

# One Shield, Two Responses: Anti-U.S. Missile Defense Shield Protests in the Czech Republic and Poland

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*What is the role of civil society in geopolitical conflict? The crisis in Ukraine has, once again, raised questions over security in the post-communist world. This article examines the puzzling variation in the anti-missile defense shield protests in the Czech Republic and Poland (2007-09) to elucidate the conditions under which civil society emerges as a significant actor in international politics. Activists in the Czech Republic staged seven times as many antishield protests as their Polish counterparts despite the two countries' similar levels of popular opposition to the project. The variation in the responses of the Polish and Czech activists resulted from the different material and legacy-driven ideological constraints faced by the civil society organizations. The findings suggest that the scholarship on contentious civic activism should take organization-level opportunities and constraints seriously when analyzing the impact of civil society on political processes.*

**Keywords:** Participation, Citizenship, Civil Society, Missile Defense Shield, Security Policy, Eastern Europe, Post-Communist States, Comparative International Policy, Geopolitical Conflict, Contentious Politics, Civic Activism, Social Movements, Poland, Czech Republic.

## **Related Articles:**

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*¿Cuál es el papel de la sociedad civil en los conflictos geopolíticos? Una vez más, la crisis en Ucrania ha planteado preguntas sobre la seguridad en el mundo postcomunista. Este artículo investiga el cambio inesperado en las protestas del escudo de defensa antimisiles en la República Checa y Polonia (2007-2009) para establecer las condiciones en las cuales la sociedad civil surge como un actor significativo en la política internacional. Los activistas en la República Checa organizaron siete veces más protestas en contra del escudo que sus contrapartes en Polonia, a pesar que ambos países mostraban niveles similares de oposición al proyecto. Su muestra que la variación en respuesta al proyecto de activistas checos y polacos son el resultado de diferentes restricciones materiales e ideológicas enfrentadas por las organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Estos resultados sugieren que las investigaciones en activismo cívico deben de tomar en cuenta seriamente oportunidades y restricciones a nivel organización cuando se analice el impacto de la sociedad civil en el proceso político.*

What is the role of civil society in geopolitical conflict? After more than two decades of relative peace in East-Central Europe,<sup>1</sup> the 2014 conflict in Ukraine has, once again, raised the specter of war. Fierce protests in the Kiev Maidan, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the separatist conflict in Eastern Ukraine rekindled geopolitical conflict in the region. The United States and the European Union retaliated by placing Russian officials and regime proponents under sanctions. Given the rising tensions in the region, what response should we expect from the East-Central European civil society? What leads civil society organizations (CSOs) to take sides on international issues, advocate specific policies, and engage in protest movements?

We tackle the broader question of why some CSOs mobilize in response to geopolitical pressures while others do not. Although CSOs in post-communist Europe have grappled with foreign policy issues in the past, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 made this question even more salient today. To identify the drivers of CSO mobilization in the face of geopolitical conflict, we compare Czech and Polish CSO responses between 2007 and 2009 to the U.S. missile defense shield plans. Why did CSOs in the Czech Republic stage seven times as many protests against the U.S. missile defense shield plans as their counterparts in Poland?

<sup>1</sup>Post-communist Eastern and Central European States including Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Belarus.

This article argues that CSOs are significantly more likely to join the national and international debate over geopolitical issues when (1) they possess the necessary material resources, and (2) mobilization serves their political goals rather than hurting them. Neither the Czech Republic nor Poland had any shortage of CSOs that opposed the U.S. missile defense shield plans. The Czech CSOs possessed financial autonomy and operated in a political environment that was favorable to mass mobilization against the U.S. missile defense deployment in the country. The Polish CSOs lacked the financial means and inherited a political legacy that made political mobilization counterproductive.

