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Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity

The Puzzle of East-Central Europe

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In this article, the authors examine the potential for concerted collective action in the societies that emerged from state socialism in East-Central Europe after 1989. Although scholars have found strong individual-level evidence that protest potential is weaker here than in other parts of the world, the authors question whether individual-level data adequately tap all the dimensions of activism that are relevant to contentious politics. They propose a differentiated model of civil society consisting of (a) internal potential for citizen action and (b) relational aspects of social activism and argue that some forms of the latter—and in particular, what they call “transactional activism”—are more robust than what evidence at the individual level suggests. They also examine some local and transnational-level data from the region and speculate about the capacities for collective action they find there and their potential for contributing to the construction of a transnational Europe.

Keywords: *activism; civil society; contentious politics; NGOs; political participation; protest*

How, and in what ways, do citizens of new democracies engage in contentious politics? And how well do the methods that scholars have used to examine mass participation tap the practices of activism that citizens of East-Central Europe have developed since the fall of state socialism? Those are the questions we consider in this article. Building on both case study and survey results from the region, we investigate the familiar claim that civil society emerged from state socialism with a weak potential for concerted collective action. Although there is strong evidence that individual participation is weak in this region, we question whether all the relevant

dimensions of social and political activism have been tapped in the tradition of research that has developed since 1989. We argue that although some forms of activism are indeed feeble in the new states of East Central Europe, there is evidence to suggest that other aspects—and particularly what we call “transactional activism”—are more robust.

Many authors have worried about the quality and the resilience of civil society in East-Central Europe, by which they mean the quality and magnitude of citizen participation of various kinds. This body of work raises three important questions, which we hope to revisit in this article:

Is it true that citizen participation in this region is too weak to influence political communication, to produce sufficient levels of participation, and serve as a check on elites?

If there are signs of a stirring of citizen participation, what forms is it taking?

What implications do these emerging patterns suggest about the region’s integration into the broader arena of participation in the European Union?

In this article, we review findings from the literature on citizen participation in East Central Europe that document a very low level of individual citizens’ capacity for concerted collective action. However, we also distinguish what we call the relational dimensions of participation from the magnitude of individual participation. We then present a process analysis we have carried out of a case of local, national, and supranational activism in Hungary that illustrates what we call “transactional activism.” Finally, we summarize evidence about this form of activism from different Central and Eastern European countries. In our conclusions, we speculate about the implications of the typology for the regions’ participation in the transactional politics of the European Union.

A Weak Civil Society?

Ever since the fall of communism brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets between 1989 and 1991, both East European dissidents

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(Raiser, Haerpfer, Nowotny, & Wallace, 2001) and Western observers (Arato, 1991; Bernhard, 1996; Ekiert, 1991; Nelson, 1996; Rose, 1993; Smolar, 1996) have been struck by the relative weakness of the postsocialist East European civil societies. Indeed, much of the literature on the region emphasizes weakening, demobilization, and even the disintegration of civil society; the increasing political apathy of postsocialist citizens; and radical or egotistic individualism, social anomie, amoral cynicism, paternalism, and distrust as predominant characteristics of the mass level of these polities.

Scholarly assessments of individual participation within Eastern Europe's societies have been mostly pessimistic. For example, Rose (2001) found that between 80% and 90% of Russians do not belong to any voluntary association (excluding trade unions). Crotty (2003) has suggested that, for the most part, advocacy groups are ineffective and citizens rarely know about the activities of civic groups. And Rose-Ackerman (2001) finds not only that volunteering appears to be relatively unimportant in the region but also that the formal civil society sector employs only about 2% of the East European populations, compared with 7.8% in the United States and 5% in France and Germany.

Howard (2003) documents that postsocialist countries have consistently low levels of organizational membership, both in absolute terms and relative to other regions. The postsocialist mean of 0.91 organizational memberships per person is exactly half of the postauthoritarian average of 1.82 and well under older democracies' mean of 2.39. Moreover, the difference between the older democracies and postauthoritarian averages is relatively small when compared to the large gap between postauthoritarian and postsocialist countries.

