



INTRODUCTION

Political mobilization in East Central Europe

Ulf Brunnbauer^{a*} and Peter Haslinger^b

^a*Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg, Germany;* ^b*Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Marburg, Germany*

(Received 17 May 2016; accepted 23 May 2016)

This article provides an introduction to the special thematic section on political mobilization in East Central Europe. Based on a brief presentation of the main arguments of the individual articles, the authors discuss the recent political volatility in East Central Europe. They highlight the tension between fierce political rhetoric and populist policies on the one hand, and low levels of voter turnout and overall political participation in the region on the other. The authors argue that recent cases of successful as well as unsuccessful political mobilization in East Central Europe point to structural re-alignments in the region's political landscape. In particular, the parties that are successful are those that manage to communicate their visions in new ways and whose messages resonate with nested attitudes and preferences of the electorate. These parties typically rally against the so-called establishment and claim for themselves an anti-hegemonic agenda. The introductory essay also asserts that these developments in East Central Europe deserve attention for their potential Europe-wide repercussions – especially the idea of “illiberal democracy,” which combines populist mobilization and autocratic demobilization and finds adherents also in more established European democracies.

Keywords: political mobilization; populism; nationalism; Hungary; Macedonia; Romania; elections; political parties; culture

More than a quarter century after the various velvet, and in some cases not so velvet, revolutions in East Central Europe, politics remains highly dynamic in the region. Few governments manage to get re-elected; and those that do only if they use devices from the toolkit of authoritarian politics, such as controlling the mass media and fiddling with the electoral system (Hungary, of course, is the most notorious example). As Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause have recently shown, voting behavior is highly volatile so that swings between one election and the next can be significant, even if ruling parties appear to have a decent record (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). As Grzegorz Ekiert and others have suggested, the vastly different outcomes of recent developments cannot sufficiently be explained by referring mainly to an alleged common Communist legacy. These processes are not covered by the transformation paradigm any more (Ekiert 2015).

Two recent examples illustrate this pattern of unpredictability: in the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland the liberal–conservative Civic Platform (PO), despite navigating the

*Corresponding author. Email: ulf.brunnbauer@ur.de

Polish economy successfully through the recent global economic downturn and overseeing years of unprecedented growth, took a severe hit of 15 percentage points in voters' support (from 39% to 24% of the votes).¹ In Slovakia, the social-democratic *Smer* party of Prime Minister Robert Fico experienced a similar crushing in the 2016 elections, falling from 44.4% to 28.3% of the vote (though at least remaining the strongest party). Neither consistent economic growth in Slovakia over the last years nor Fico's strong anti-immigrant rhetoric were sufficient to salvage *Smer's* absolute majority. Thus in recent years, from Slovenia to the Baltic States, party landscapes were fundamentally reshaped due to fierce political competition and new patterns of voters' mobilization (Rovny 2015). While major parties often struggle to maintain their level of support at the next elections, new populist parties are popping up. Typically, they are either established by local billionaires/millionaires, or grow out from the extreme, sometimes even ultra-nationalist fringes of the political right. These populist movements thrive also on their diatribes against alleged foreign intervention in internal affairs and domination by malicious foreign powers, by simply substituting Moscow with Brussels. Political volatility is increased also by new forms of protest politics, often caused by concerns about corruption and environmental degradation as well as social issues.