The variation in the civil society's responses to the U.S. missile defense shield plans is theoretically significant for our understanding of the conditions under which CSOs take it upon themselves to exert influence over foreign policy during high-stakes geopolitical conflicts. Furthermore, gaining a better understanding of how East-Central European civil society may respond to the Ukrainian conflict if it becomes a more encompassing crisis has policy implications for the countries involved, as well as for Europe and the United States.

The next section presents and evaluates two approaches to post-communist civil society: the previously established perspective which focuses on explaining the weakness of post-communist civil society, and the emergent one which contends that civil society is alive and well in East-Central Europe. While this debate has produced valuable empirically grounded research on civil society in post-communist Europe, this article makes the case that scholarship ought to move beyond it and ask the logically subsequent question: under what conditions do citizens of post-communist states mobilize and engage in civic activism? To this end, the following section examines why, despite the similar public opinion on the issue in both countries, the U.S. missile defense shield plans drew different civic responses in the Czech Republic and in Poland.

### **Civic Activism after Communism**

Despite the ability of overbearing communist regimes to stifle autonomous social organizations, it was not the civil society but the communist regimes themselves that proved to be weak in 1989. The triumphant dissidents inspired numerous studies examining and celebrating their victory (Howard 2002, 157). Having “that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state,” could “articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests” was deemed necessary for democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996, 7).

The initial triumphalism soon surrendered to skepticism as it became evident that East-Central Europe would not become a Tocquevillian paradise of citizens' associations. Post-communist civil societies appeared feeble, and manifestations of cynicism and mistrust became commonplace (Taylor 2011a). Citizens showed signs of political apathy, radical individualism, purposelessness, paternalism, and distrust (Petrova and Tarrow 2007, 76). Although some

scholars have pointed to the role of the immediate context, institutions, and international pressures (see e.g., Crawford and Lijphart 1995), many blamed the apathy on the legacy of communism, and thought little could be done about it (see e.g., Howard 2002; Jowitt 1991).

Studies of civil society in post-communist states repeatedly showed low civic engagement and, consequently, low potential for public mobilization (Crotty 2003; Howard 2003; Raiser *et al.* 2002; Wedel 1998). As Putnam (1994, 83) forewarned, “[w]here norms and networks of civic engagement are lacking, the outlook for collective action appears bleak.” Despite having relatively high trust in acquaintances (Howard 2002), citizens of post-communist countries appeared to lack interpersonal trust in those outside of their immediate social network (Carnaghan 2001; Crotty 2003; Nichols 1996; Osgood and Ong 2001; Uslaner 2001). They also exhibited distrust for most political institutions (Mishler and Rose 1997; Rose 2001; Rose-Ackermann 2001).

Crawford and Lijphart (1995) identified two competing explanations of this outcome. The first emphasized the shared communist legacy. It deemed post-communist transformation, a function of the cultural, social, and institutional structures created during the communist period. “In this view, the past casts a long shadow on the present, shapes the environment in which the battle to define and defend new institutions takes place, and may ultimately undermine the liberalization process,” Crawford and Lijphart (1995, 172) explained. The path-dependency approach has suggested several causal mechanisms for the weakness of civil society in the region. For example, communist regimes’ suppression of protest and control over individuals’ daily lives had arguably led to the lack of popular participation within the post-communist civil society. The totalitarian state outlawed protest and open dissent (Taylor 2011b), and assumed full responsibility for social order. This generated within the citizenry total dependence on the state to “solve every problem,” including those traditionally associated with the civil society in developed democracies. Not all communist societies were equally dependent on the state. For example, Poland was a case of a highly self-organized society in which “people dared to organize, act, think, and live. . . as if they were free” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 263; also see Ekiert and Kubik 2001).