Even when different types of organizational participation are reviewed separately, the postsocialist mean is much lower than that of older democracies and of postauthoritarian countries for all types of participation, except for labor unions, where East European countries rank higher than postauthoritarian ones. Howard shows that postsocialist states have particularly low membership levels in organizations of a political and religious nature but vary more widely in membership in leisure and charitable organizations. Finally, Howard presents convincing data to suggest that membership rates have been dropping consistently since the collapse of the state-socialism, even in the once mandatory unions.

Raiser et al. (2001) confirm Howard's conclusion that participation in civic organizations is significantly lower in transition countries than it is in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries,

but with an interesting qualification. When asked about their attitudes toward the needs of others, postsocialist citizens did not differ that much from citizens in OECD countries; yet when asked to record the frequency with which they engaged in activities that implied a regard for the common good, East Europeans recorded significantly lower frequency of civic involvement than OECD citizens did (established also by Ockenfels & Weimann, 1996). Similarly, citizens in transition countries are not less interested in politics than are citizens of more developed countries; but unlike the case in OECD states, in East-Central Europe, political interest does not correlate with participation. Last, these authors document the generally lower levels of interpersonal trust in transition countries than in the average OECD country and a prevalence of smaller and more closed social circles in the region, with both inferences being robust with time. Howard (2003) also finds that people in postsocialist societies have remained extremely invested in their private circles and argues that bridging the wide gap between private and public spheres by participation in voluntary organizations is retarded by the widespread suspicion and mistrust toward most public organizations (see also Ledeneva, 1998).

The lack of interpersonal trust in the region has become a focus of much research (Crawford & Lijphart, 1995; Nichols, 1996; Osgood & Ong, 2002). An apparent oversupply of greed and envy (Theesfeld, 2004) is found to be coupled with a lack of trust in the new states and in the majority of their civil and political institutions (Carnaghan, 2001; Crotty, 2003; Miller, Grodeland & Koshechkina, 1998; Rose, Mishler, & Haerpfel, 1997). EuroBarometer surveys also show that citizens of the region have little trust in their leaders. For example, an average of 72% of East Europeans believe that their new regimes are more corrupt than their predecessors (Rose, 2001; Rose-Ackermann, 2001). Yet others have qualified those findings by pointing out that trust in acquaintances is relatively high (nearly 60%) and trust in members of one's social network is even higher—an important finding to the extent that political cooperation does not take place among perfect strangers (Gibson, 2001). Gibson not only finds that postsocialist countries are characterized by broad, porous, and politically relevant interpersonal networks but also that such networks could serve the diffusion of democratic ideas, because East-Central Europeans embedded in extensive social networks are more likely to support key democratic institutions and processes.

When civic groups are used as the units of analysis, the results are equally ambivalent. The early and the mid-1990s witnessed a surge in the creation of new voluntary and nonprofit organizations. Some of those

groups grew out of the remnants of the “moral civil societies” that had opposed state socialism before its collapse. Even though many of these movements suffered severe defections after 1989 as their activists moved en masse into government and business (Smolar, 1996), as a result of favorable changes in the laws governing nongovernmental organizations, many new civic groups came into being (Smolar, 1996). Many were the successors of issue-oriented community groups from the socialist era, including veterans’ unions, welfare groups, women’s circles, fishing, hunting, and soccer clubs. But despite a high degree of public confidence in them, these groups found it hard to advance significant social demands (Narozhna, 2004), primarily because of a lack of resources (Carson, 2001).

The third-sector groups,¹ which have come to dominate East-Central European civil societies, are believed to be divided between the haves and have nots of international assistance—a rift that has splintered nongovernmental organization (NGO) movements across the region, accentuating the new and old hierarchies and privileges and forcing aid-dependent groups, which might otherwise work together, into a competitive relationship (Baker & Jehilicka, 1998; Evans, 2002; Henderson, 2002). Attention has been drawn to the high turnover of single-issue organizations—which were established to apply for a specific grant or to obtain tax advantages—frequently to the exclusion of pursuing community causes, generating support locally, or engaging the wider population (Henry, 2001; Jancar-Webster, 1998; Narozhna, 2004; Richter, 2002; United States Agency for International Development, 1999b). However, there is some evidence that third-sector organizations have won official and societal acceptance as legitimate social actors that have sought to establish new democratic channels with political elites for input and the articulation of interests and have also learned to take advantage of transnational civil-society networks (Glenn & Mendelson, 2002; Klose, 2000; Weinthal, 2002).

