Mobilizing Grassroots in the City: Lessons for Civil Society Research in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

What can we learn about civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Russia from studies on activism within the region's urban spaces? In this article, we argue that studying urban activism in CEE offers useful insights for general theory building about the importance of uneventful protests, the formation of agency and the processes of becoming active in the public sphere (conceptualized here as "political becoming"), and the enabling role of informality in collective action in adverse contexts. By contributing to our understanding in this way, these insights help to advance relational and process-based conceptions of civil society.

Keywords Central and Eastern Europe · Civic activism · Civil society · Post-socialism · Urban movements

Introduction

Civil society in Central and Eastern Europe has been the topic of much scholarly debate.[1] In the first two decades after 1989, narratives about "weak civil society" dominated the research literature. As Salamon put it "despite its achievements […] the Central European civil society sector remains […] a fragile organism, undercapitalized, under-staffed, and still not fully integrated into the prevailing political and economic order" (2004, p. 9). Scholars lamenting the weakness of civil society in post-socialist Europe have highlighted the lack of social and political trust, the general passivity of the population, and low levels of engagement in political

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[1]Traditionally, the term "Eastern Europe" included Russia, but after 1989, it came to refer to the post-communist European states, excluding Russia. While we are keenly aware of the specificity of the Russian social and political context, we believe that the countries' common histories and cultural similarities allow Russia to be included in this analysis. Sadly, the growing authoritarian trend in Hungary and Poland indicates that differences in civil society actors' situations in the respective countries may not be as big as one would expect.

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processes, interpreting these as the historical legacy of the socialist-state experience. This research has focused on the NGO-ization of civil society, which is characterized by depolitiicization and donor dependency due to these NGOs being sponsored by external sources, especially during the first decade of economic and political transformation (e.g., Gawin & Gliński 2006; Mendelson & Glenn 2002; Narozhna 2004). Only in the last decade has this characterization been increasingly challenged by scholars interested in grassroots activism and community work, as well as social movements working on behalf of marginalized groups (e.g., Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013; Chimiak 2014; Mocek 2014; Jacobsson 2015; Pleyers & Sava 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017). Recently, warnings about "shrinking civic space" in Hungary and Poland have also been voiced (e.g., Szuleka 2018), along with analysis of mass social movements that emerged in response to growing authoritarianism in some countries, such as Poland (e.g., Korolczuk 2016; Majewska 2018).

This article sides with the literature arguing that the overly pessimistic views on civil society in this region—which for a long time dominated scholarly debates on this issue—are in part biased by the methodological and theoretical lenses used in dominant research (e.g., Ekiert & Kubik 2017). A reassessment of post-socialist civil society is needed on both empirical and theoretical grounds. In this article, our focus is on urban activism. We argue that an examination of civic activism in CEE urban spaces can yield more general theoretical insights for post-socialist civil society research (see also Jacobsson 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017).

To this end, the article ties recent research on urban grassroots activism to the existing literature on civil society in post-socialist countries. More specifically, it is argued that studying urban activism in CEE offers useful insights for theory building on matters such as the role of uneventful and low-visibility protests, the formation of agency, and the processes of becoming active in the public sphere (here conceptualized as "political becoming"). This theory building may help in developing relational and process-based conceptions of civil society in post-socialist contexts.

Why focus specifically on urban activism? Because this field is illustrative of interesting new developments in post-socialist civil society, particularly the growth and the important role of grassroots activism and mobilization from below. An analysis of contemporary urban activism reveals a new post-NGO-ization phase in the development of CEE civil society. Contemporary urban mobilizations are examples of domestically driven, grassroots activism opposing the professionalization and bureaucratization characteristic of externally sponsored civil society organizations (e.g., Aidukaitė and Fröhlich, 2015; Bitušíková 2015; Jacobsson 2015; Domaradzka & Wijkström 2016; Florea, Gagyi, & Jacobsson 2018). Thus, whereas post-socialist civil society has often been criticized as NGO-ized—i.e., elitist, detached from the people it claims to represent, and unable to address the most pressing issues brought about by rapid social and economic transformation—urban activists tend to be concerned with ordinary people's everyday problems, to be more able (and willing) to mobilize citizens around common interests, and to address the economic and social consequences of neoliberalism. Moreover, those cases of urban activism that will be discussed further in this article illustrate how people also become politically active and engaged in social and political contexts that are not conducive to collective action. These cases point to new hybrid forms of action and organization, revealing the fluid boundaries between the formal and the informal, and between the public and the private spheres. Finally, urban activism illustrates another important development: efforts to overcome the fragmentation of civil society driven by competition for scarce resources and a lack of trust in unknown others (cf. Jacobsson 2012; Mendelson & Glenn 2002). As detailed later, studies on urban grassroots movements in CEE

testify to the development of deliberative, collaborative processes, and structures aimed at strengthening activists' position vis-à-vis the authorities and/or facilitating dialog among citizen groups. We argue that it is necessary to find ways to conceptualize and capture these processes in order to give a fair account of civil society's development here and elsewhere.

Our analysis is based on existing research, as well as the outcomes of three new research projects: *Institutional constraints and creative solutions: Civil society in Poland in comparative perspective*, which included comparative analyses of civil society in Poland, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic; *Urban social movements in the post-soviet context: Political opportunity structures and local activism in Moscow and Vilnius*; and *Housing, social mobilisation and urban governance in Central and Eastern Europe*, which focused on urban activism in Bucharest, Budapest and Vilnius.[2]

The article is structured as follows. First, we give a brief account of the urban transformation in CEE and the development of urban activism in response to this transformation. Based on this account, we draw out five lessons for post-socialist civil society research, followed by the conclusion.