After the collapse of the communist regimes, many continued to rely on the state as a caretaker (Crotty 2001). This so-called “social individualism” has been described as the most important factor contributing to weak civic associations in the transition era (Crotty 2001). The state not only attempted to foster dependency and compliance in the populace by eliminating any form of independent activity, but also “supplanted” civil society “with an intricately organized system of state-controlled organizations, in which participation was mandatory” (Howard 2002, 161). It thus provided venues where people could interact socially and develop common interests. These included trade unions, organized holidays, after school clubs, daycare facilities, and sports and social

clubs (Crotty 2003, 491). According to Howard (2002, 161), the experience with state-run organizations led large majorities of citizens throughout post-communist Europe to distrust organizations.

Crawford and Lijphart (1995) also emphasized the “imperatives of liberalization,” arguing that alternative institutions can be crafted and new international pressures can efface the negative influences of the past. Still, the past was not the only object of blame. Multiple studies have documented more immediate sources of civic skepticism. During the early years of transition, while many of the old elites enriched themselves through illicit means (Hanson 1997; Linz and Krueger 1996), the majority of ordinary citizens experienced reduced living standards and increased uncertainty in their daily lives (Colton 2000; Dowley and Silver 2002).

There was some evidence that CSOs have gained acceptance, both official and societal, as legitimate social actors capable of bridging citizen-elite interests (Klose 2000; Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Weinthal 2002). Several studies identified the potential benefits of international aid for democracy-building and the development of civil society (Weinthal 2002), the fostering of more democratic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs; Mendelson 2001), and the role of grant-assisted projects in helping NGOs to achieve their goals (Klose 2000). Some studies showed that the outcome of assistance is usually the opposite of that intended (Luong and Weinthal 1999), facilitating little more than the maintenance of the organization. Moreover, the CSOs frequently exhibited weak intergroup coordination as a result of their competition for international assistance (Baker and Jehlicka 1998; Crotty 2003; Evans 2002; Henderson 2002). Inappropriate strategies on the part of West European promoters of democracy have been widely cited as responsible for this outcome (Crotty 2003; Henderson 2002; Howard 2003; McMahon 2001; Wedel 1998).

Although there is strong evidence that individual participation is weak in the region, Petrova and Tarrow (2007, 74-5) probe “whether all the relevant dimensions of social and political activism have been tapped in the tradition of research that has developed since 1989.” They conclude that while there are some aspects of the civil society that are indeed weak in post-communist Europe, “there is evidence to suggest that other aspects—and particularly what we call ‘transactional activism’—are more robust” (75). This approach distinguishes the relational dimensions of participation from the magnitude of individual participation. The former is more robust than the evidence at the individual level suggests.

Petrova and Tarrow (2007) argue that relational interactions help foster a more vibrant civil society in post-communist Europe than the more pessimistic perspectives have presumed. Building on this new approach to civil society in the post-communist context, this article raises the questions: What explains politically motivated civic activism in post-communist Europe? Under what conditions do CSOs mobilize to make demands regarding foreign policy?

To answer these questions, this article focuses on the variation of civil society activism between Poland and the Czech Republic.

The next sections seek to answer the questions laid out above through a comparative case study that utilizes the most similar systems research design. The extensive historical, social, and institutional similarities between the two cases help to rule out some of the potential competing explanations.

### **The Antishield Mobilization Puzzle**

The tensions in East-Central Europe have been rising steadily since the mid-2000s. Before the Euromaidan uprisings in Kiev erupted in late 2013, and became an international crisis in 2014, regional security had become a contentious issue in 2007 with the U.S. missile defense shield plans. In January 2007, Washington officially opened negotiations with Prague and Warsaw to involve the two former communist countries in the U.S. missile defense system. The ensuing defense agreements immediately drew criticism from Russia, which challenged the Pentagon's claim that the missile defense shield was to be used solely for intercepting Iranian missiles aimed at Europe and the United States.