In other words, the postsocialist era may have produced a broad spectrum of NGOs, interest groups, voluntary associations, and politically relevant interpersonal networks, but East Europeans have developed few of the civic skills that are believed to be important for supporting a democratic system (Mendelson & Gerber, 2005), and overall postcommunist citizens’ voices have remained poorly represented in the political decision-making process.

Is the glass half empty or half full? We revisit the question of the weakness of East European civil societies by conceptualizing civil participation in two dimensions: individual and relational. We see signs of the development of a civil society that is stronger in the development of lateral ties among civil society groups and vertical ties between these groups and public officials

than it is in the potential for broad citizen activism. We call this dimension of participation “transactional activism” and find evidence of it in a variety of settings and relationships at the local, national, and transnational levels.

Transactional and Participatory Activism

Most surveys and much of the case study literature on the weakness of civil society in East-Central Europe tend to frame activism as a property of individuals or of individual civil society organizations. But we think that this places undue emphasis on the magnitude of individual and group activism and too little on the actual relations among civil society groups, between them and political parties, and their relations with public officials. As we see it, collective action has at least two dimensions:

Individual participation is the dimension that is most directly measured by the survey evidence we have summarized above—whether people vote, join voluntary associations, or turn out for demonstrations or protest meetings.

But there are also *relational aspects of activism*—whether and how voluntary associations and advocacy groups interact with one another, with political parties, and with power holders. For example, do they coalesce around interests of common concern? Form loose networks that communicate regularly and share information? Combine for joint pressure on policy makers? And do they reach upward from the local level to the national and international levels of decision making? Are civic associations engaged in *transactional* activism?

By *participatory activism*, we mean the potential and actual magnitude of individual and group participation in civic life, interest group activities, voting, and elections.

By *transactional activism*, we mean the ties—enduring and temporary—among organized nonstate actors and between them and political parties, power holders, and other institutions.

We think that although there is a logical affinity between the magnitude of participation and the relations among publicly organized actors, the two dimensions should be kept analytically distinct and may vary independently of one another. For a variety of reasons, the societies that emerged from state socialism after 1989 seem to possess a higher level of transactional activism than the individual levels of participation that have been measured in surveys and in studies of individual civic groups.

Let us first be clear: We do not think that the evidence others have gathered of a low level of individual participation in Central and Eastern Europe

is mistaken. And there are bound to be negative consequences from the low levels of citizen participation that these scholars have uncovered. But such a weakness does not necessarily imply a lack of societal capacity for weaving relations among civil society groups and between them, political parties, and power holders, all of which may flourish in the face of a low level of mass participation. We see a richer picture of transactions consisting of coalition formation around single issues, network formation, and negotiation with elites on the part of civic groups in Central and Eastern Europe than would be predicted from the levels of individual participation that have been observed.

A high level of intergroup transactions in the presence of low levels of mass participation may be creating political systems of a decidedly elitist cast. But power holders confronted by organizational elites with weak followerships are nevertheless more constrained and may be more responsive than power holders faced by inert or alienated citizenries. As occurred in Western countries in their own periods of political development, relations among groups and between them and parties and policy makers may be laying the foundation for vigorous civil societies in the future. We illustrate these relational aspects of collective action in the case study developed in the next section of the article. Then we present some survey evidence to examine the strength of transactional activism before turning to the implications of our proposal for East Central Europe's participation in the European Union in the conclusion.

Closing the Ring in Budapest

Well before Central and East European countries entered the European Union, the European Council and the Pan-European Transport Conferences, supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB), decided to finance the building of a ring road—the M0—around Hungary's capital city. But according to the original plans for the northern section of the M0, the road would pass within 250 meters of a housing estate inhabited by 5,000 people, within 150 meters of a nursery school, and within 400 meters of apartment buildings in the area and in connecting to the M2 through a nature protection area (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998). A sequence of first local and then transnational activities was triggered by the local residents and their allies.