Thus, it seems that the East Central European countries are experiencing a new round of tectonic shifts in their political landscapes. The most important background for these realignments is the rupture in the economic growth model of the region. The crisis caused by the global financial meltdown in 2008–2009 severely affected East Central Europe as well, although the countries of the region in general recorded either less steep recessions, or faster recovery than Western European ones. Poland was the only country within the European Union which did not experience a post-2008 recession at all. Nevertheless, post-crisis growth rates remain on significantly lower levels than before 2008: while in 2006–2007 the average annual GDP growth rate for the region as a whole was more than 6%, it has been hovering around 2.5% and less since 2010.² With this development, the era of deregulation, liberalization, and European integration as the main pillars of economic and political reform in the formerly socialist societies seems to have come to an end (Ther 2014, 98). As a matter of fact, the crisis has resulted in a new popular sense of economic vulnerability, nurtured also by the growing inequalities and the intensifying awareness of them. After two decades of significant economic expansion, some East Central metropolitan areas are now among the richest regions in Europe, while large parts of the countryside and significant segments of society have not participated in this upturn. To give an example for the regional disparities: as of 2014, the region of Bratislava displayed a GDP level per capita, in purchasing power parity, of more than 186% of the EU average, yet Eastern Slovakia's GDP per capita level was only at 53% of the EU average.³ For a small country, this is a striking disparity of income, even if differentiation within these regions is disregarded.

Political events on the regional and European level added to the popular sentiment of a deep malaise. This concerns especially Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military incursions in Eastern Ukraine, the Euro crisis, and the future of the Greek economy as well as the so-called refugee crisis since 2015. The accumulated effects of these external challenges shattered many of the hopes, which the political elites and populations of East Central Europe had pinned on their countries joining the EU. Both in countries that managed to join the EU in three waves of enlargement (2004, 2007, and 2013) and for those at different stages in the process of accession – from negotiating for membership to being a “potential member country” – support for the European Union, and more generally the European project, has lost ground significantly (though the populations of most East Central Europe countries on average still express much more favorable views about the

European Union than the average of the EU population as a whole).⁴ Difficult economic conditions, which forced many governments to impose austerity measures, as well as the heightened sense of political uncertainty put further pressure on the popular acceptance of political institutions in a region, where distrust for the state is – for understandable historical reasons, given the experience of state repression – widespread. Trust in national governments is lower in East Central Europe than in Western Europe and, with few exceptions, it has decreased since 2008. Trust in political parties is even lower than in governments, which poses a problem for the legitimacy of multiparty democracy (see Table 1).

Against the backdrop of all these developments, the articles in this special section discuss different forms of political mobilization in East Central Europe today. They ask two major questions: Which factors determine the level of political mobilization? Secondly, what are the effects of particular patterns of mobilization on the overall political development? The contributions take on three different case studies, each of which offers lessons beyond the individual example. Sergiu Gherghina (published in a previous issue) (Gherghina and Tseng 2016) discusses an issue of growing importance in view of the high rates of emigration from the region: he raises the question of the determinants of the electoral behavior of emigrants from Romania in elections in their native country. To what extent is this related to individual attitudes or dependent on the context in their chosen country of destination? Gherghina studies this using the example of four Western European countries of Romanian immigration, with notably different political systems as well as different regimes of citizenship (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain). Based on an experimental setup, Gherghina develops a complex model, highlighting the behavioral changes of migrants through interaction in and with a new environment. Projecting his results back onto the nonmigrant population, his conclusion suggests that individual attitudes toward political participation are not static at all, yet will also not change overnight, given the stability of contextual factors. The relevance of this was evinced by the importance of the emigrant vote in the second round of Romania's presidential elections in November 2014 – both in terms of votes and as a contested issue. In a transnational world, the dynamics of domestic politics are not limited to the territory of the national state.

In his contribution, Philipp Karl analyzes the exploitation of social media by the extreme right-wing *Jobbik* party in Hungary. It appears that *Jobbik* is able to make more effective use of the Internet for the purpose of spreading its message and mobilizing support than other parties in Hungary. This is an important reason why this party enjoys so much success among the young. This paper produces arguments for the, at first sight, astonishing fact that in Hungary, as elsewhere, large parts of the young population,

Table 1. Trust in government and political parties.