In addition to becoming a hot international topic, the missile defense shield became a contentious domestic issue in both the Czech Republic and Poland. Numerous polls consistently showed that over half of the Czech and Polish citizens were against the agreements (Bratová 2008; Hildreth and Ek 2009; Steiger 2008). The similarities between Poland and the Czech Republic go beyond the widespread opposition in both states to the U.S. shield on their soil. The two parliamentary republics share a communist past and a regional neighborhood. They concurrently joined the World Trade Organization (1995), NATO (1999), and the European Union (2004).

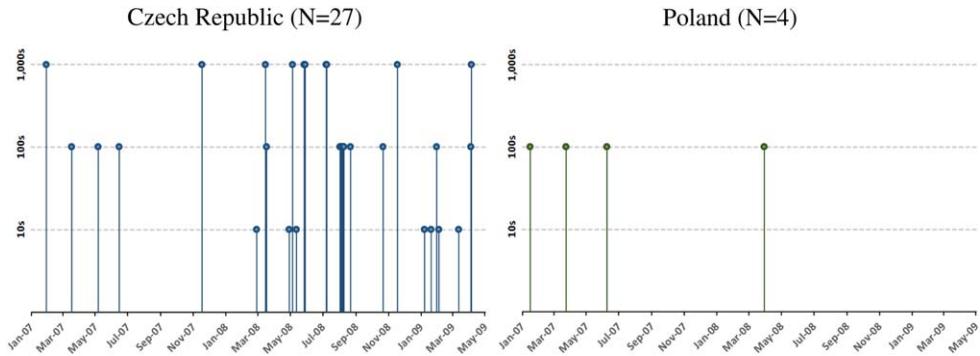
What is even more puzzling is that the Polish civil society is traditionally deemed more conducive to contention than its Czech counterpart. According to the United States Agency for International Development (2010) measures, Poland's CSOs are better off in terms of their organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, legal rights, infrastructure, and public image. Consequently, it was the Poles—not the Czechs—who should have made more headlines with their public demonstrations, marches, and hunger strikes. It was the Polish civil society that should have challenged the state, and the superpower.

The Czech activists organized 27 protests, a third of which drew thousands of participants. As Figure 1 shows, only four protests took place in Poland, with roughly 400 as the highest number of participants. Why was the Czech civil society significantly more responsive than its Polish counterpart to the shield issue?

### **Case Selection and Methods**

To provide a valid explanation to the above question, we draw on data from extensive fieldwork in Prague and Brdy, Czech Republic, and Warsaw,

**Figure 1.**  
**Antishield Protests and Number of Participants**



*Source:* Data compiled from international and national newspapers and confirmed by activists during interviews.

Poland, conducted in 2009. Prague and Warsaw witnessed the highest number of protests against the missile defense shield. The headquarters of the organizations which participated (or could have participated) in the antishield protests were located in Prague and Warsaw as well. Brdy was the intended site of the radar, and multiple protests took place there. We surveyed the national, foreign, and local newspapers for information about the key players and events. We also interviewed CSO leaders and rank and file members, ranging from fully committed to occasional participants, as well as Czech and Polish experts. Moreover, we engaged in participant observation, which included attending organizational meetings and events, and witnessed first-hand the processes through which CSOs designed and implemented protests.

A two-pronged strategy was used to identify the CSOs that could have participated in protest movements in Poland. First, we surveyed the media to determine which organizations were active in Poland on missile defense and similar issues. Second, we interviewed Czech activists and experts to identify which Polish organizations they considered to be most similar to their CSOs in terms of ideology and organization. The Czech activists were remarkably well informed about their Polish counterparts. Having frequently encountered each other at international conferences and other events, they readily identified the Polish CSOs that could have mobilized against the missile defense shield. The two-pronged approach allowed us to identify the relevant Polish actors, and to compare the two groups to uncover the relevant explanatory variables.