Opposition first emerged from local government officials. Even though two Budapest district municipalities and three towns near the city refused

further construction of the M0 on their territory, construction of the northern section began in 1998 (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998). The public was to be informed of the project at a hearing, but as the hearing was poorly publicized, none of the affected citizens or environmental groups was aware of the plans until construction work began (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998). Opposition turned to protest when local residents organized themselves into the Kaposztasmegyer Environmental Protection Association (KEPA) and shortly thereafter asked for professional assistance from a national federation of nongovernmental environmental organizations called the Clean Air Action Group (CAAG). CAAG and KEPA also received legal assistance from the Environmental Management and Law Association (EMLA), a national environmental service provider, and from a lawyer resident in Kaposztasmegyer (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1999). As a result, CAAG prepared a report in which the group argued that the exhaust and the noise generated by the increased traffic on the Ring Road would exceed Hungarian air and noise standards by 25% to 30% and would thus violate key public provisions of the Hungarian Constitution, of the Regional Planning and Development Act, and of a Hungarian Constitutional Court decision (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998). CAAG and KEPA proceeded to organize a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Transport.

Although KEPA was entrusted with ensuring good protester turnout, CAAG was instrumental in managing the rally logistics, ranging from choosing the time and location to supplying the protest signs. At the end of the protest, a petition demanding an end to the M0 construction project was handed to the Minister of the Transport (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998). In July of 1998, KEPA and CAAG, with the legal assistance of EMLA, took the Hungarian state to court. On July 21, 1999, the Capital Court of Budapest issued an injunction to halt construction of the northern section of the M0 motorway, stating that it would worsen the local environment, endanger the health of tens of thousands of local citizens, and cause economic damage to area residents. But in spite of the court decision, the M0's northern section was ultimately constructed (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1999).

Failure at the local level did not end the campaign. CAAG had woven a tight and extensive network of partnerships, not only with Hungarian government officials but also in the EU and with other (mostly East and West European) environmental groups and competent officials, a network that facilitated its work by adding to the federation's own political weight and to its technical and political knowledge. The CAAG sought the assistance

of the Central and Eastern European Bankwatch Network to protest the M0 construction at the European level. Even before the Budapest Capital Court had issued its decision in October 1998 on behalf of KEPA and CAAG, the Central and Eastern European Bankwatch and one of its U.S. partners, the New York-based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, were petitioning the EIB, which was partially financing the project, to withdraw its funding. Again, through the Bankwatch, CAAG sent letters to the European Commission protesting the project (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 2002).

This was a significant scaling up of the level of conflict, but the Bank's president denied the request, stating that any project financed by the EIB had been subject to detailed national environmental studies and had received the necessary legal clearances (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1999). Then CAAG and the Central and Eastern European Bankwatch turned to the EU Ombudsman for legal redress. The Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau agreed to submit a complaint on behalf of the Bankwatch to the EU Ombudsman against the M0 construction. The complaint states that by failing to adhere to the EU's Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, the EIB appeared to have violated its policy to conform to EU Directives when lending outside the EU (Central and Eastern European Bankwatch, 1998; Council Directive 85/337/EEC). In its defense, the Bank argued that the environmental impact of the project had been fully investigated by the Hungarian government and appropriate environmental impact reduction measures were included in the project design. The Bank also challenged the Ombudsman's request to investigate its decision to finance the project (European Ombudsman, 2001).

In his ruling, the Ombudsman did not find that his inquiries revealed maladministration on the part of the Bank in the M0 case (European Ombudsman, 2001). He did, however, maintain that the Ombudsman's prerogatives do not allow for the kinds of exceptions from community law that the EIB claimed for itself. He also concluded that when granting a loan, it is the Bank's responsibility to check whether a proper environmental impact assessment or other sufficient environmental studies have been carried out for the project and that the appropriate requirements set by European Community legislation should also be taken into account.

We do not claim that this case study is typical or representative of civil society in Eastern Europe in general. However, it seems to us that the episode tells us a lot about the kinds of contentious political processes that can be observed throughout the new democracies of the region. Recall what happened in that episode:

First, a new and inexperienced neighborhood group emerged to challenge what seemed to be a *fait accompli* on the part of the EIB in collusion with local elites who had not bothered to consult the local population;

Second, these local protesters were rapidly able to bring in expert opinion and involve national and transnational NGOs, which then were able to scale the conflict upward by making an effective presentation to the EU Ombudsman;

Third, both CAAG and Bankwatch served as repositories for technical and political knowledge, thus compensating for the inexperience of the grassroots group by serving as brokers who mediated between individuals temporarily mobilized around an issue of particular concern to them and the Hungarian state and the relevant EU institutions.

