) dispute some of the conclusions in Crowley and Ost (2001), particularly that unions in Southeastern Europe were created “as weak actor.” They argue that in many cases they started relatively strong and only weakened over time (2012: 184-191). Ost (2005) develops the argument about Solidarity activists “betraying” their unionist identity, replacing it with nationalistic and religious ideology and in the process losing their effectiveness as labour’s champions.

Sil’s “second generation” argument (2014) is that labour in Eastern Europe is not particularly weak and the unions are not inconsequential (after the initial decline), though their influence varies across the region. He offers a complex, context-sensitive explanation for the difference in the effectiveness of labour unions in Poland and the Czech Republic, and concludes that in the latter the unions are less divided and more successful in defending workers’ interests because they form more effective alliances with left-wing parties. Wenzel (forthcoming) studies labour union activities in Poland, particularly their protest actions, and – much like Sil – concludes that the unions have had significant influence on the course of post-communist transformations in that country.

Ashwin (1999) examines the relative quiescence of the Russian working class.

Beissinger and Sasse (2013), who studied the massive protest wave that swept the post-communist countries after the crisis of 2008, ask whether *the end of this patience is coming*. They refer to the relative quiescence of the labour class in post-communist countries. They conclude that it is context-dependent: “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” (2013: 363-364).

Comparative politics: regimes, institutions, and contention

The literature in this area can be usefully grouped into four, occasionally overlapping, strands. They include studies of: (1) contentious politics in new democracies (including right-wing contentious challenges to liberal democracy and protests against democratic backsliding), (2) the role of protests in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian states, (3) “colour revolutions”, and (4) contentious dimensions of ethnic politics.

There is a group of post-communist countries that at some point began negotiating membership in the EU and eventually became members of this elite club, and made the best progress on the path of democratisation. Most work on these countries concentrates on top-down mechanisms of change, such as institutional reforms, the emergence and evolution of political systems and political parties, and the political economy of transformations. Studies of bottom-up mobilisations have been far less common. Building on an assumption that protest is a legitimate mode of political behaviour in a democracy, Ekiert and Kubik (1998a, 1999) propose a systematic study of the role of bottom-up contention in the consolidation of democracy in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and former East Germany. Their method is event analysis based on systematic data collection from newspaper sources, often used by the scholars working within the SPOT paradigm. Other scholars of contention *and* democratisation studied the role of “corrective” bottom-up

protests in Bulgaria (Ganev 2014), Romania (Margarit 2016) or, comparatively, in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania (Margarit 2015, see also Szabó 1996).

Democratic backsliding in the new EU member states has recently attracted scholarly attention, also among scholars of contention. The problem, observed at least since least 2008, is particularly pronounced in Hungary where the right-wing populist parties – often relying on mass mobilisation – have challenged liberal democracy (Krasztev and Van Til 2016). The rise of right-wing populist movements in Eastern Europe and the increasing visibility of their contentious actions is captured in the large comparative project, “The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: Hungary, Poland, South Korea and Taiwan” (Greskovits, Várhalmi and Wittenberg 2013; Ekiert, Kubik, and Wenzel 2013). Using the method of event analysis, Płatek and Płucienniczak (2016) conducted a detailed study of Polish right-wing protests in 2003-2014. More generally, right-wing mobilisation in the region is well documented in several collections, Kopecky and Mudde (2003), Melzer and Serafin (2013) and Langenbacher and Schellenberg (2011). These works analyse a broad range of organisations in several East and Central European countries, though they did not study protest actions per se.

The second distinct body of work is devoted to the study of protest politics in countries where political transformations stalled and the outcome has been more or less repressive authoritarianism. Here, the dominant problem areas include periodic outburst of discontent, most famously *colour revolutions* (discussed as a separate phenomenon below), protest actions directed against the abuses of electoral process (*electoral protests*) and de-democratization, and protest under authoritarian regimes. Bunce and Wolchik (2011) study 11 electoral episodes in nine countries to comparatively examine the

electoral model of democratic transition in mixed (hybrid) regimes. They do not focus on protest per se, but examine its role as the major factor of political change, alongside and in interaction with elections. Their work examines also the role of diffusion, also of protest repertoires, in challenging non-democratic regimes (particularly in Bunce and Wolchik 2010). Several influential works focus explicitly on the role of protest in hybrid regimes (conceptualised often as competitive or electoral authoritarianism). Robertson (2007, 2010), using the method of event analysis and relying partially on his own database constructed from the daily reports prepared by the Russian Interior Ministry, builds a densely textured analysis of the Russian case (during three periods: Yeltsin, 1997–2000, the first Putin term, 2000–2004, and the second Putin term, 2005–2008). He generalises that within hybrid regimes “variations in protest patterns are likely to be driven by three key variables: *organizational ecology*, *state mobilization strategies*, and *elite competition*” (2011: 6). Specific combinations of the values of these three dummy variables account for eight specific patterns of contention (2011: 204). For the students of mixed regimes, including Russia, the most important finding is that in such regimes “competition is less something that authoritarians have failed to eliminate, but rather something that they consciously allow and try to control (2011: 217). Lankina and Voznaya (2015) study “multiple protest arenas” in a large hybrid regime state (Russia) and demonstrate that regional variation influences both the intensity of protest and the type of demands. Greene (2014) shows the post-communist system in Russia increasingly relies on “disconnecting” the political world of the elite from society. Russian society is not suppressed, but rather it is just made irrelevant, since the state/government/elite has managed to form a system in which it is relatively isolated from “bottom-up” pressures of

protest. The society is not as passive as it is portrayed in most standard studies; it is active but the system's configuration prevents this activity from being effective. Smyth (2014) and Smyth et al (2015), building on their original database (including interviews with the protestors), analyse the competing mobilisations (and narratives) of Putin's opponents and supporters, often clashing in the streets after the December 2011 presidential elections. Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva (2013) study the manufactured mobilisation of Putin's supporters and its political impact.

Two books deal with the periodic outburst of protest in the most authoritarian post-communist states. Navumau (2016) studies "the Belarussian Maidan" of 2006 in a rare study of protest in the most oppressive regime in Europe. He provides a detailed account of what transpired, but also an original interpretation, partially driven by an effort to assess the applicability of Western models to the specific realities of post-Soviet Belarus. Radnitz (2010), in a book "subverting" the chief idea of James Scott's influential study (1985), shows that protest in Kyrgyzstan was to a large degree manufactured by a part of the elite that achieved influence over some segment of the populace through a mechanism he calls "subversive clientelism."

The literature on colour revolutions, a fascinating cross-national protest wave, deserves to be discussed as a distinct strand. The 2000 "Bulldozer Revolution" in Serbia was the first in a series of revolts against new authoritarian rulers in the region. As in other cases, the success was predicated on massive mobilisation of civil society and its coordinated actions (Bieber 2003). Revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) followed. Their origins, mechanisms, and consequences have been interpreted and explained in several ways. Wilson (2005) offers a description and day-to

day analysis of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, while Onuch (2014), comparing this revolt with the Argentinian upheaval of 2001, provides a comprehensive history of Ukrainian revolts since 1920, develops her own theoretical frames inspired predominantly by SPOT, uses her own multifaceted database, and as a result is able to “map” a very comprehensive picture of the revolution. Hypotheses derived from the SPOT program are mixed with several CARP ideas in Beissinger’s analysis of the Orange Revolution (2013). Relying on the results of two surveys, he shows that the revolutionaries in Ukraine (as in Tunisia and Egypt) were not driven by a strong commitment to democratic ideals; rather, people with disparate preferences formed “negative coalitions” and their actions were “fueled predominantly by extreme rejection of the incumbent regime, with no dominant, overarching grievance” (2013: 17). For Tucker (2009), who works within the CARP paradigm, the free-riding dilemma is one of the central concerns. He argues that the most important factor that helped to overcome this dilemma in Ukraine and trigger mobilisation was information about vote-rigging. Lane (2009), by contrast, believes that most people assumed that the information about the rigged elections was manufactured (2009: 132). Lane focuses also on “democracy promotion” that he sees as a misguided strategy, because counter-elites use the ideology of democracy to win power from incumbents, not to justify and underpin democratic reforms. He also confirms a widely accepted view that while relative deprivation predisposes people to rebel, it is not a sufficient cause of insurgency (2009: 125).

Beissinger (2007) sets out to determine whether the external (such as diffusion of ideas and democracy promotion) or internal factors (that is, structural conditions and elite behaviour) are more important in triggering “modular” revolutions and in increasing the

probability of their success. He convincingly demonstrates that while the power of example can help to overcome adverse structural conditions and trigger protest, the success of the revolt is more difficult to achieve if favourable internal, structural, and institutional factors are not properly aligned. Beissinger mixes elements of SPOT and CARP, as he models the impact of both structural factors and mobilisation thresholds, calculated by the elites, to model the shape of protest waves. Way (2008) gives primacy to structural factors (political opportunity structure in SPOT's terminology) emphatically in a study in which he tries to explain differential successes of various colour revolutions.

The fourth subset of works in comparative politics deals with national and ethnic mobilisations that often take highly contentious forms. Beissinger's seminal work (2002) set the standard for this body of literature. Building on his own sophisticated theorising of the relationship between structure and agency (firmly embedded within the SPOT tradition) and a painstakingly collected protest event database, he argued that although the collapse of the Soviet Union was caused by a complex set of factors, the dominant role was played by contentious events that accumulated over time and ultimately overwhelmed the ostensibly unmovable power structure. In a study that also relies heavily on the SPOT analytical apparatus, Gorenburg (2003) examines four ethnic republics of the Russian Federation and shows that the success of bottom-up nationalist mobilisation does not depend on the existence of propitious economic conditions, but is rather brought about by the strengthening of ethnic loyalties by "friendly" institutions that are often provided by the state. Stroschein (2012; also in this volume), another practitioner of SPOT, observes that the literature on the rise of ethnic politics and ethnic mobilisations does not always articulate with the field of study of contentious politics.

She sets out to rectify this problem and relying on her own database (built by protest event analysis) she studies contentious actions of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and Romania to demonstrate “how ethnic protest served to incorporate Hungarians into politics in which that are permanent minorities, by providing an extra-institutional means for them to confluence policies...” (2012: 10).

Sociology of discontent: protests of the excluded

This literature, anchored in the historical and political sociology, is concerned with identifying, understanding and explaining *patterns of mobilisation per se*, and assessing their role in politics though not always explicitly their impact on regime consolidation. The studies belonging to this strand deal predominantly with contentious politics driven by *identity issues*, ranging from religion to sexual orientation. Members of many social groups and categories struggle for the full recognition of their identities and interests and/or protest against the high costs of transformations, unjustly – in their judgment – impacting their members. There are works on protests by farmers (Foryś 2008), women (Regulska and Grabowska 2013), environmentalists (Fagan and Carmin 2011), homeless and urban activists (Jacobsson 2015), and sexual minorities (Vermeersch 2006, Holzacker 2012, O’Dwyer 2012, Sperling 2014; O’Dwyer in this volume). Some scholars have focused on the study of left-wing (often radical) movements and their weakness in post-communist Europe, for example, alterglobalists (Piotrowski 2013).

Summary

Collective protests and contentious mobilisations have been permanent features of East European politics since 1945 to the present, although over time they have changed considerably. There are four distinct periods in the evolution of contentiousness in the region: (1) mostly spontaneous rebellions against the imposition of communist rule and policies of the new regimes; (2) the period of reforms and opposition movements lasting from the Prague Spring in 1968 until 1989, with the Prague Spring and the rise and suppression of the Solidarity movement as its dominant events; (3) the 1989-1991 revolutions that involved widespread contentious mobilisation, contagion and diffusion, and enormous range of protest strategies from peaceful demonstration to bloody civil wars; and (4) the post-1989 period, characterised by the “normalisation” of contention shaped by diverging regime types, spanning the entire range from consolidated democracies to various forms of authoritarian rule.

In this review we did not set out to present protest and contentious mobilisation in Eastern Europe, but rather to reconstruct the evolution of approaches used to describe, interpret, and explain contention. We focus in particular on the post-1989-1991 period characterised by an impressive diversity of interpretative and explanatory strategies. Inspirations of critical Marxism are clearly reflected in the continuing interest in the absence of class-based mobilisation and weakness of the left-wing radicalism. The second broad research programme belonging mostly to comparative politics is preoccupied with the role of contention in democratisation and authoritarian backsliding, while the third strand focuses on patterns of mobilisation related to social cleavages and identities. While many studies of contention in the region are descriptive and interpretive,

there is an equally significant body of work employing more “positivistic” explanatory strategies focused on identifying causal mechanisms and based on large, systematic, and comparative data sets.

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