Urban Transformation and Urban Movements in Central and Eastern Europe

While our research focus here is on CEE, including Russia, our central argument is that the development of civic activism in the region is marked by both general trends in the contemporary world and the region's distinctive experiences of state-socialism and post-socialist transformation. Secondly, it is argued that these distinctive experiences can yield more general insights into the study of post-socialist civic activism.

Whereas CEE is hardly a singular entity—and processes such as gentrification and privatization do not influence different localities in exactly the same ways across this region—we nevertheless believe that there are reasons to look at urban activism in the region as a whole. In CEE, recent decades have been marked by the rapid, far-reaching liberalization of housing and urban policy, which has often fully opened up these areas to market forces. These developments were followed by problems such as inadequate state policies and urban planning; conflicts over the restitution and privatization of property; the deterioration of housing stock; the low levels of new social housing being built; increases in rents and electricity prices, the emergence of gentrification, gated communities, and social polarization; and the extensive privatization and commercialization of public space (e.g., Andrusz, Harloe, & Szelényi 1996; Van Kempen, Vermeulen, & Baan 2005; Altrock, Güntner, Huning, & Peters 2006; Stanilov 2007; Hirt 2012). Thus, CEE cities reflect general trends such as neoliberal urbanization (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer 2012), as they engage in a game of inter-urban competition and city branding to attract investment and position themselves as creative cities in the global economy (Lisiak 2010). These initiatives are accompanied by "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2012), pushing the urban poor to the city margins (Florea 2015; Jelinek 2010). At the same time, compared to Western European cities, CEE cities have experienced much sharper and more abrupt changes, which have taken place in the context

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of relatively weak state institutions and a civil society still under development. These negative effects of urban restructuring have therefore been mitigated by redistributive public policies and guided by public planning to a lesser extent, permitting the emergence of non-transparent "growth coalitions" between public authorities and private urban developers (Stanilov 2007). Even if citizens' voices gradually have begun to be heard in urban governance (e.g., Bitušíková 2015; Van Kempen, Vermeulen, & Baan 2005), citizens' insight and involvement in urban governance remains highly uneven across CEE countries and Russia.

Unsurprisingly, these urban developments have spurred opposition among residents, who have mobilized to demand urban policy changes, heritage protection, and sustainable housing and living conditions. City residents have organized actions to protect green areas and historic buildings against exploitation by urban developers (Ivanou 2016; Tykanova & Khokhlova 2015), to protest gentrification and the privatization and commodification of public spaces (Jelinek 2010; Pixová & Sládek 2017), and to demand affordable housing (Polańska 2015; Udvarhelyi 2015). Local protests have engaged citizen groups of different social backgrounds, such as neighborhood-based networks and community organizations (Aidukaite & Jacobsson 2015), the elderly (Leipnik 2015), economically disadvantaged tenants, squatters, and various brands of new-left activists. At times, these groups have cooperated and formed multi-group and multi-class alliances (Domaradzka & Wijkström 2016; Florea 2015; Polańska 2015). Some countries badly hit by the 2008 economic crisis have seen the formation of multi-group alliances by the new middle classes and the new poor (including those afflicted by housing debt after 2008). For example, The "City is For All" was formed in Budapest in 2009, inspired by a similar initiative in New York (Udvarhelyi 2015; Florea, Gagyi, & Jacobsson 2018).

As we have argued, urban mobilization in CEE reflects both the specificities of urban change during post-socialist transformation, as well as those broader, more general processes of economic, political, and social change—such as increased polarization and new social cleavages—that are due to neoliberalization, globalization, and the transformation of urban governance. Grassroots mobilizations in CEE, as expected, draw on developments in other parts of the world, sometimes strongly critiquing capitalism and neoliberal ideology. New leftist framing in urban activism exists here, too, as in Right to the City- or Occupy-inspired activism (Bilić & Stubbs 2015). Anti-austerity protests have taken place in recent years in the region, most notably in Southeastern Europe, and they have often been mixed with anti-corruption protests and disillusionment with domestic political elites (Krašovec 2013). However, in other cases, such discourses are notably absent among urban activists. Leftist framing is more complicated in a context where the left can be associated with the socialist-state past. Consequently, much urban activism in CEE employs less spectacular forms of action, and the critique of neoliberalism and globalization is not always articulated.

Thus, whereas scholars studying urban mobilizations in Western Europe and North America are inclined to focus on movements capable of challenging neo-liberalism at the discursive level—such as the Right to the City activism, anti-austerity protests, and anti-neoliberal protests in general (e.g., Harvey 2012; Mayer 2013; Smith & McQuarrie 2012)—a different lens is needed to understand urban activism in the post-socialist context. Here, it is more useful to side with scholars pleading for more attention to everyday life (e.g., Boudreau, Boucher, & Liguori 2009) or "the politics of small things" (Goldfarb 2006) and its relation to collective urban struggles. As Goldstein (2017) has argued, "everyday discreet activism" appears as a distinct form of activist citizenship—albeit less radical and more long-term than engagement in either NGOs or social movements—in contexts where other forms of activism appear

unsatisfactory or ineffective, as in the post-Yugoslav urban setting Goldstein studied. Moreover, in CEE countries, many activists combat the negative consequences of privatization and marketization by directing their claims to local authorities, or by forming self-help communities rather than explicitly challenging neoliberal institutions and ideology. Importantly, in both cases, activists not only oppose specific policies but also propose new ways of doing democracy on the local and sometimes the national level.