Although the campaign was not successful in securing what the local protesters demanded, it had two indirect effects at the European level: the redefinition of EIB prerogatives and the birth of a second campaign when Central and Eastern European Bankwatch joined with four other international NGOs (Transport and Environment, World Wildlife Fund, BirdLife International, and Friends of the Earth Europe) to raise awareness about the contradictions between EU transport policy and EU nature conservation law.

We have little evidence that the grassroots association that started this process of protest and advocacy either enjoyed mass support or survived the end of its campaign. The real strength of the campaign was relational: It triggered complex horizontal and vertical transactional processes. But was this campaign atypical of the low level of civil activism in East-Central Europe in general? There is evidence that it is in fact representative of a combination of low citizen activism and high levels of transactional activism elsewhere as well.

Transactional Activism in Central and Eastern Europe

There have been few efforts to collect comprehensive data on civic campaigns in East-Central Europe, which would be the only way to allow for meaningful cross-country and longitudinal comparisons of transactional activism. A step, albeit quite imperfect, in that direction has been taken with the NGO Sustainability Index studies for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, prepared by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) from 1998 to 2004. The Index is based largely on the understandings of both local and international donor experts and is collected,

in part, through field-based focus groups. As such, it might be somewhat optimistic. Still, it illustrates NGO coalition formation practices and advocacy capacity (along with other characteristics) of the third sectors in each country of the region.² In examining the evidence, we limit our investigation to the new members of the EU, because we are also interested in discussing the implications of activism patterns for the region's integration into the broader arena of participation in the Union. For each country, we examined the USAID annual civil society report to evaluate transactional activism in the region (i.e., the strength and frequency horizontal and vertical interactions of civic actors).

Despite their fragmentary and contested nature, the USAID studies reveal that civil society/government relations document the existence of a few transparently governed and capably managed NGOs and a supply of professional cadres of local experts and consultants across a variety of sectors. The data also suggest some ability and capacity of the NGO sector in Central and Eastern Europe to respond adequately to changing needs, issues, and interests of their communities. "Though many advocacy campaigns continue to be initiated by international donors, local NGOs are increasingly identifying their own advocacy issues and messages, forming issue-based coalitions, and educating the public on key issues of reform" (USAID, 2001).

There is ample evidence that NGOs in the region have begun to form coalitions to pursue issues of common interest and to monitor and lobby legislatures and executive bodies. Indicative of their overall strength and importance is Toepler and Salamon's (2003) finding that advocacy and political activities of Central and East European NGOs comprise twice the share of total nonprofit activity of similar organizations in the West. Some examples that demonstrate the sectoral breadth and number of successful advocacy and coalition formation campaigns at the national level in just one year (2003) are summarized in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

It should be noted that there is some variation in the advocacy and coalition-formation capacity of third sectors across the 10 new members of the EU. As Table 1 demonstrates, civil societies in Poland and the Baltic countries stand out as of 2004 in their ability to mobilize coalitions to respond to changing needs, issues, and interests and to monitor and work with the different levels of government. In contrast, the third sectors in Hungary, but especially in Romania and Slovenia, have less experience in information sharing and networking within the sector to then inform and advocate within the government.

Table 1
Advocacy Capacity of Eastern European
Civil Societies: 1998 to 2004

| Country | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Bulgaria | 2.8 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Czech Republic | — | — | 2.0 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 2.0 | 2.2 |
| Estonia | — | — | 2.0 | 1.8 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Hungary | 1.0 | 1.5 | 3.0 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.3 |
| Latvia | 4.0 | — | 3.0 | 2.2 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Lithuania | 2.0 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 1.8 | 1.6 | 2.0 |
| Poland | 2.0 | 2.5 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 2.2 | 1.9 |
| Romania | 3.5 | 4 | 3.5 | 4.5 | 4.0 | 3.8 | 3.6 |
| Slovenia | — | — | — | — | — | 3.0 | 3.8 |
| Slovakia | 2.0 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 1.6 | 2.2 |

Note: The United States Agency for International Development Advocacy Index measures the following: (a) the extent to which coalitions of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been formed around issues and whether NGOs monitor party platforms and government performance; (b) the prevalence of advocacy in different sectors, at different levels of government and with the private sector; (c) the NGOs' record in influencing public policy. This dimension does not measure the level of NGOs' engagement with political parties.