	Trust in national government	Trust in political parties
<i>Sweden</i>	60	43
<i>Austria</i>	50	37
OECD	32	21
Hungary	31	20
Slovak Republic	28	17
Poland	14	10
Czech Republic	13	10
Slovenia	10	4
<i>Greece</i>	9	4

Source: OECD (2013, 32).

including students, display a preference for anti-European, right-wing political options. Karl's findings are also a timely reminder that social media *per se* are not tools of emancipation but can also be used by unsavory political forces. The contents of messages, thus, do count.

Irena Stefoska and Darko Stojanov, in contrast, show that traditional – one could even say nineteenth century – methods of history politics still have a place in the arsenal of tools for political mobilization: they analyze the project *Skopje 2014*, which was launched by the government of Macedonia with the intent to radically change the physical appearance of the capital city. The ruling nationalist-conservative VMRO-DPMNE party uses monuments to presumed historical heroes of the Macedonian nation and neo-neoclassical monumental architecture to manifest its particular vision of the Macedonian nation. Their concept of national identity is firmly grounded in the idea of continuity with the ancient Macedonians. By that, they hope to garner support from ethnic Macedonian voters – so far, quite successfully. Evidently, the oversaturation of the public space in Skopje with allusions to antiquity is also a response to Greece's refusal to accept Macedonia's chosen name (Republic of Macedonia) and its continuous vetoing of opening EU membership negotiations with the country.

These papers originate from two conferences, organized jointly by the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe (Marburg) and the Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg) in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The main questions addressed by the conference participants were: How do perceptions of crisis and political mobilization interact? What are the social and symbolic means of mobilization? What is the function of cultural propaganda and civil-society activities for political mobilization? How are groups formed as political interest groups? What turns mobilization into persistent political loyalties? Both conferences aimed at comparison on two scales: temporal and spatial and discussing processes of political mobilization in East Central and Southeastern Europe in the past and present.⁵

The two conferences highlighted that, for the sake of understanding political mobilization, developments on the microlevel of social interaction are at least as important as major social cleavages. Political agents who want to mobilize support for their ideas need to be able to translate their ideology in a way that it resonates with popular experiences, grievances, and expectations. In his influential 1974 article "Toward a Theory of Political Mobilization," David R. Cameron (1974) argues against social determinism in explanations of political mobilization. He also questions the assumption that political mobilization was historically linked to modernization, such as suggested by authors like Stein Rokkan and Karl Deutsch. Cameron stresses that it is the "development at the 'micro' level which is crucial in the process by which individuals change group memberships, non-membership reference groups, affiliations, and commitments" (1974, 147). In other words, mundane social and cultural practices count a lot. A successfully mobilizing actor must find a way to link his or her message to these mundane preferences. For groups competing for support, it is therefore highly important to connect their political language and their practices with people's perceptions of the world they live in. Successful political entrepreneurs manage to shape these perceptions and provide people a framework to express and explain their grievances, something social movement theory calls "framing" (see Tatar 2015, 63).

This is why the aforementioned conferences put a strong emphasis on what in German is called the *Vorpolitische* (prepolitical) as a social and cultural space distinct from, but closely intertwined with the overt participation in political life (see Kühnlein 2014). In the "prepolitical space" attitudes, preferences, and antipathies are formed, which can be

transformed into identifications with concrete political movements and thus be used as a means for political mobilization. As a concept, it shares a lot with the idea of political religion but emphasizes those actions of political agents for gathering support which have a strong cultural and/or social dimension but no explicit political agenda. Successful political movements skillfully operate at the interface between the political and the prepolitical, building social and cultural capital in the latter sphere, which can then be translated into political support at the voting booth. This is why pre-existing cultural identifications, especially if they are institutionalized (such as in churches), play such a powerful role in shaping political preferences and party identifications.