As in urban development, the challenges to collective action in CEE are typified by both the region's distinctive experiences and more general trends in civic engagement. Here, the mobilization of collective action needs to overcome not just political distrust but also a preference for individualist or market-oriented problem-solving strategies as well as individualistic notions of agency, which were strongly supported by the post-socialist economic transformation. Rampant individualism is promoted by both global trends of neoliberalization and political disillusionment and a locally rooted tendency toward anti-collectivism, a legacy of the socialist experience (Hirt 2012) reinforced by the weakness of political institutions. Consequently, in countries such as Poland, many people feel most able to exert their freedom and agency in the market (Rychard 2009, p. 230), which necessitates the use of different discursive frames and strategies from those employed by city residents in the West. The mobilizing capacity of issues related to problem-solving in everyday life is arguably more important in CEE, where residents tend to distrust the political system and may seldom engage in political processes. It is still more important in contexts where citizens have every reason to fear state institutions and organizations that claim to work on their behalf, as in Russia and increasingly also Hungary and Poland today.

Lessons for Post-socialist Civil Society Research

A fair assessment of civic activism in CEE sheds light on the limitations of the theoretical and empirical lenses used so far in studies about civil society in post-socialist countries. Focusing on the low level of engagement in organized forms of opposition or lamenting the lack of mass mobilizations risks rendering invisible and misinterpreting events on the ground in some social and political contexts. The same risks arise from relying on quantitative data that do not take into account either context-specific differences in definitions of who activists are or groups and networks that do not formalize or prefer to stay beyond the radar of the state. Finally, we need to avoid applying frameworks that are based on studies of urban mobilizations in Western Europe and North America—such as the Right-to-the-City type of activism—which tend to disqualify traditional forms of community action. The following section offers more general lessons that can be extracted from urban activism in CEE and Russia.

Lesson 1: The Role of Uneventful Protests

The first lesson concerns the well-known variation of protest repertoires and forms of engagement across contexts. The post-socialist context clearly illustrates the limitations of a perspective on civil society and civic activism focused either on membership in formal organizations or participation in street protests. Most urban mobilizations in CEE are informal, local, and low-key forms of activism, which easily escape the attention of researchers focused on effective advocacy organizations capable of lobbying policymakers, on "headline-grabbing protests" (Scott 1990, p. 182), or on "eventful protests" (della Porta 2008). Certainly, there are examples of such events in CEE, e.g., in the Southeastern-European and Polish movements

that have successfully organized large-scale street protests in recent years (e.g., Korolczuk 2016). However, urban activism in CEE countries mostly follows the logic of uneventful protests and is low-key, small-scale, and initiated by individuals or small, informal groups, and little discussed in the mass media and public discourse. When failing to acknowledge the role and importance of such uneventful activism in civic life, researchers risk taking an overly pessimistic view of the state of post-socialist civil societies.

While most researchers measure the strength of civil society by the scale of individual participation or the number and size of non-governmental organizations, Císař's (2013a, b) protest-event analysis in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bulgaria suggests that what he conceptualizes as self-organized civic activism is the most common form in post-socialist Europe. This form of collective action—which is mobilized without the involvement of organizations— consists of "many events, no organizations, and few participants" (Císař 2013b, p. 143). Many mobilizations around urban questions are of this kind: small-scale, low-profile, self-organized, and focused on mundane everyday problems, such as heavy traffic on local roads, the closure of kindergartens in the area, or plans to demolish a building to which people attach value. Although it is true that this type of activism reflects the structural weaknesses of civil society in CEE (e.g., a lack of resources), such mobilizations should also be interpreted as a way to pursue political goals in a socio-political context where the notion of politics has strong negative connotations—and where social engagement tends to be treated with suspicion and kept at a distance by both citizens and authorities.

Even less visible than self-organized civic protests and activities are what Scott terms "infrapolitics," referring to the wide variety of low-profile protests and instances of resistance that "dare not speak in their own name" (1990, p. 19), and which take place in secret or appear in public in disguised forms. For instance, amid the over-regulation of public space and increasing state repression in contemporary Russia, urbanites have developed creative and subversive ways of performing resistance that balance on the borders between overt and covert forms of resistance, defiance, and protest—and thus operate under the authorities' legal radar. Such forms of protest include nano meetings (placing puppets holding protest banners in parks and then spreading pictures of them on social media), solitary picketing (individuals taking turns picketing to avoid being defined as an illegal public meeting), or using market stands to discuss political issues, thus avoiding the need to register and seek permission from authorities (Fröhlich & Jacobsson 2018). The informal assemblages of market, neighbors, family, and community thus provide both a structure and a cover for resistance (Scott 1990, p. 200), giving rise to clandestine public spaces in the private or semi-private sphere (e.g., Goldfarb 2006). While studying the infralevel of political and social engagement poses methodological challenges and requires close knowledge of the local context, neglecting to do so again risk an overly pessimistic view of levels of civic engagement. Infrapolitics—and even refraining from open resistance—are highly rational in a context where overt political opposition carries high costs. Greene (2014, p. 221) notes that it is precisely because Russians are acutely aware of the opportunities and limitations for fruitful collective action in their political context that their opposition may appear individualized, ad hoc, opportunistic, and unstructured.