Consolidation (1 to 3): The NGO sector demonstrates the ability and capacity to mobilize citizens and other organizations to respond to changing needs, issues, and interests of the community and country. As NGOs secure their institutional and political base, they begin to (a) form coalitions to pursue issues of common interest, including NGO legislation; (b) monitor and lobby political parties; and (c) monitor and lobby legislatures and executive bodies. NGOs at this stage of development will review their strategies and possess an ability to adapt and respond to challenges by sector.

Midtransition (3 to 5): Narrowly defined advocacy organizations emerge and become politically active in response to specific issues. These organizations may often present their concerns to inappropriate levels of government and weakness of the legislative branch might be revealed or incorrectly assumed, as activists choose to meet with executive branch officials instead. Beginnings of alternative policy analysis are found at universities and think tanks. Information sharing and networking within the NGO sector to inform and advocate its needs within the government begins to develop.

Early Transition (5 to 7): Broad umbrella movements, composed of activists concerned with a variety of sectors and united in their opposition to the old regime, fall apart or disappear. Some countries at this stage might not have even experienced any initial burst of activism. There may be an increase in passivity, cynicism, or fear within the general public. NGO activists may be afraid to engage in dialogue with the government, feel inadequate to offer their views, and/or do not believe the government will listen to their recommendations.

Source: United States Agency for International Development, 1998, 1999a, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004

To get a more concrete sense of the frequency and impact of civil society and government interactions, we looked at a 2004 United Nations Development Program survey study of local and regional governance in Bulgaria—not generally thought of as a robust modern civil society.³ According to the USAID Index (please refer to Table 1), the third sector in Bulgaria is closest to the average performer out of the 10 new members of the EU. If there is evidence of effective civil society and government interactions in this case, it would be safe to suggest that similar processes are unfolding in the other East European countries as well.

Although the findings are limited, the survey reveals that—faced with the challenges of decentralized governance—many Bulgarian subnational authorities draw on their relations with NGOs, whose experience, expertise, and resources have proven valuable to them. For example, in the process of drafting their local development strategy, which details annual government commitments in the realms of economic, social, civil society, infrastructural, and environmental policies and is the foundation of municipal budgets, 51% of all Bulgarian local governments report extensive or moderate cooperation with social and economic actors. In addition, 53% of the local authorities organized public hearings to collect proposals for projects under the strategy, 34% organized focus group discussions, 34% set up advisory councils, 18% held public meetings, and only 12% conducted none of these. Likewise, after having drafted the strategy and its constituent projects, 56% of Bulgarian municipalities consulted NGOs to help them improve these programs, 48% consulted businesses, and 25% the local citizenry. In the policy implementation stage, only 17% of local governments reported that they neither joined nor assisted a local civil society organization project. However, 32% of Bulgarian municipalities assessed their cooperation with local NGOs as poor and 43% saw their cooperation with local businesses as unsatisfactory, but 63% were eager to improve their cooperation with social and economic actors and the public in general.

The Bulgarian findings regarding civic participation in regional policy making are consistent with these findings about local governance. Local social and economic actors are involved in 58% of district policy planning. In drafting district development strategies and the programs under them, 17% of district authorities organized public hearings, 42% held focus group discussions, 33% created advisory councils, and 8% held public meetings, but 25% conducted none of those. The picture is mixed: Although 21% of all district governments reported poor interactions with *local* NGOs, 38%

of these administrations assessed their cooperation with *regional* NGOs as poor and 42% of all district authorities had unsatisfactory relations with local businesses; 50% of these governments seek to improve their cooperation with local social and economic actors.

In terms of the impact of civil society involvement in municipal policy making on local governance, the United Nations Development Program data reveal that partnerships with social and economic actors increase the degree of local development strategy implementation. For example, 75% of all municipalities that developed their local strategies in cooperation with the local citizenry (either directly or through intermediary civil society organizations) fulfilled more than 50% or all of their commitments, compared to 50% of local authorities who used external consultants or advice by national government officials in the development of their strategies. Such a difference is both statistically significant and practically meaningful (also see Petrova, 2005).

None of this evidence, of course, tells us much about the quality and quantity of mass participation in voluntary activity or of political participation in general in these new democracies. But this is precisely our point: Although individual measures of participation tap the potential of a society for mass politics, by focusing only on this dimension, we may miss a peculiar characteristic of activism in the region, its predominantly *transactional* character, with all that this implies about its potential for coalition building and problem-solving negotiation with elites on one hand and certain isolation from those it claims to represent on the other hand.