Two distinct groups were involved in the antishield protests. The first may be described as leftist/Marxist/anarchist. In the Czech Republic, it was represented by the No Bases Initiative, an informal coalition of roughly 60 organizations, the ideological spectrum of which ranged from social democratic to

anarchist. The Initiative was organized in June 2006 as a response to news of U.S.-Czech negotiations to place a permanent U.S. military base in the Czech Republic. Its main purpose was to prevent the installation of a U.S. radar base in the Czech Republic through nonviolent forms of action and to demand a referendum on the issue. No Bases was initially joined by the Humanist Movement, which was led by a charismatic young activist with political ambitions. The Humanist Movement leader attracted significant media attention with hunger strikes (one of which lasted 21 days), that initially made him the face of the Initiative. However, the Humanist Movement then split from the Initiative, citing the other side's refusal to widen its agenda beyond the missile shield issue.

A comparable Polish leftist/Marxist/anarchist counterpart of the No Bases Initiative is *Pracownicza Demokracja* (Workers' Democracy). Workers' Democracy has been vocal against the U.S. missile defense shield plans, along with the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its members are well acquainted with the Czech activists, and expressed admiration for their antimissile shield protests. In the interviews, both the leaders and the members of Workers' Democracy stated that they wished they could have organized similar protests in Poland, and cited previous experience in organizing protests against similar issues, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The second player actively involved in the antimissile defense shield protests in the Czech Republic was the local branch of Greenpeace. The Czech branch of Greenpeace staged dramatic performances against the missile defense shield plans. These included occupying treetops in Brdy and "brain washing" shows, in which Greenpeace activists wore giant plastic brains which were demonstratively being washed with soap with large mops. Greenpeace Poland did not mobilize to protest the shield. However, the leader of the Polish branch of Greenpeace expressed that his group had wanted to stage protests. The No Bases Initiative and Greenpeace acted independently of each other. The two neither coordinated their actions nor joined each other's protests.

### **Alternative Explanations of Civic Mobilization**

Given the extensive similarities between the Czech Republic and Poland, as well as between the civil society groups that were involved in the opposition to the shield, what explains the variation in mobilization? Popular accounts of the protests have suggested three rationales for why the civic groups in the Czech Republic may have protested much more virulently than the ones in Poland. These explanations suggest that differences in culture, geopolitical priorities, and political opportunity structures may explain the variation in observed protest behavior. However, as the discussion below shows, these explanations are less than convincing.

One account of the lack of protests against the missile defense shield in Poland emphasizes Polish history and culture. As a U.S. diplomat stationed in

Warsaw expressed: “Poland is very pro-American by its culture and history. Compared to the Czech Republic, Poland has a proud martial tradition, a bulwark of Christendom, savior of Vienna against the Turks, resister of its partitions, and fierce resister against Nazi occupation. The Czech Republic, by contrast, has a proud pacifist tradition and culture.”<sup>2</sup> This opinion was frequently reflected in the press and the authors’ interviews with experts.<sup>3</sup>

Another view regarding why the missile defense shield was protested widely in the Czech Republic and not in Poland drew attention to each country’s respective relationship with Russia. According to it, the Poles felt more threatened by Russia than were the Czechs and, therefore, were less likely to protest the shield. Even though the shield was officially meant for keeping Iran from dropping nuclear weapons on Europe, weakening Russia’s nuclear capacity was the real goal. The Poles welcomed the shield as a way of weakening Russia and, thereby, keeping it from invading Poland.

Although plausible, these explanations fail to explain why over half of all Czechs and Poles were opposed to the deployment of the shield on their territory. Moreover, characterizing the Czechs as inherently more pacifist than the Poles, aside from its primordial assumptions, overlooks the Czech people’s own proud tradition of dissidence, such as the Prague Spring, and capacity for resistance, as was the case during the subsequent Soviet occupation. When, in August 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the liberalizing reforms that were known as the Prague Spring, a group of Czech students made a suicide pact to sacrifice themselves in protest of the invasion. Twenty-one-year-old student Jan Palach died after setting himself on fire in Wenceslas Square on January 16, 1969. The example also shows that the Czech Republic has its own historical grievances against Moscow.