Moreover, devoting attention to less spectacular and media-resonant forms of activism that are more closely related to everyday collective problem-solving is necessary to avoid a middle-class bias in the study of urban movements. As Scott (1990, p. 182) observes, for scholars "attuned … to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum". Doing justice to mobilizations by marginalized classes or social groups demands

acknowledgment that these actors might not conceptualize their activism in the same ways as middle-class or radical groups and may display other emic understandings of this activism. For example, the collective action by elderly people in Leipnik's (2015) case studies from Ukraine was marginalized and dismissed as representing backward Soviet mentalities and attitudes, simply because of their strategy choice and because they framed their claims using old-left discourse. The importance of uneventful protests lies partly in the suitability of such resistance for structurally weaker groups, whose demands are often seen as unjustified by the state as they go against the (neo) liberal-free market logic. Members of such groups are often orientalized, because "shifts in collective identities and the meaning of 'the Other' have become a part of the transformations in Europe after 1989. There are several factors influencing these alterations, but one among them seems especially salient: a restructuring of the perception of social inequalities by the hegemonic liberal ideology" (Buchowski 2006, p. 464).

Low-key, informal mobilizations around everyday issues also provide much of the infrastructure—the cultural and structural underpinnings—of the more visible political action which generally attracts attention (Scott 1990, p. 184). This argument resonates well with Melucci's (1996, p. 116) claim that social movements cannot be understood by looking only at protest events without also considering networks that emerge in everyday life: "the molecular change brought about by the hidden structure should not be seen as a 'private' and residual fact, but as a condition for possible mobilization" (Melucci 1996, p. 116). Researchers' preference for headline-grabbing protests and eventful politics reflects an overly narrow conception of the kind of politics that is relevant to the study of post-socialist civil society (as well as other parts of the world).

Lesson 2: Challenging the (Narrow) Understanding of the Political

We argue that the (in)visibility of specific forms of action is related to both the definition of civil society and the broader conceptualization of the political in a given context. Scholars have often claimed that CEE civil society has lost its vital functions of claim-making and voice-giving due to the de-politicization of NGOs, which have become donor-dependent and focused on service provision (e.g., Naroznha 2004). The case of urban social movements, though, invites us to rethink this thesis and critically assess the notion of politics at work in such critiques, as well as to challenge dichotomous views of the political versus the non-political. A view of politics focused on either involvement in party politics or open rebellion represents far too narrow a conception of political life. As long as we see as political only activities that are openly declared as such, we miss out on the political life of subordinate groups (Scott 1990). The view of economically subordinate strata of society as passive and apolitical, unable or unwilling to engage in any collective attempts to change their situation, was widespread in the post-socialist context in the first two decades after 1989. Hence, as argued by Buchowski regarding the Polish context, "The voice of the powerless and the poor rarely makes it through the accepted democratic procedures. Subalterns have to resort to radical methods if they want to articulate their interests and are afterward accused of demagoguery" (2006, p. 467).

It is therefore necessary to extend our understanding of political engagement to include a wide range of activities oriented toward social change by which people attempt to collectively challenge the status quo—even if for various reasons those engaged reject the label of "political" activism. It is equally important to go beyond the limited vision of the political sphere as associated with the institutions of power, and to look at how power circulates in society through everyday encounters and exchanges.

One of the ways in which an overly narrow definition of "the political" has influenced critiques of civil society in the region is through an either-or view of social actors. On this view, social actors are either seen as engaged in contentious action and political claim-making or as merely service providers—as politically engaged critics of the city's neoliberal management, or just members of self-help and not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) groups. This dichotomous vision is not helpful for understanding collective action in the CEE context (or, indeed, anywhere) because many groups engage in both types of action simultaneously (Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013). An either-or view is especially ill suited for understanding urban movements, which often transgress such dichotomies. Rather than either-or, urban movements typically are both-and, multifunctional in nature, at once oriented toward practical problem-solving and opposed to the present order and current practices (e.g., Jacobsson 2015). As Goldstein (2017) showed, arenas and activities that were labeled non-political—such as bookshop cafés with multi-lingual and hard-to-sell books, and the organization of recreational activities such as free yoga classes—turned out to be ways by which citizens were "practicing citizenship." They did so by forming pluralistic spaces that countered nationalist discourses as well as the commodification of public space in the post-Yugoslav context. These examples illustrate "the politics of small things" by which people make history through their social interactions (Goldfarb 2006). Likewise, despite their claims to be apolitical, the actions of the bike activists in Belgrade studied by Kopf (2015) turned out to be ways of articulating social critique and negotiating the right to the city.

Redefining the political is important not only for CEE but also for other contexts because in today's world citizens often distance themselves from politics, which is increasingly associated with dirty business, unproductive conflict, and corruption (Eliasoph 1998; Neveu 2015). As shown in research by Bennett et al. (2013) in the USA, skepticism and even cynicism are widespread among civil society activists, leading to the disavowal of politics. Refusing to be associated with anything political while attempting to influence the political sphere allows people to resolve the ambiguity experienced "when their expectations about how politics ought to function are contradicted by how they believe political decisions actually take place" (2013, p. 531). Similarly, activists in CEE countries tend to discursively distance themselves from party politics and to draw boundaries between politics and the everyday, local, "real" problems on which they focus.