Discussion

Students of contentious politics in the West will find nothing very new here. Many studies have detailed how collective action has both transactional and participatory aspects (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Other scholars have underscored the importance of contextualizing findings about individual orientations toward politics (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005). If the Central and Eastern European countries have a low level of participatory activism—that is, if these societies are producing more NGO generals than professional soldiers—that may be the result of contingent political factors rather than of a deep-seated weakness in civil society.⁴ But a low level of individual civic participation does

not necessarily imply a lack of capacity for transactional activism, which may provide incentives for as well as constraints on civic and political elites and their international allies, even in the face of a weak mass participation.

We do not maintain that a thriving civil society has already emerged from state socialism. We only suggest that when we examine the actual relations among challengers and authorities, we find a more variegated and richer mix of activism than either the individual level data or case studies of civil groups reveal. As our story of the M0 Motorway in Budapest and our review of Central and East European coalitions and campaigns suggests, nonstate actors in the region are developing a transactional capacity that seems to outstrip their capacity to mobilize large numbers of citizens in enduring organized collective action.

Of course, there is another side to the coin: If Central and East Europeans do not develop a participatory activism potential, then NGOs, interest groups, and social movements that claim a popular mandate will lack the legitimacy to convince officials to take them seriously. They may also veer in the familiar direction predicted for professional movement organizers by Michels a century ago: officers without armies whose goals may drift away from the needs of those they claim to represent. And they may lack the impulsion of popular pressure to empower them vis-à-vis higher levels of authority, like the European Union (Michels, 1962).

What are the implications of these observations for East-Central Europe's integration into the European Union? We often assume that institutions with participatory structures are governed by a logic of mobilization (e.g., the greater the mobilization of opinion around a given issue, the more likely are decision makers to respond). But the European Union, with its glaring democratic deficit, is hardly the paradigm of participatory politics that Western scholars who criticize East-Central Europe seem to implicitly assume. Where major legislation is proposed by a nonelective supranational Commission in which major legislative power is held by the Council of Ministers and citizen activism is distant from the centers of decision making, the possession of expertise and the development of the skills of negotiation and lobbying may be far more important than the mobilization of opinion (Marks & McAdam, 1999). In the current crisis of European integration, Easterners accustomed to the thrust and parry of transactional politics in systems in transition may have an advantage over their more institutionally constrained and popularly accountable Western counterparts.

Appendix A

Coalition Formation in Eastern Europe: National Level Campaigns in 2003

Although Central and East European civil society organizations are not always eager to form coalitions to influence policy makers, organizations with a common objective, regional location, or those working in the same field often do reach agreements. Some examples are the following:

Successful, large-scale advocacy campaigns in 2003 were implemented by the Estonian Students Union (loans for student families), the Movement for the Estonian Child, and by environmental groups struggling to preserve trees in Jamejala National Park.

The Bulgarian Media Coalition coordinated a group of 55 nongovernmental organization (NGOs) in fighting proposed amendments to the penal code that would unreasonably expand the definition of classified information, making it virtually impossible for journalists to remain “the fourth power in the country.” Again in 2003, other Bulgarian NGOs have also successfully formed coalitions around the environment, youth issues, the amendments to the penal code, and local elections.

A coalition of six Romanian NGOs closely monitored the 2003 drafting of a new law on the establishment of political parties and influenced the outcome to reduce the number of required members for registration of a new party. Another positive example was the coalition of NGOs and trade unions that created a human chain around the parliament building, successfully protesting government attempts to block public access to the files kept by the former Romanian secret police.

Some examples of successful Slovene NGO issue-based coalitions from 2003 include Trust, Program Partnership for Environment, Coordination of NGO networks, different coalitions for helping the refugees, asylum seekers, and homosexuals, which all operate on the national level.

Czech NGOs have already established several regional and sector based coalitions such as Association of Social and Social Health Care NGOs (health and social care), Green Circle (environment), Spider’s Web (environmental education), the Centre for Community Organizing (community development) and the Donors’ Forum (foundations). Environmental NGOs are especially unified in their cooperation, which has enabled them to successfully advocate for some changes in regional development plans and other local development projects.