This also gives would-be political entrepreneurs guidance: they should not only aim at penetrating existing prepolitical spheres, for example by providing social services and leisure activities, but also creating such arenas on their own, that is, to establish their own systems of reference. As Philipp Karl shows in his article, the success of the *Jobbik* Party in Hungary is to a large extent built on the successful penetration and creation of prepolitical arenas, e.g. by cultural activities for youth or by establishing virtual spaces for exchange and socializing. In these spaces, the party can create and propagate its own truths, and its followers may live in their own world in which even the most obscure conspiracy theory begins to make sense. What makes organizations like *Jobbik* so successful is the fact that they give voice not only to concrete political, social, and economic concerns, but they propagate a new morality. This is one reason why established party systems find it so difficult to accommodate these movements: they propose radically different notions of citizenship and political organization and promise a radical break. Such political formations often seek alternatives in political and cultural traditions that are not associated with the “establishment.” This is why they have an anti-hegemonic edge which gives them appeal and emotive power among those who feel left behind, and especially among young people.

Another important insight by David R. Cameron helps us to understand past and current dynamics of political mobilization in East Central Europe: “Mobilization efforts more often than not represent the resistance of groups which believe that public policy discriminates against them and that they are peripheral to its formation” (1974, 169). Resistance against a national government which by socially or geographically marginal groups is seen as hostile to their cultural preferences or economic well-being can provide fertile soil for political mobilization. This is, of course, not an entirely new phenomenon, on the contrary: it can, for example, be illustrated by the successful mobilization strategies of the Sudeten German Party (SdP) in interwar Czechoslovakia. As Birgit Vierling (2014) has shown, the SdP skillfully played on the widespread sentiment of marginalization and discrimination among interwar Czechoslovakia’s German minority. Yet this alone would not have guaranteed success, and growing sympathies for Nazi Germany among the Germans of Czechoslovakia cannot explain the SdP’s rise to dominance among the minority either. The missing link was the sophisticated communication strategies of the party, which provided a coherent worldview and an apparently plausible explanation for the perceived ills of the Germans. It also managed to dominate the sphere of prepolitical identification. They were able to articulate their political and social visions in a way that resonated with their deep-seated discontent and self-image. Propaganda messages were skillfully combined with strategies of social control and violence on the local level as well as the professional use of, at that time, new media (especially the radio) for communicating their political ideas. By requesting group solidarity against the state, the party radically challenged the political status quo and marginalized political competitors for the votes of the German minority, which were portrayed as a danger to the unity of the group.

The significance of finding the right communication tools and messages for addressing groups that feel marginalized, and for mobilizing them, are highlighted by Karl in this special thematic section. The fact that the European Union now often serves as the punch bag for political groups on the right and the left, that claim to defend legitimate local interests against an intrusive state (i.e. Brussels), resonates with Cameron's theory of the mobilizing power of anti-hegemonic narratives.

Since the (failed) Arab spring, the potential of social media for inciting and organizing political protest is obvious. Yet such mobilization will result in sustained political action only if it becomes organized (and if it is not rooted out by a repressive state). Hence, political mobilization increases the volatility of a political system but does not necessarily challenge its power structures. As long as oppositional mobilization does not result in institutionalized forms of political participation and not shake the legitimacy of the political system, ruling parties and regimes can use political mobilization (including scapegoating) to stay in power despite popular urges at change. For that reason, their main goal is actually not sustained mobilization but the demobilization of society through displaying their own initiative and silencing oppositional movements by taking over their communication strategies. The article by Stefoska and Stojanov shows how the VMRO-DPMNE ruling party, whose leader (Nikola Gruevski) has developed increasingly authoritarian inclinations, attempts to demobilize society by mobilizing a part of it. In this way, it plays to emotions, deep-seated identities – which have been formed also by cultural actors in the prepolitical sphere – and a widespread feeling among the ethnic Macedonian population of rejection: by its neighbors, by Europe, and of course by the Albanian minority in the country, which also happens to be Muslim. Through history politics, the VMRO-DPMNE wants not only to solidify its image as the only genuine defenders of the Macedonian nation, but also to purposefully strengthen a cultural cleavage in order to prevent mobilization along common socioeconomic interests (of Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia). Already Gagnon (2004) has convincingly shown that the nationalists, who destroyed Yugoslavia and led the country into fratricide, did not genuinely aim at mobilization but rather wanted to demobilize a population which in its majority wanted to preserve peace and the unity in the country.