Employing an overly narrow view of politics defined by articulated or manifest contention—such as traditional protest events—risks omitting relevant forms of political engagement and protest. Dichotomous views of social—including urban—movements and forms of activism that juxtapose contentious and non-contentious action do not help to better understand collective action, either in the post-socialist context or in other non-Western societies. Also, in societies commonly perceived as unchangeable, passive, atomized, and repressed, people undertake many collective activities that escape researchers' attention because they are perceived as unimportant, non-political acts of everyday life, but which nevertheless have important political consequences (e.g., Buchowski 2006). When citizens face non-responsive or repressive authorities, different forms of symbolic resistance—the construction and consolidation of illegal settlements, court litigation, letter writing to authorities, or even attendance of town council meetings—constitute contentious action. Indeed, urban activism in CEE often combines claim-making, direct help for community members, and critique of socio-political trends. Cases illustrating this trend range from single mothers providing legal help to each other and advocating for institutional changes (Hryciuk & Korolczuk 2013); to Polish tenants combining eviction blockades, negotiations with local

authorities, and the voicing of a general critique of the city housing stock's neoliberal management (Polańska 2015); and to the elderly residents of Ukraine's capital fighting against the closure of a local hospital, defending patients' rights, and opposing a larger trend in illegal sales of municipal property (Leipnik 2015).

Choosing service provision or types of mobilization sometimes described as NIMBY activism may reflect the tendency toward the de-politicization of citizens' claims, but may also enable politicization and political action in a hostile institutional environment. This tendency is perhaps most pronounced in social and political contexts that are as constraining for protest as present-day Russia. Mobilization is often triggered here by a perceived intrusion into the private sphere that is seen as disrupting citizens' everyday life, such as immediate threats in their close vicinity (e.g., Greene 2014). Initially, NIMBY logics drive such mobilizations; nevertheless, Greene (2014) found that the neighborhood groups he studied quickly came to see their struggle as simultaneously local and political: "It was the local grievance, the not-in-my-back-yard anger, that mobilized them, but it was the frustration at a political system in which they had neither purchase nor franchise that kept them angry" (Greene 2014, p. 163). Moreover, the claims of urban movements are often "extra-local", simultaneously addressing local, practical concerns and national policies or global forces (Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler, & Mayer 2000, p. 2).

Clément's (2015) analysis of the 2009–2010 protests against local authorities in Kaliningrad provides insight into how practical issues can gradually become politicized and increasingly contested. She shows that in the repressive Russian context, taking steps toward collective action does not naturally follow on from grievances but rather arises from a range of social-cultural mechanisms operating in everyday life, as well as from relational mechanisms at work in network building and the scaling up of contention. For example, with time, local protests (against the closure of hospitals, new regulations on car imports, and a new law revoking kiosk owners' right to conduct business on municipal property in Kaliningrad) scaled up and became more generalized, leading to mass mobilization and the dismissal of the regional governor (Clément 2015). In the process, people who initially declared themselves to be uninterested in politics took to the streets, and individuals with no previous experience of activism became protest leaders. Likewise, Fröhlich and Jacobsson (2018) argued that in Russia the infrapolitical acts initially taken by neighbors to protest against developers were instrumental in shaping resistant political subjectivities, making citizens willing to take on new fights about other issues. These studies challenge the common association of ordinary people's practical concerns with particularistic claims, or with NIMBY reactions oriented to their own good and not the common good—which is the overriding concern of "true" civil-society actors. The particularistic–general dichotomy fails to acknowledge that even NIMBY mobilizations may help activate new citizen groups and forge new social networks. They may also broaden people's civic competence and transform the nature of their participation: from victims seeking compensation for direct harm they turn into citizens actively shaping their own futures (Hager 2015). Practical, everyday concerns are inherently political and constitute a natural, appropriate starting point for protest, even if the outlook and generality of these citizens' claims must be expanded to achieve what we understand here as politicization.

Lesson 3: Urban Space as Conducive to Political Becoming

The process of politicization is an object of study in its own right, and is of particular importance for analyses of post-socialist and other transitional societies. Here, we argue that

urban spaces are especially conducive to what we conceptualize as "political becoming," understood as the process of political subject-formation and the development of political agency and efficacy (Jacobsson 2015; Baca 2017; cf. Gunnarsson-Payne & Korolczuk 2016). These are highly important in a context with limited citizen rights and without a long tradition of political engagement.

There are good theoretical reasons why the urban context is particularly conducive to processes of political becoming and thus the revitalization of citizenship. As argued by scholars analyzing other socio-geographic contexts, the city offers an environment conducive to fostering civic identities and practices (e.g., Boudreau et al. 2009; Merrifield 2012). In Merrifield's (2012, p. 271) words, people "encounter other people within and through urban space; the urban confers the reality of the encounter, of the political encounter, and of the possibility for more encounters". Cities provide a space where transgression of the public–private divide often becomes interwoven in the fabric of everyday life. Boudreau et al. (2009) argue that the condition of urbanity, which is characterized by high degrees of interdependency, mobility, and uncertainty, involves continuity between political events and everyday life. Whereas social movement scholars tend to focus on political events outside the ordinary, radical urban theory carries the potential to remain close to the feelings experienced in political practice and to theorize the continuities between everyday life and politics. Urbanity creates numerous unexpected situations that give salience to "small gestures" not initially made with strategic, political goals (Boudreau et al. 2009, p. 338). Small acts of everyday life that constitute the first steps toward activism and collective action for change are especially important in the post-socialist context, which is not usually conducive either to trust in others or to publicly visible or widespread collective action.