In Hungary, the National Civil Fund and its environmental twin the National Civil Representation initiative were organized in the early 2000s. Moreover, many Hungarian NGOs have sought participation in the Hungarian Association of NGOs for Development and in the Economic and Social Council at the EU.

Polish NGOs are also continuing to form cross-border partnerships within the region, including ongoing mentorships and collaborations with NGOs in Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and throughout the former Yugoslavia. In addition, some Polish NGOs have a permanent delegation in Brussels—the Polish NGO Representative Office. There are currently a number of coalitions and umbrella groups working on issues such as children’s rights, the rights of the disabled, human rights, and environmental protection. Furthermore, in every big Polish city, there is an NGO council or similar structure.

Slovak NGOs often create small coalitions to lobby for legislative changes and have had some major successes, including a new law on waste, highway construction, the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman, and a broadly supported campaign against racial discrimination, all in 2001.

Source: United States Agency for International Development, 2003

Appendix B

Civil Society—Government Interactions in Eastern Europe: National Level Campaigns in 2003

Hungarian NGOs advocating for the rights of the disabled are cited by international observers as “an outstanding example of successful advocacy capacity” (United States Agency for International Development, 2001).

Slovak NGOs too demonstrated a certain level of sophistication during the 2003 discussion on the ban on abortions, which was controversial both in society and within the NGO community. Two NGO coalitions—one for and one against—were formed around this issue, proving that different NGO groups can work and advocate for their own constituency.

Czech NGOs have had the opportunity to comment on new legislation as it is being drafted, largely because of the growing willingness of public authorities to communicate and cooperate with NGOs.

In Poland, there have already been several dozen “social dialogue institutions,” in addition to NGO representatives, often invited to participate in various consultative bodies such as the *Forum for Non-Governmental Initiatives Association*, which took part in the preparation of the National Development Program. An example of the visible improvement in the ability of NGOs to conduct popular campaigns on particular issues is the campaign “Children Protected by Law,” which led to significant changes in the way children are heard before courts. In general, campaigns and lobbying activities by issue organizations in ecology, human rights, gender equity, and disabled persons have continued to occur even more frequently in Poland since the beginning of the 2000s.

In Romania, NGOs have also increasingly been engaging—even if not always successfully—in advocacy campaigns, including issues of domestic violence, child protection, anti-corruption, environment, constitutional revisions, and political party activities.

Bulgarian NGOs have had success in opposing and supporting legislative proposals in Parliament. For example, the 2003 lobbying efforts by the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria resulted in the adoption of the first legislative step in fiscal decentralization, providing municipalities with the discretion to decide how to spend a small portion of their municipal budgets.

In Estonia, Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, the Estonian Fund For Nature, the Movement of Estonian Villages and Small Towns, and others have done well in helping to develop legislation, the creation of the National Development Plan in the framework of the European Union’s funds structure, and policy making in the educational and environmental domains.

Lobbying of Slovene NGOs has been successful in issue areas such as rights to free legal aid, Humanitarian Organizations Law, Disabled Organizations Law, a little less at new Societies Act, Asylum Act, but absolutely unsuccessful at Freedom of Information Act.

It should be noted, however, that barriers to civil society–government partnerships still exist on both sides. Some of the ties between government officials and NGOs remain personal rather than institutional. In addition, public officials often distrust the mandate and/or competence of NGOs. Finally, many, especially young, civil society organizations are not always sufficiently familiar with lobbying methods and do not always have enough information about existing possibilities under the law or about the issues discussed.

Source: United States Agency for International Development, 2003

Notes

1. Third-sector groups are “formal, functionally differentiated and frequently professional non-profit organizations that interact with state and market actors” (Richter, 1998, p. 1).

2. Seven different dimensions of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector are analyzed in the Index: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, NGO infrastructure, and public image. The Index database can be found at http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/ (April 17, 2006).

3. The survey was administered to all municipalities in Bulgaria by United Nations Development Program officials or their assistants from the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria and from the Foundation for Local Government Reform. The majority of the answers was provided by high-ranking municipal officials—a deputy mayor or a senior expert—and were validated through focus group discussions (United Nations Development Program, 2004).

4. It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate on the factors affecting low individual participation; however, Howard (2003) and Greskovits (1998), among others, have focused particularly on this issue.

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