The most successful mobilizing tactics for achieving the strategic goal of demobilization are pursued by governments with authoritarian tendencies. The VMRO-DPMNE-dominated government in Macedonia was a case in point – until international pressure forced Prime Minister Gruevski to step down in early 2016 (but without excluding a comeback). Still the most notorious case of a European government that uses mobilizing practices for solidifying an illiberal political system, which is actually predicated on people not participating in politics, is the Hungarian one built systematically by Viktor Orbán and his FIDESz Party (Koenen 2015). An emblematic feature of their tactics is the constant creation of new foes, which are presented as deadly threats to the nation: these used to be Communists and more recently immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. Under conditions of electoral politics, autocratic parties cannot do without also rallying popular support, even if – as in Hungary – the institutions of power and the rules of the game, including the electoral law, are already strongly biased in favour of the ruling party. There needs to be an “other” against which the “genuine” members of the nation can be rallied, without letting citizens participate in the political process.

Populist mobilizations as well as excited political rhetoric in which political opponents are regularly presented as traitors or enemies of the nation, as can be observed in East Central Europe, are indicators of a lack of political consensus. Yet, they do not necessarily imply high rates of popular politicization, despite the fierce rhetoric on the surface of public

debate. Actually, the vitriolic political rhetoric in East Central Europe and the frequent emergence and disappearance of new populist parties do not correlate with high levels of popular participation in political life. Turnouts for parliamentary elections are significantly lower than in Western and Northern Europe, and in most cases are below the average of all European Union member states taken together (see Table 2). Apart from weak penetration by party organizations, the already mentioned high level of distrust in parties and state institutions plays an important role in that. Many people simply do not believe that their votes count and consider the whole democratic process to be a scam. In the case of Romania, Marius Tatar spoke of the “political alienation syndrome” (2015, 69). This is evinced not only in low turnouts at elections but also in a lower than the European average readiness of people to engage in various forms of political protest, from signing petitions to participating in demonstrations (thus, Romanians must have really been disgusted by the corruption of their political elite, when popular demonstrations after a devastating fire in a Bucharest night club brought down Victor Ponta’s government in November 2015).

East Central Europe today, thus, presents a challenging case for the study of different practices of political mobilization. Its political systems are characterized by various paradoxes, such as the combination of radical political rhetoric and low rates of political participation, or the exploitation of modern social media for nativist policies. Given recent political developments all over Europe, however, we suggest that the patterns of political mobilization in East Central Europe manifest the fault lines not only *within* the region but also *across* the continent. In the current debates about migration and European refugee policies, the countries of East Central Europe take a radically anti-immigrant position that is shared by populist parties and political newcomers in Western Europe like the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). Far from just being swing states between neoliberal and conservative political preferences, we can observe in East

Table 2. Turnout (last two parliamentary elections).

Country	Penultimate election	Last election
Albania	50.8% (2009)	53.3% (2013)
Bosnia-Herzegovina	56.5% (2010)	54.5% (2014)
Bulgaria	52.5% (2013)	51.1% (2014)
Croatia	54.2% (2011)	60.8% (2015)
Czech Republic	62.6% (2010)	59.5% (2013)
Estonia	63.5% (2011)	64.2% (2015)
Hungary	64.4% (2010)	61.8% (2014)
Kosovo	45.6% (2010)	42.6% (2014)
Latvia	59.5% (2011)	58.8% (2014)
Lithuania	48.6% (2008)	52.9% (2012)
Macedonia	63.5% (2011)	63.0% (2014)
Moldova	63.4% (2010)	55.8% (2014)
Montenegro	66.2% (2009)	70.6% (2012)
Poland	48.9% (2011)	50.9% (2015)
Romania	39.2% (2008)	41.8% (2012)
Serbia	57.8% (2012)	53.1% (2014)
Slovakia	59.1% (2012)	59.8% (2016)
Slovenia	65.6% (2011)	51.7% (2014)
Ukraine	57.4% (2012)	52.4% (2014)
Average	56.8%	53.0%
European Union (EU28)	68.0% (2012–2014)	

Source: The International IDEA Voter Turnout Website. Accessed 14 January 2016. <http://www.idea.int/vt/>.