Media accounts and local experts have also identified political opportunity as responsible for mobilizing the Czechs, as opposed to the Poles, against the shield. According to this argument, the Czech activists had good reason to believe that their government might change its stance on the issue. The Czech Social Democratic Party, a leading force in Czech politics and one of the two leading contenders in the 2010 parliamentary election (which was originally scheduled for 2009), and some key members of the Green Party seriously considered rejecting the project in preparation for the elections; their representatives even attended some of the protests. In Poland, no influential political actors seriously entertained the notion of completely scraping the plans. The elites were effectively united on the issue, with the only question being how much they would be able to extract from Washington in return for this deal.

<sup>2</sup>Authors’ interview with an anonymous U.S. official, June 12, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Authors’ interviews with Tomas Weiss (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Czech Republic) and Vladimir Handl (Institute of International Relations, Czech Republic), June 20, 2009, Prague, Czech Republic.

U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Prague in April 2009, during which he gave his first major foreign policy speech, may have also provided an opportunity for protesters to mobilize public opinion against the shield.

The political opportunity logic also falls short on empirical grounds. In the early stages of the agreement, by the time the Czech protests were well under way, the missile shield plans encountered significant elite opposition neither in Poland nor in the Czech Republic. Interestingly, it was the Czech Social Democrats who were the first to hold talks with Washington on the issue. However, having sensed the popular mood and nearing the parliamentary election (which was, at the time, scheduled for 2009), the party then repositioned itself as the main opponent of the missile shield. Thus political opportunity at the initial stages of the opposition movement does not account for the mobilization outcome. Obama's April 2009 visit to Prague did not instigate an unusually high level of protest activity (Figure 1). Prague hosted two protests in April, but their size was not greater than the majority of the 25 other antishield protests that took place before it. Poland did not experience any antishield protest activity since March 2008.

### **Finance and Strategy: Organization-Level Drivers of Protest**

As opposed to the macro-structural explanations examined above, this article contends that financial and strategic constraints faced by civil society groups explain the variation in the mobilization outcomes. The activists of both groups involved in the antishield protests—leftists/Marxists/anarchists and Greenpeace—had the desire to mobilize in opposition to their governments' ongoing plans to install the unpopular military equipment. Interviewees consistently reported that they wished to engage the public with demonstrations. Polish activists in particular described their admiration for their Czech counterparts who staged numerous protests.<sup>4</sup> It was certainly not the lack of will that kept the Polish CSOs from taking to the streets.

The two types of groups that participated in the antishield activism faced different constraints on their involvement. For the leftists, legacy-driven ideological constraints played a key role; for Greenpeace members, it was access to material resources. The cases suggest that civic mobilization in the face of geopolitical conflict in post-communist Europe can vary by the type of group. Studies of civil society that focus exclusively on regional, national, or individual level of analysis overlook potentially significant variables by ignoring organization-level factors.

The leaders and rank and file members of both Greenpeace Czech Republic and Greenpeace Poland wanted to protest the missile shield, but only

<sup>4</sup>Interviews with Jacek Winiarski (Greenpeace in Poland founder) and Malgorzata Swiatek (Polish leftist activist), July 29, 2009, Warsaw, Poland.

Greenpeace Czech Republic engaged in contentious activity. The Czech branch made national and international news for its elaborate and dramatic performances. For example, in April 2008, roughly two-dozen Greenpeace activists “took over” the military zone site, referred to as “Spot Height 718,” which was the exact location of the proposed radar site in the Brdy forest. They scaled the hill without a permit to enter the zone and set up camp in treetops. They also hung a 15 × 15 m banner with an image of a large target. By staging a political protest on military premises, the activists committed a misdemeanor punishable by a fine. After the military requested that they leave, the activists still continued their protest for several weeks. In contrast, Greenpeace Poland did not stage a single protest against the shield.

What made the key difference for the two branches’ capacity to engage in civic activism was their access to material resources. Greenpeace Czech Republic was fully self-sustaining, whereas Greenpeace Poland was not. Financial differences between the Czech and Polish branches of Greenpeace emerged in the recent past and had no connection to their capacity or propensity to engage in contentious activity. The Czech branch encountered severe financial crises in the second half of the 1990s, which compelled it to alter its financial structure. The push to make the Czech branch financially sustainable resulted in the expansion of its donations from individual contributors. By 2002, the branch had built a solid base of individual contributors, which effectively made it financially independent from Greenpeace International.

Greenpeace International refused both branches permission to protest against the shield, and consequently declined to fund the venture. The central command feared alienating the organization’s donors. Having come close to declaring bankruptcy in the past, Greenpeace International did not want to estrange donors who would have disapproved of focusing on the “peace” part of the organization’s name. Established just five years prior, Greenpeace Poland was stretched thin and did not have adequate material and human resources to protest. As one of its founders described:

We have no resources – no money, and no people. We could do it [protest against the shield] if we had [the] support of Greenpeace International, but we didn’t have it... We sometimes have to commit our private time and energy. There are five divorces in our office already. Ten marriages, five divorces. So you can imagine how we worked. For the first three years, we worked like crazy, sleeping in the office. It wasn’t just work, it was life. People got tired.<sup>5</sup>

The leftist/Marxist/anarchist coalition encountered a different constraint. The activists in both countries had adequate access to material resources

<sup>5</sup>Authors’ interview with Jacek Winiarski, Warsaw, Poland, July 29, 2009.

(mostly from online contributions and membership fees), and none of the groups were materially dependent on a disapproving central authority. The discrepancy in the mobilization patterns of leftist groups in the Czech Republic and Poland lies in the historical legacy of each country. The strength of pre-1989 civil society affected leftist mobilization in 2007. The country with the most vibrant civil society prior to 1989, Poland, experienced significantly less civic activism against the missile shield by the leftist/Marxist/anarchist coalition than the country with a relatively weak pre-1989 civil society—Czech Republic.

In their analysis of Poland, Linz and Stepan (1996) underscore the distinctiveness of the pre-1989 regime and, consequently, civic culture. They argue that Poland never experienced a fully established totalitarian regime, and had a highly self-organized society. Throughout the communist period, Poland maintained a significant degree of *de facto* pluralism, which “increased the ability of parts of civil society to resist the regime’s ideology and somewhat checked the will of the aspirant totalitarian regime to impose intense mobilization, especially in the ideological area” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 256). This reading of Polish history is shared by Ekiert and Kubik (2001), who cite the powerful Solidarity Movement as contributing to the collapse of communism in Poland. Czechoslovakia, conversely, had a rather small group of dissidents, who existed mostly in isolation from the public, particularly when compared to Poland (Dvorakova 2003).

The causal mechanism through which Polish history influenced the protest outcome was not the primordial cultural background of the Czechs and the Poles, but the strong, ideologically-charged legacy of pre-1989 civic activism. As one Polish activist put it:

If we go marching on the streets carrying red banners with a hammer and sickle on them, the people will not join us because nobody in Poland wants to join a group carrying communist banners. And if we agree not to bring the banners with us, there will always be someone who will refuse to compromise and still bring them. It would be better for us not to demonstrate and hope that the Polish government will listen to the public opinion than to demonstrate and risk turning the people towards favoring the missile defense shield.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the strength of Poland’s pre-1989 civil society, which was staunchly anticommunist, contemporary leftist activists found themselves facing a dilemma. Pursuing civic activism and organizing protests in line with their political preferences would likely alienate significant sections of the Polish population, which remains strongly anticommunist. In the case of the missile

<sup>6</sup>Author’s interview with Filip Ilkowski (“Stop the War” initiative in Poland leader, *Pracownicza Demokracja* member), Warsaw, Poland, July 28, 2009.

defense shield, the leftist, Marxist, and anarchist activists calculated that their protests would, in effect, have caused those who were against the shield (roughly half of the population) to reconsider their position. Mobilizing for a protest could lead the Polish activists, who were ideologically associated with the unpopular pre-1989 *status quo*, to lose significantly more supporters than they would gain.

This was not the case in the Czech Republic, where public sentiment against communism was relatively weaker than in Poland. The Czech dissident movement of the 1980s was relatively weak, and its anticommunist legacy was not as pronounced as that of Poland. The Communist party in the Czech Republic has consequently remained resilient and unreformed (Stegmaier and Vlachova 2009). Unlike in Poland, contemporary Marxists and anticapitalist groups did not constitute a delegitimizing element in the Czech civil society and antishield protests. The No Bases Initiative was able to engage in contentious civic activism together with sympathetic Marxist elements without fear of a societal backlash. “A year later after we started, we opened a bank account. People started sending us money. For the demonstrations we were able to rent the sound equipment, the stage, have a nice banner, professionally made, fliers,” explained Humanist Movement, Czech Republic, leader Jan Tamáš, who successfully attracted public attention to the shield issue with his hunger strikes. “The people support us. They always come up to us and tell us that they agree with what we are doing. Often, they join us,” observed up No Bases Initiative leader Jan Majicek.<sup>7</sup> The Czech left-leaning organizations were able to capture the hearts and minds of the public in a way that their Polish counterparts never could due to the pre-1989 ideological legacy of each country.

### Conclusion

The antimissile defense shield protests in the Czech Republic and Poland between 2007 and 2009 demonstrate that post-communist civil society could, under the right circumstances, emerge as a significant player in international politics. Scholarly debate on the strength of civil society in East-Central Europe has swung between optimism and pessimism. The initial euphoria over the breakup of the Warsaw Pact and the demise of European communist regimes cemented the triumphalism of civil society and democracy. However, Western observers soon began to notice that the vibrant civil societies of East-Central Europe had all but eroded in a matter of a few years. The ensuing literature extensively examined the causes and consequences of weak civil societies in the post-communist states.

<sup>7</sup>Authors’ interview with Jan Majicek, Brdy, Czech Republic, July 25, 2009.

Beyond debating the strength of civil society, this article poses the next relevant question: Under what conditions do CSOs in post-communist Europe engage in contentious activism? We argue that the causes of civic mobilization cannot be understood without significant attention to the opportunities and constraints facing individual organizations. While Greenpeace Poland was as willing to protest the shield as its sister organization in the Czech Republic, it lacked material resources. Dependent on Greenpeace International for its funds, it could not defy the prohibition imposed by its international sponsor against the protest. Having access to a wide network of individual donors, Greenpeace Czech Republic had the means to disregard the ban, and stage dramatic protests against the missile shield.

The leftist/Marxist/anarchist coalitions in the Czech Republic and Poland that strongly opposed the deployment of the missile shield shared both the desire and capability to stage demonstrations against it. Yet the powerful anti-communist sentiment in Poland, a legacy of the country's strong dissident movement of the 1980s, had marginalized CSOs and political movements that identify themselves as anticapitalist. Polish Marxists and their leftist allies decided not to protest the missile defense shield because doing so could have alienated a significant portion of the society. The left-leaning civic organizations in the Czech Republic did not have to second guess their activism. The relative weakness of the anticommunist sentiment in the Czech Republic allowed Marxist and anticapitalist groups to freely join the protest movement. Political preferences of the Marxists did not delegitimize the antimissile shield demonstrations.

The variation in the Polish and Czech responses to the missile defense shield resulted from the different material and legacy-driven ideological constraints faced by CSOs in these two countries. Future research would benefit from taking organization-level opportunities and constraints seriously when analyzing the impact of civil society on political processes.

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