For many city residents, resisting chaotic re-privatization, rising prices, and worsening living conditions becomes necessary, and they often engage in political practices without identifying themselves as activists. Encountering those in similar situations, sharing experiences, and taking action together sometimes become formative experiences that shape new collectivities, identities, and solidarities. As shown in Polańska's (2017) study of Polish tenants, this process starts with the realization that the problems one encounters result not from fate or one's bad choices but from the authorities' decisions, which are neither self-evident nor just. People can therefore demand and expect them to be changed. Expanding individuals' "horizon of expectation" is often the first step in opening new fields for social and political action (Koselleck 1985). Thus, engagement in collectively solving everyday problems or participation in infrapolitics might be important first steps toward gaining a sense of agency and political efficacy—and toward expanding the range of possibilities that an individual, or a collective, can envisage.

Common places bridge the "regime of familiarity" and "common" action (Thévenot 2014), and thus are vital for mobilizing collective action by people who might not identify as political activists (Clément 2016). Common places are locations with common meaning where shared concerns are discussed and identities are shaped. They thus provide a basis for collective agency. The research challenge is thus to explore what Neveu (2015) calls a "politics of ordinariness" and investigate the various ways in which "ordinary spaces" come to be used politically. There are therefore good theoretical reasons for arguing that the transformative potential of everyday encounters goes beyond specific struggles—and that the city serves as an arena that shapes political subjectivities and senses of individual and collective agency. This is especially important in those contexts where the legacy of state socialism has atomized individuals and/or strengthened household or friendship ties rather than wider social

relationships, and where open political contestation is risky. This is the case not only in Russia, but also in countries such as Hungary and Poland where civil society is shrinking and where we experience the rule of law backsliding (Szuleka 2018). In such contexts, mobilization does not emerge naturally from grievances or collective political convictions, but rather from everyday encounters and practical concerns shared by people who, for instance, live in the same apartment block or whose children go to the same kindergarten. Here, politicization works "through the ordinary", as Neveu (2015, p.144ff) frames it, inviting researchers to explore the everyday modalities and practices that can provide continuity between everyday life and political action (Boudreau et al. 2009). Conceptualized in our terms, everyday experiences may trigger the process of political becoming, which involves re-orienting oneself in relation both to others and to issues that need solving so that one feels like an agent, not an object, of change.

An important related step in the process of becoming an agentic citizen is recognizing one's worth in relation to other people and broader society. Engaging in activism in one's closest environment—whether this is an apartment building, nearby park, or street—may trigger the process by which ordinary people without previous experience of activism begin to see themselves as active citizens who not only have rights but can also make claims and deserve to be heard. This process of re-gaining self-worth assumes special importance when taking action requires one to shed the guilt and shame associated with belonging to marginalized groups such as those of undocumented migrants, poor single mothers, tenants, the homeless, or simply economically disadvantaged people. Shaming the poor for being poor is hardly unique to post-socialist societies. However, one socio-economic effect of post-socialist transformations in CEE was the rapid economic and symbolic downfall of large social groups, who almost overnight became the "post-socialist leftovers" accused of an inability and unwillingness to adapt to the capitalist order (Hryciuk & Korolczuk 2013). As illustrated in Hryciuk and Korolczuk's analysis of single mothers' mobilization (2013) and in Polańska's (2017) study of Polish tenants' activism, an important effect of potential activists' everyday personal encounters was their ability to resist and challenge marginalizing discourses and practices. Through discussions with other people, many tenants realized that they had no responsibility for being evicted and that not they but the socio-political system caused their problems. Polańska (2017) shows how gradually the tenants' sense of shame and guilt was replaced by righteous anger and empowerment, which increased their readiness to act together. Shedding marginalized identities and gaining agency and self-worth through a sense of togetherness constitute the first steps toward building the more generalized (social) trust needed to overcome the low-trust traps of post-socialist civil societies.

Lesson 4: Deliberative and Collaborative Processes in Post-socialist Civil Societies

Previous studies of urban movements in Eastern Europe during the 1990s (e.g., Rink 2000) often noted that there were relatively few connections between different kinds of initiatives (e.g., tenant mobilizations, artists and urban culture activists, ecological and social development initiatives, squatters, and countercultural scenes), but our analyses of CEE civil society indicate that interesting relational mechanisms are being constructed among CEE activists (not only in urban spaces). Accounting for the consequent density of relationships yields a different picture of civil society strength than that provided by indicators of individual acts, such as voting or membership statistics (e.g., Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017; Korolczuk 2014). We observed increased collaboration between different formal and informal actors, which often involves the development of deliberative structures such as the national Congress of Women (Korolczuk 2014) and the

informal Congress of Urban Movements in Poland (Kowalewski 2013; Pobłocki 2014). Indeed, in Poland, there are many examples of semi-organized participatory bodies and practices, both offline and online, which include participatory budgeting, food cooperatives, and time banks, as well as groups on Facebook and mailing lists promoting the sharing economy and collaboration around specific issues (e.g., Bukowiecki et al. 2014; Korolczuk 2014; Bitušíková 2015; Polańska 2014). Current research on urban activism in CEE and Russia also points to ongoing deliberative and collaborative processes in local civil society. These efforts reflect activists' awareness of and attempts to overcome the fragmentation of civil society groups, which is conventionally seen as a primary obstacle to developing a strong, well-connected civil society in CEE (Jacobsson 2012). Hence, there is a tendency among urban activists to employ a range of relational mechanisms that enable cooperation, among which are the engagement of brokers who create linkages between different groups and manage diverse alliances in the city (Polańska 2015); efforts to build relations through everyday encounters during the scaling-up phase of opposition (Clément 2015, 2016); the formation of networks and organization of events that become spaces of deliberation (Kowalewski 2013); and the establishment of cooperative relations between various local initiatives in order to improve quality of life in the city (Bitušíková 2015). The bookshop cafés studied by Goldstein (2017)—as well as spaces devoted mostly to debates and collaboration on urban issues, such as Państwomiasto cafe and discussion club in Warsaw—could also be interpreted as spaces of deliberation and reflection.