Central Europe the emergence of a new political model which can be labeled “illiberal democracy.” Its main characteristic is its disdain for checks and balances, which are replaced by the populist claim to represent the “will of the people.” This has its followers in the more established European democracies as well. However, the region also proves that populist mobilization tactics might backfire, as Robert Fico recently has experienced. Apparently successful mobilization “from above” does not automatically translate into real support: it must link with the life-worlds of people. Contexts, thus, do matter greatly, which means that beyond comparison and abstraction, we also need thick descriptions of relevant local factors and practices. The three following studies present such.

Notes

1. See special issue “Gegen die Wand. Konservative Revolution in Polen,” *Osteuropa* 66 (1–2), 2016.
2. See World Bank Data (<http://data.worldbank.org>).
3. Eurostat data (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/RSI/#?vis=nuts2.economy&lang=en>).
4. According to the 2015 spring Eurobarometer survey, the EU enjoyed a “totally positive” image among 42% of Europeans across all member countries. Among the East Central European member countries, the “total positive” view was below – but not by much – this average in the Czech Republic and Slovenia (both 37%), Slovakia (38%), Latvia (39%). Romanians, Bulgarians, Poles, and Lithuanians, in contrast, were still among the most enthusiastic supporters of the European Union; even in Hungary, run by an openly EU-critical prime minister, 43% of those polled had a “totally positive” image of the EU and only 13% a “totally negative” one. See Eurobarometer. 2015. *Public Opinion in the European Union (Spring 2015: First Results)*. Accessed 15 January 2016. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_first_en.pdf.
5. See conference report at <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-5427>.

References

- Cameron, David R. 1974. “Toward a Theory of Political Mobilization.” *The Journal of Politics* 36 (1): 138–171.
- Ekiert, Grzegorz. 2015. “Three Generations of Research on Post-Communist Politics – A Sketch.” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29 (2): 322–337.
- Gagnon, Valère P. 2004. *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gherghina, Sergiu, and Huan-Kai Tseng. 2016. “Voting home or abroad? Comparing migrants’ electoral participation in countries of origin and of residence.” *Nationalities Papers* 44 (3): 456–472.
- Haughton, Tim, and Kevin Deegan-Krause. 2015. “Hurricane Season: Systems of Instability in Central and Eastern European Party Politics.” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29 (1): 61–80.
- Koenen, Krisztina. 2015. “Orbánismus in Ungarn. Ursprünge und Elemente der ‘illiberalen’ Demokratie.” *Osteuropa* 65 (11–12): 33–44.
- Kühnlein, Michael, ed. 2014. *Das Politische und das Vorpolitische: über die Wertgrundlagen der Demokratie*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- OECD. 2013. *Government at a Glance 2013*. Paris: OECD.
- Rovny, Jan. 2015. “Party Competition Structure in Eastern Europe: Aggregate Uniformity Versus Idiosyncratic Diversity?” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29 (1): 40–60.
- Tatar, Marius. 2015. “Rediscovering Protest: Reflections on the Development and Consequences of the Early 2012 Romanian Protests.” *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 9 (2): 62–85.
- Ther, Philipp. 2014. *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Vierling, Birgit. 2014. *Kommunikation als Mittel politischer Mobilisierung: die Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP) auf ihrem Weg zur Einheitsbewegung in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik (1933–1938)*. Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut.