

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Editorial

Introduction to the special issue: Citizens' participation in post-communist Europe



Keywords:

Citizen participation
 Postcommunist Europe
 Civil society
 Democratization
 Protest
 Development

On 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayem called on his fellow citizens to protest against the government, which was perceived to be corrupt, inefficient, and unresponsive to those it governs (Nayem, 2014). Following the call posted on the social networking website Facebook, thousands of Ukrainian citizens took to the streets of Kiev marking the start of the Euromaidan movement, the most significant popular protest that has taken place in Europe in the last decades (Onuch, 2015). The protest resulted in the removal of the head of state, replacement of the government, and overhaul of the geopolitical orientation of Ukrainian politics. Originally the protests reflected popular dissatisfaction with the President Yanukovich and his failure to sign the association agreement with the European Union, opting for closer ties with Russia instead. However, when excessive force was used to remove peaceful demonstrators, the Maidan Square became a focal point of a more general discontent with the president, the government, and their acquiescence to cooperation with the Russian Federation. The so-called Euromaidan protests lasted for more than three months, eventually forcing the elected president to flee Ukraine for exile in Russia in February 2014 (Kuzio, 2015).

The events following this sequence include calls and a referendum for independence on the Crimean peninsula, effective incorporation of that region into the Russian Federation in March 2014, separatist insurgency in the east of Ukraine from/since May 2014, proclamations of autonomy and later independence by the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics in November 2014 (Goble, 2016; Sakwa, 2015). Indeed, many observers—and a recent special issue of this journal (Kuzio, 2016)—view the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, as well as within Ukraine itself as a direct consequence of citizen rallies at the central square of the country's capital city that called for greater accountability of the government to the people they govern.

Scholars of post-authoritarian states and societies would know that it was the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974 that set off the so-called Colour Revolutions, of which Euromaidan is but one, albeit the most recent example (Galbreath, 2009; Sanches and Gorbunova, 2016). All of the Colour Revolutions that have followed since 1974 – Velvet in Czechoslovakia (1989), Rose in Georgia (2003), Orange in Ukraine (2004), Tulip in Kyrgyzstan (2005), Jeans in Belarus (2006) – pressed governments to deliver on citizens' right in general, their social and human rights in particular. These protests could flourish as a result of the behaviour of corrupt and irresponsive elites that undermined the quality of governance and governments' lack of responsiveness to the *vox populi* as expressed at the ballot box. In some cases, these protests have indeed led to various political and institutional change in states and societies affected, as in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, while in many others political transformation has seen a more bumpy development.

Scholarship on the original popular discontent across Europe and Latin America claims that citizen participation was key to establishing better governance and ensuring improved quality of democracy in any one country (Duch, 1998). More specific

observations made over the last two decades indicate that citizen engagement with the political process facilitates updates in the democratic institutions, keeping elected political leadership (Linz and Stepan, 1996), the government (Diamond, 1996) and societal change as a whole (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005) under scrutiny.

Yet, if experience is anything to go by, citizen protests cannot be seen as an ultimate condiment that ensures democratic credentials of political regimes (Johnson, 2015). Accountability of political institutions to people they serve, the opportunities for citizen to feed back and participate in politics after popular protests, are all connected to both institutional and popular perceptions of what politics after protest should look like. In this vein, the Arab Spring made clear that after the initial protest, much work still needs to be done to make political elites accountable to citizens and deliver on their promises to make people's lives better (Hussain and Howard, 2013). Scholarly debate confirms that not all citizen protests are inherently beneficial for long-term accountability of elected governments to the people (Fox, 2015).

The electoral successes of both new and recalibrated political forces from all sides of the political spectrum in European democracies drives home this point. Increasingly, citizen protest is expressed not just in the streets, but also at the ballot-box, reflecting a growing disenchantment of European citizens with their elected representatives, as well as with the process of political decision-making more generally. Directed against the established political elites in long-standing European democracies such as Germany and Greece, popular mobilisations, both from the right (such as Front National, Jobbik, Alternative für Deutschland, Sweden Democrats, UKIP, Lega Nord) and the left (such as Syriza, Podemos), challenge and reshape political agendas across Europe and across all strata of society (Dostal, 2015; Gerodimos, 2015).

Many existing case studies have tended to view the emergence of populist politics as a temporary phenomenon, reflecting electorates' dissatisfaction with the politics, personalities and trajectories of the political mainstream (Barr, 2009; Stanley, 2008). Yet, with none of the EU member states immune to the rise of populist sentiment, it is clear that there may well be a fundamental shift in citizens' preferences about expressing their dissent. The results of the recent referendum in the UK on membership in the EU demonstrate strongly that political participation as such is being recalibrated: though the voters express their dissatisfaction with contemporary politics both via the ballot box and in street protests, we are staring in the face of a new kind of politics, and ultimately citizen participation in political process. In fact, many of the new populist movements and parties across the more established democracies in Europe, the electoral success of neoliberal candidates across Latin America and the meteoritic trajectory of Donald Trump in the US showcase that nearly all democratic governments across the globe face growing demands from their citizens on a range of issues that challenge the neat division between formal and informal political participation (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Li and Marsh, 2008).

It is in this context that our special issue takes stock of, and assesses the multifaceted citizen participation across the post-communist region, asking whether the original notion that citizen participation is good for democratic governance (still?) holds. All papers in this special issue start with the neo-Tocquevillian assumption that democratic public space needs citizen participation, and as citizen participation has been often linked to the quality of democracy in any one country, we discuss how knowledge from one region can help us grasp the challenges of the changing nature of citizen participation for effective, that is, responsive governance. In doing so, all contributions implicitly assess whether citizen participation facilitates democratic, that is, citizen-inspired evolution of politics and policies that enhance institutional accountability of those elected to govern to those casting the vote. And, as many issues central to citizens' everyday concerns hardly make it onto the political agenda on par with those of the more vocal parts of society, all papers are specifically interested in ascertaining how this accountability works. As discussed throughout this special issue, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) most often feature as the most effective instruments to project citizen interests in the public space, an avenue that is operational in many cases only thanks to international funding and support. Contributions to this issue, then, look at the impact citizen participation has on the dynamics of political processes across the region, on cooperation between political institutions and civic organizations, and representation of diverse social groups in process of policy-making.

The special issue purports that post-communist states—including EU members and candidate countries, states in the Eastern Neighbourhood and further afield, in post-Soviet Central Asia—provide an ideal testing ground for assumptions about the impact citizen participation has on contemporary political process and on perspectives of democratic consolidation. In the late 1980s, large parts of the then communist societies were active in citizen groups contesting the communist parties' political dominance across the region (Bahry and Silver, 1990). In many cases, these popular protests against the regime empowered the dissenting political elites in these states to declare *de facto* independence from communist patronage and assert sovereignty for their nation-states (Leff, 1998). Today, eleven of the post-communist states are members of the EU with more (still?) aspiring accession. This despite the fact that only thirty years ago, most states in the region were an integral part of what appeared to be a robust and everlasting political constellation of Communist states. Over the past three decades, however, many citizens of post-communist societies, and especially those so-called 'losers' of socio-economic transition and members of ethnic minority groups, have been disillusioned—and often repeatedly so—with the outcomes of formal representation by the newly established and now formally consolidated political elites. In the absence of means to enter the formal political process, many resort to civil society activities to advance their political, social, cultural and religious interests.

It is not the purpose of this special issue to address the reasons for post-communist citizens to invest time in civic activity, or the reason for them not to participate in formal political process. Nor do contributions to this volume engage in debates on whether post-communist democracies are comparable to political regimes in other regions of the world despite their

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