Perhaps the most notable example of a space where deliberation, bridging and building the capacity for collective action takes place is the Congress of Urban Movements held annually in Poland since 2011. Initially, this informal coalition of individual activists and associations met to discuss specific issues and coordinate collective action. It has since evolved into the Union of Associations' Congress of Urban Movements, which addresses a range of issues, including urban democracy and equal opportunities (Domaradzka & Wijkström 2016; Kowalewski 2013). As in many other places, this assemblage of local struggles was inspired and enabled by notions of the urban commons and the right to the city (cf. Harvey 2012). Nevertheless, such relational building of coordinated action capacity is especially notable in the CEE context because post-socialist civil societies have often been pictured as fragmented. This development prompts Domaradzka and Wijkström (2016) to speak of a maturing field of urban movements in Poland—one characterized by denser relations and network building, as well as by more cooperation both among civil society actors and between civil society actors and local authorities (see also Bitušíková 2015, for similar observations in a Slovak city).

Cooperation and relationship building among different groups may lead to the formation of multi-group alliances in urban mobilizations, but these efforts also entail challenges that deserve further attention. There are various examples of unorthodox coalitions of urban movement groups emerging in CEE. Among these was the (rather short-lived) architectural heritage protection movement in Bucharest, where a cross-class alliance of architects, middle-class activists, and poor Roma residents was formed to resist the neoliberal restructuring of the city (Florea 2015). Elsewhere, the "City is For All" alliance has united the homeless and middle-class activists in Budapest since 2009 (Florea et al. 2018). Both cases suggest that CEE is a good site to explore what Brenner et al. (2012) call alliances between the deprived (those who are immediately exploited, unemployed, and impoverished) and the discontented (those who are disrespected or otherwise constrained in their capacity to explore the possibilities of life). These cases also invite us to identify the challenges entailed in building and managing alliances of people with very different social positionalities. As Mayer (2013) remarks, "though all of them are affected by contemporary forms of dispossession and alienation, they occupy very different strategic positions

within the post-industrial neoliberal city" (p. 11). Specific cases of multi-group alliances in CEE provide cautionary tales that show how fragile and problematic such coalitions may be: some urban movements have been taken over by right-wing nationalist groups attracted by the defense of national heritage. In the Bucharest heritage protection movement, for instance, this takeover led to the gradual exclusion of the socio-economically weakest group: the Roma families inhabiting the city-center buildings that the activists initially aimed to protect from demolition (Florea 2015).

In a post-socialist context, both the new left and the right often articulate critiques of the neoliberal city, so "unholy alliances" appear from time to time (cf. Petrovici 2011). In other cases, left- and right-wing urban groups do not cooperate but nonetheless constitute ideologically diverse components of what can be conceptualized as a common "field of contention," representing divergent responses to the same structural conditions. This was the case in left- and right-wing mobilizations over housing in Hungary fueled by the financial crisis (Florea, Gagyi, & Jacobsson 2018). A relational and process-based approach to social mobilization helps us account not only for such polarized dynamics but also for the co-existence of both progressive and conservative urban movements in CEE and elsewhere.

To conclude, the emergence of collaborative, participatory, and deliberative governance arrangements developed both within civil society (e.g., the Congress of Urban Movements) and between civil society and public authorities (e.g., large-scale participatory budgeting in Polish cities) shows the need for a more process- and relation-oriented conceptualization of civil society. This conceptualization should be attuned to the ways in which collaboration and the exchange of information between formal and informal groups becomes a part of civil society structures. This trend also shows the great potential for the development of CEE civil society through urban activism (Domaradzka & Wijkström 2016). At the same time, these developments require further investigation and closer scrutiny of their long-term consequences, which may include the marginalization of more radical claims and the risk of cooptation and clientelism.

Lesson 5: Understanding the Role of Informality

Studies of civil society in CEE and Russia often focused on formal organizations, equating the third sector—comprised of foundations and associations—with civil society as a whole (e.g., Zimmer & Priller 2004). Scholars have also shown that both the state and local institutions expect informal groups to register, so that they establish legal personality and do not act as private individuals (e.g., Chimiak 2014). A closer look at urban activism in CEE shows, however, that this particular field of activism is predominantly grassroots in nature, characterized by a high degree of informality in activists' relations and practices. Most urban groups and networks are essentially grassroots-driven and not top-down directed or donor dependent, although they sometimes adapt to the prevalent incentive structures in specific contexts and register as associations or make other adjustments to meet policy makers' criteria (e.g., Aidukaite & Jacobsson 2015). Even the groups that have formalized themselves typically seek not to become professionalized, bureaucratic entities but to maintain their grassroots identity. Many urban movements actively resist the nongovernmental (NGO) model, instead preferring to operate as informal "initiatives" and networks (Bitušíková 2015; Polańska & Chimiak 2016). Hence, activists' relations with each other within informal groups and organizations—as well as their relations with local authorities and other social actors—are often informal in nature: people may not follow legal rules, contacts are based on personal

connections, and organizations and groups primarily rely on the personal resources of their members and supporters.

In the post-socialist context, informality can be enabling because it helps activists cope with limited resources (Polańska & Chimiak 2016). Many formal associations have very limited organizational and financial resources, so retaining their grassroots nature along with a high degree of informality in everyday operations becomes important. Doing so enables people to build collective action capacity despite organizational constraints and low levels of generalized trust (Hayoz 2013). This is not to deny that informality has many side effects, including the emergence of informal power hierarchies, unequal voice opportunities, problems of representation, and a lack of transparency in the organization of civil society. However, it is crucial to think of informality as a practice with both advantages and disadvantages, rather than merely a phase in the development of civil society actors.

Another aspect of informality deserving of scholars' attention concerns the distinction between non-institutionalized and institutionalized action and the consequences of blurring it. This distinction may be less significant in the post-socialist context than in Western Europe, but as disillusionment over formal politics grows globally, people often turn to informal activism to avoid cooptation, bureaucratization, and alienation from society. In CEE, the blurred boundary between informal and formal organizing has sometimes facilitated the emergence of unorthodox alliances. For instance, in Poland, tenants have increasingly begun to use direct action methods (e.g., eviction blockades), while some squatters' groups have engaged in dialog with policymakers (Polańska 2015). This case shows how the boundary between formal and informal organizing becomes blurred, and suggests that a high degree of informality enables these different groups to draw on the other's action repertoires.

Weaving informal relations between civil society and the authorities, especially on the local level, may become even more important in the context of a shrinking civil society space in CEE and Russia. Petrova and Tarrow (2007) contend that in post-socialist contexts, so-called transactional activism—which is based on developing lateral ties and advocacy—may be more effective than participatory activism—which involves mass participation in protests and mobilization of the wider public. Transactional activism simply may be more suitable for a context in which "the development of civil society 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" (Petrova & Tarrow 2007, pp. 78–79). Such practices of (in)formal transactions and network building may be enabling for activists in contexts where the official channels of communication and influence become weak or closed. This conclusion may also hold beyond the post-socialist region because the existence of established institutional channels does not always translate into effectiveness or openness to all groups of citizens. Sometimes, it is easier for informal, ephemeral grassroots groups and networks not to institutionalize but rather to exert ad-hoc political influence from outside the system, although such relations may turn into classic clientelism. Operating as informal "initiatives" and free-floating networks may be a deliberate choice by activists in a context where autonomy from both government and donors needs to be asserted (e.g., Bitušíková 2015; Goldstein 2017).

Conclusion: Toward Relational and Process-Oriented Conceptions of Civil Society

Based on analyses of urban movements in the CEE context, this article has identified a number of theoretical lessons for research on post-socialist civil societies and suggested some directions for the broader theorization of civic activism. These lessons point to the limitations of the concept of civil society as used in research on post-socialist civil societies until recently. The dominant conceptualizations often focused on: formal organizations at the expense of informal civic engagement; the activism of middle-class and educated groups at the expense of mobilizations by socio-economically weaker groups; and, finally, civil society as a stable object of study, comprised of organizations and individuals, rather than as deliberative and collaborative processes involving these groups and people, which are fluid and developing over time. Whereas most public attention and scholarly interest focuses on NGOs and lately mass mobilizations, we argue that it is imperative that civil society scholars also take into account "uneventful" activism, which is often accompanied by the emergence of a wide variety of collaborative and deliberative processes both within civil society and between activists and authorities (at least on the local level). To properly account for the latter, researchers need to adopt a lens that allows them to see low-visibility forms of action and ways of cultivating and enacting citizenship based on small acts; to account for the enabling role of informality in collective action and relationship-building in adverse contexts; and to theorize further the role of uneventful politics in social and political transformation. Moreover, new tools and concepts are needed to track the process of civic engagement as it evolves over time and changes in content and form. This requires inter alia new tools for capturing and measuring the process of political becoming, which is mediated through engagement in the mundane problems of everyday life and the various forms of organizing, which are inherently fluid and change over time.

Analyses of urban mobilizations in CEE provide fertile ground for advancing relational and process-oriented approaches to the study of post-socialist civil society (see also Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2017). We propose to conceptualize civil society as a process of building relations and achieving collective goals rather than a stable object of research or a structure that can be fully captured by quantitative measures at any given point in time. Such an approach emphasizes the interactions between different collective actors that develop over time in a specific locale (e.g., informal groups and formal organizations, and their relationship building to create collective action capacity), while also identifying patterns of conflict/avoidance and cooperation.

Key problems that call for further attention include not only the question of whether and how changes on the individual level—such as re-defining the sources of one's problems and gaining a sense of agency—translate into actual engagement and collective action, but also the question of which characteristics and outcomes of activism are sparked by everyday problems and encounters in urban spaces. Under what conditions is the weaving of informal ties and collaborative efforts enabling, and when does this lead to clientelism and the exclusion of structurally weaker groups? What are the preconditions for the process of political becoming to take place, and how can this process be initiated and strengthened in urban spaces and beyond? Are the emerging deliberative and collaborative structures and bodies capable of exerting significant influence on urban governance? What is the connection between informal activism, engagement in NGOs, and engagement in social movements? And finally, what consequences does urban activism have for liberal democracy? After all, joining a group driven by racist and

homophobic views may also involve re-defining the sources of social ills and re-imagining one's role in finding collective solutions. The issue of democratic identification in the process of political agency formation is of particular importance in post-authoritarian, low-trust societies, but becomes even more crucial in the wider context of the increasingly illiberal and populist trends visible on both sides of the Atlantic.

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