ACTIVISM IN HARD TIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

People Power

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As a college professor teaching classes on gender and women's rights in the early 1990s, Marta Mazurek never imagined that her advocacy work would someday become her vocation. Years later, as a city councilwoman in Poznań, Poland, Mazurek appreciates the different but crucial roles activists play in addressing social problems, and she knows first-hand that activists in CEE can be important agents of change. Our discussions of civic activism in this volume show that in a world where many are despairing over the existential crises that we face, we have much to learn from the creativity, energy, and resilience that civic activists in CEE display. In this concluding chapter, we synthesize our findings on the vitality and importance of activism in bringing desired social and political change. We also identify important lessons from our conversations with activists in several CEE countries and activists' experiences, which suggest the conditions under which civic activism in the region is successful in achieving change. Since this book sought to elevate activists' voices and activities, showing how citizens in CEE make the most of possibilities for activism, it is appropriate that we conclude this volume with activists' suggestions for how to support and strengthen civic activism.

Responding creatively to challenges

Our book examines how activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, working in different spheres of activism and toward different goals, responded to various political and social challenges while addressing people's needs. These challenges, what we refer to as hard times, include polarization, democratic backsliding, generational divides, environmental degradation, and crises caused by Covid-19 and

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war on Ukraine. Table 1.1 in the Introduction provides a summary of our volume's activists, their organizations, countries, and the focus of their activism. Again, in this book, we did not try to be comprehensive, and our selection of cases and activists was influenced by our authors' expertise and experience, as well as the issues we wanted to cover. That said, we did select countries that allowed for comparison within three distinct parts of the post-communist region: Central Europe (Poland and Hungary), post-conflict (BiH), and post-Soviet (Russia and Ukraine). Choosing activists to serve as co-authors or to be interviewed was more difficult, but we endeavored for diversity in many respects, including country, focus of activism, and organizational form.

Because the activists featured in our book are clearly not a representative sample of activists in these countries, we cannot generalize about what motivates civic activists or explains the varying impact of civic activism. Instead, highlighting activists' voices through co-authorship and/or profiles of activists provides first-hand testimony from activists' experiences and perspectives that contribute to a more holistic understanding of these important questions and generates theory that can be later tested in other cases and using different data. Our book's approach responds to a recent call for scholarship that is collaboratively produced at the intersection between activist and academic knowledge to understand how and why activism and civil society matter more broadly (Hayes et al., 2021). The profiles we provided demonstrate that civic activists engage in long and twisting journeys that do not unfold in a straight line toward failure or success. Instead, civic activists seek to learn from what did and did not work, adapting to evolving social and political conditions to try to realize their goals. These profiles also provide powerful evidence that challenges common ideas about activism in CEE. This includes the proposition that the communist legacy has had a similar impact on these societies, specifically a universally negative legacy on civic engagement, or that civic activists in CEE are generally ineffective.

The activists in this book use self-organization to step up and step in when governments are not capable or refuse to act, or when grassroots action around everyday problems or crises is deemed more effective. In the last decade alone, many countries in CEE faced multiple crises and challenges, some of which are global in nature (e.g., democratic backsliding, shrinking public space, COVID-19 pandemic, or environmental crises), and some which are local or regional (legacies of one-party authoritarianism, Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine). The history of activism in CEE is decidedly multidimensional, sustained, and transcends issue areas, if mixed in terms of its impact. In some countries and at certain points in time, bursts of activism were responses to a particular crisis and were quite consequential, such as anti-regime protests in Ukraine. Often, however, it is hard to measure the

impact of social activism on desired outcomes, because outcomes are neither direct nor immediate, and social activism occurs alongside other behavior (Chenoweth et al., 2017).

Examples presented in this book show different patterns of activism by pro-democratic elements of civil societies. In one pattern, civic actors politically engage in contentious efforts against political elites, democratic erosion, and/or more broadly against inefficient states that neglect everyday needs of the people and certain rights. In another pattern, activists organize when something important is at stake and a crisis becomes a threat that people need to react to (Zarembo & Martin, 2023). These responses sometimes take the form of in-person protests, but gradually everyday sustained efforts to organize, mobilize, and act have also been visible, often facilitated by social media and communication technology. Digital platforms, like those developed by Madarász's aHang in Hungary or Akcja Demokracja in Poland, enable cooperation and collaboration of like-minded citizens, groups, and organizations, allowing for information sharing and organizing online petitions designed to strengthen democracy. These digital platforms also became hubs for civic education and raising citizens' awareness, promoting both in-person and online mobilization from new and enduring active citizens.

Importantly, we have learned that democratic backsliding does not necessarily lead to a decline in activism. In fact, the attacks on liberal-democratic norms in Poland and Hungary, attempts to shrink public space, and political polarization in these countries and in others have been important motivating factors for many pro-democratic activists to engage in the protection of human rights, democratic innovations, and coalition building. As one activist suggested, "What I observe is that the polarization of society hinders our work on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it consolidates each side. People are ready, have greater motivation, and are more mobilized and willing to participate" (Arczewska et al., 2019). Polish activists stress that the PiS government's behavior and social and political polarization has impacted even the language used to describe individuals' behavior and activities. In Poland, for example, the term "activism" has suddenly become more important and the social potential for activism, which was dormant for the last twenty years, cannot be ignored even by authoritarian governments (Chimiak, 2022). As we see, mobilizing citizens today is easier, because of the availability of social media and information but also because of growing civic awareness among individuals and local communities, or at least among some segments of the societies. These individuals have encouraged collaboration with others across sectors of activism. What this means, for example, is that female activists who support liberal ideas participate not only in feminist activities or activism to support women's rights; when needed, they may also engage in ecological movements, join climate protests, and support other groups with similar progressive goals.

Despite a widespread perception among scholars and practitioners that public space has been shrinking in certain Central European countries, activists in Poland and Hungary emphasize that a much more significant process is taking place as a response to this constantly changing situation. Instead, social mobilization, which happens both in-person and online and is sometimes institutionalized but more often is intentionally spontaneous and ad hoc, undermines the static view of civil society (Putnam et al., 1993; Howard, 2003; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022) weakened by a shrinking or closing public space in CEE. Good examples of such evolving forms of engagement are participation in online consultations, signing online petitions, or criticizing certain policies via ad hoc protest and movements that are vibrant, spontaneous, and well-organized. Table 8.1 summarizes the key empirical trends in innovative adaptation that our book reveals.

Tactics featuring the creation and use of horizontal networks have been embraced by activists seeking to enhance accountability, as illustrated by Brkan's story of digital activists *Why Not?* in BiH and Svets' testimony on local monitoring groups such as OPORA in Ukraine. Activists working in tough conditions or battling specific hard times have, thus, adopted horizontal networks that intentionally contrast with the hierarchical, NGO model decisively promoted by international donors in CEE in the 1990s and criticized by scholars who pointed out that "NGO-ization" often pulled civic groups toward foreign donors and away from citizens (Helms, 2003; Henderson, 2003; Sundstrom, 2006; McMahon, 2017; Belloni, 2020). These horizontal networks, which take advantage of digital communications, allow each of their parts to adapt to deteriorating safety, legal, or local conditions. Horizontal approaches are also intentionally taken to empower citizens themselves to act, rather than to act on behalf of others. Put another way, these agents of change are using leaderful approaches (Milkman, 2017) designed to cultivate many leaders and to democratize decision-making, as championed by young Polish feminists (Chapter 4).

We also need to stress that not all challenges and crises can be seen as opportunities for activists. As the Russian government continues its full-scale war against Ukraine and tightens its authoritarian regime, the war has had a profound impact on both Ukrainian and Russian civil societies and activism. While volunteerism in Ukraine is still high, the Russian military's daily attacks have inflicted mass death, injury, displacement, and trauma on Ukrainian society (Zarembo & Martin, 2023). Working in such an incredibly dangerous environment, Muzyka has exerted tremendous effort to step up and work with like-minded fellow citizens, mostly women, to empower citizens through creating local branches of her association during Russia's war. Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has imposed fines, arrest, detention, or imprisonment on more than 21,000 Russians for criticizing the authorities and participating in protests (Amnesty International

TABLE 8.1 Key Empirical Trends in Innovative Adaptation to Shrinking Civic Space

Empirical Trend	*Examples*	*Civic Activists Illustrating This Trend*
Embracing digital tools	Advocacy campaigns, either wholly or significantly online	Popova in Russia, Brkan in BiH, Rossman in Russia, Madarász in Hungary
Engaging through informal activism	Activism organized in ways beyond hierarchical formal organizations	Popova in Russia, Ivanova in Russia, Rossman in Russia
Developing horizontally structured networks	Coalitions of local activist groups Groups comprised of locally based branches or activists	Móra in Hungary, Lemeš in BiH Gosiewski in Poland, Svets in Ukraine, Muzyka in Ukraine, Rossman in Russia
Focusing on local-level change	Efforts to increase citizen engagement in or change polices of municipalities or cities	Gerwin in Poland, Mazurek in Poland, Lemeš in BiH, Ivanova in Russia
Adapting goals	Shift to pressing, concrete everyday problems Shift to work toward individual-level change, raising awareness	Svets in Ukraine, Muzyka in Ukraine, Lemeš in BiH Rossman in Russia Popova in Russia, Ivanova in Russia
Enhancing citizen participation in democratic decision-making	Deliberative practices of participatory budgeting, citizens assemblies	Gerwin in Poland, Madarász in Hungary
Building bridges across divides	Group's inclusion of individuals across ideological or generational lines Group forming coalitions with organizations or activists across ethnic or national lines	Gosiewski in Poland, Madarász in Hungary, Mazurek in Poland, Svets in Ukraine Brkan in BiH and beyond, Lemeš in BiH and beyond, Rossman in Russia and beyond

UK, 2023). The war sparked a horizontal ecosystem of emerging resistance groups among Russians; these efforts might serve as a future foundation of a new civil society (Terekhov, 2023). Thousands of Russian activists who oppose the war fled the country. Rossman and her colleagues at the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) have worked assiduously using a networked approach to support and give individual feminists inside and outside Russia who oppose the war the power to act in ways that make the most sense

given their resources and localities. Yet, the war cannot be seen as creating opportunities in Ukraine and Russia for civic activism but rather as imposing severe limitations and the need to act in different ways.

Activists' ability to adapt to closing public space at the national level by bringing change at the local level is an important take-home lesson from our activists, and it supports recent scholarly work on the evolution of civic activism in the last decade (Puljek-Shank & Fritsch, 2019; Pudar Draško et al., 2020). This tactic also helps ensure that activism accomplishes specific desired changes. In terms of process, a wider mobilization takes place at the local level where cooperation with authorities is focused on certain everyday issues like the natural environment. All of this is happening despite democratic backsliding, which indicates a certain resilience and robustness of civic activism in countries where citizens' expectations for the quality of democracy are relatively high. Although activism in BiH has had fewer opportunities to make an impact on policies due to the unresponsiveness of political elites and the country's complicated structure which reinforces divisions along ethnic lines, we still observe activists like Lemeš who persist, resist, and bring change at local and regional levels. In other countries, such as Russia where autocracy has suppressed independent voices and action, civic activism concentrates more on finding ways to protect certain groups, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, or to work on a small scale and focusing on everyday local efforts.

Our book illustrates the resourcefulness of activists who respond to oppression, crisis or harm, and policies limiting the rights of certain groups by stepping up, raising awareness, mobilizing, and innovating, developing new strategies and tools. For example, the aHang movement in Hungary has managed to, as Madarász emphasized, "boost a lot of good activities" in response to the government's oppression, seeking to address weaknesses in Hungary's democracy while enhancing citizens' role in democratic decision-making. Participatory mechanisms such as citizen assemblies and juries in Hungary, community dialogues, civic panels, and everyday patriotism in Poland are efforts to bring people together, find a common ground despite divisions and reduce polarization. People power in democracy has long been focused on voting in elections. These new participatory tools are used by activists not only to oppose the government and its harmful measures or inaction but also to find a way forward, change people's attitudes and raise awareness of their work among the public, and perhaps invent a new type of democracy.

We argue that even and perhaps especially in times of crisis, individuals' power and engagement can be significant. As the example of the Ukrainian civil network OPORA shows, crises such as the authoritarian government's violent crackdown on EuroMaidan protesters and Russia's war bring people across generations together, increasing solidarity with those whose rights are under threat. To a lesser extent, this could also be observed in Poland, as different generations of women have supported activists defending women's

reproductive rights. Other examples that we discuss in this volume illustrate how crises can lead to activists' strengthening their work by expanding networks, deepening ties to citizens, and developing new agendas and strategies. In this unstable environment, grassroots activists show remarkable courage, sustainability, and willingness to adapt and find better organizational solutions such as those sought by both the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers Participating in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in Ukraine and the Feminist Anti-War Resistance in Russia. At the same time, they also pay a price in terms of making a broader impact when new challenges force them to shift the focus of activity from their main goals and issues to more immediate concerns and threats.

Another type of activism that we explored is everyday activism, which pursues immediate and enduring problems that affect people's lives such as environmental and health issues but also social justice or work-related problems (Sundstrom et al., 2022). As our examples of everyday activism from BiH show, addressing locally rooted problems may lead to building networks of allies at the national or regional level to trigger change of policy or highlight the issue of concern. Here also innovation and strategy building, including for funding, expression, and support, play a significant role and require a lot of effort to make the grassroots work sustainable. Starting at the local level and building support of local citizens and authorities can be a decisive first step for everyday grassroots activism to sustain, advocate, and pursue goals.

Importantly, activists use lessons they have learned from responding to needs during prior crises and applying them quickly to new challenges. For example, Brkan mentioned how the responses *Why Not?* developed to counter disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic helped digital activists quickly pivot to work against disinformation about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition, women activists in BiH and Russia long advocating for vulnerable women stepped up and strengthened horizontal networks within and across groups to protect the women made even more vulnerable by the pandemic. In some cases, like in Poland now, we also learn of the importance of building ad hoc partnerships of different kinds of groups and organizations to manage the humanitarian and refugee crises produced by Russia's war on Ukraine. These common goals may prompt other efforts and activities for which a shared platform or network can be very consequential in times of top-down division and polarization.

How civic activism matters

Even after reading about activists' creativity and ability to create opportunities out of crises, readers may wonder whether civic activism really matters in a region that has experienced varying degrees of

democratic backsliding and/or a closing of the public space for autonomous civic action. We recognize that civic engagement rarely influences policies immediately or directly, but this, as we have demonstrated, should not be interpreted as a failure or as inconsequential. What the activists presented in our book and featured in our research show is that civic activism in CEE plays an unparalleled role in shaping social and political outcomes, even if it is delayed and indirect or its goals are altered, as in a war situation. Also, the activism highlighted in the book illustrates the capacity of ordinary people to respond, confront, and transform attitudes, practices, and policies. This section synthesizes insights from activists' stories and the research on activism presented in the book to address this very criticism of civic activism, as well as to discuss how civic activism matters and the factors that help activists realize their goals.

But how can civic activism make a difference in the face of powerful non-democratic actors? It is certainly important to be realistic about what civic actors can do. Bernhard, for example, argues civil society actors can work as a "firewall" for democracy, serving as a final layer of accountability when anti-democratic forces have captured democratic institutions (Bernhard, 2020). However, on their own, civic activists cannot prevent powerful political authorities from re-asserting authoritarian rule (Deegan-Krause, 2022), as the cases of Russia and Hungary after 2010 illustrate.

It is also important to point out that our approach of featuring long-form profiles of a small number of activists supportive of democracy in a handful of CEE countries and supplementing these profiles with other types of data about activism in the region is designed to highlight activists' experiences and their perspectives on their work. These generate insights into the dynamics and impact of civic activism that can be later tested in different cases and using different data.[1]

The civic activists we feature have persevered under difficult conditions, adapting and working by using horizontal approaches that operate at the local level and use locally rooted groups to build networks of groups within their countries and across the region and globe (Brkan, Lemeš, Móra, Gosiewski, and Rossman). These strategies appear to increase the likelihood that activism will lead to change and challenge a potential criticism that activists featured in our book are isolated, or what scholars of one-party communist systems called atomized (Havel, 1985; Arendt, 1994). What is different from earlier activism that included external networks of activists and donors is that these networks are initiated and maintained by actors more firmly rooted in CEE, rather than formed by powerful external actors.

Far from being exceptions, several activists profiled here began their activism without prior experience in formal civil society organizations, including Lemeš, Ivanova, and Muzyka. These everyday activists were driven by intimate experience with an acute problem to take public action, reminding

us of the power of citizens. Although citizens often criticize civic activism for failing to achieve concrete results, the activists profiled demonstrate that they have shaped outcomes, albeit over time but even under considerable risk to their careers and even their personal safety. Indeed, our profiles of activists bring to light the long-term battles activists undertake to achieve their goals in a way that common social scientific approaches that extract chopped up short excerpts from interviews cannot.

Russian activists have not been able to stop the Russian government from waging war or to get it to pass a law on domestic violence that includes the protection and rehabilitation of survivors or to encourage the widespread practice of sustainable development. However, the activists working on these issues have adopted longer-term strategies that work to change minds, debunk the myth that Putin's policies have universal support, and make small steps forward to improve people's lives or Russian society. These include obtaining signatures to demand a law on domestic violence (Popova), creatively using artistic protests and securing digital communications to express opposition to war and in favor of gender equality (Rossman), and combining Russian rural traditions with science to practice sustainable farming (Ivanova). Even during the horrific war in Ukraine, activists are collecting evidence of war crimes that can be used in later trials (Svets) and giving decision-making power to and building the skills of female family members of soldiers to help them get assistance for recovery, not just now but also in the future (Muzyka). Lemeš's organization's participation in campaigns to compel action to improve air quality in his hometown and pass a law preventing the construction of dams that threaten rivers took more than a decade. Yet, these efforts ended up having a measurable impact on the country's environment.

These examples illustrate that activists adopt different theories of change and have diverse goals. As a result, their efforts should be evaluated according to their approaches and their intended goals. Sometimes, they emphasize policy change. Working mainly locally but also nationally, Mazurek is changing policies to address gender inequalities in Poland, while Gerwin and Madarász are improving the quality of political decision-making by engaging more broadly and deliberatively citizens in Poland and Hungary, respectively. Other times, activists seek to hold elected officials accountable, as Brkan in BiH and Svets in Ukraine demonstrate. Another group of activists profiled in our volume aspire to change social attitudes and behavior. This group includes Gosiewski's encouragement of everyday patriotism in Poland, or consciousness raising and prefigurative ecological activism practiced by Ivanova in Russia, Popova's digital sharing of stories of Russian survivors of domestic violence, and Rossman's support of anti-war resistance in Russia. These grassroots approaches are intended not only to bring about some immediate change but also to work cumulatively, from the bottom up in society, to foster long-term, deeper change. Still other activists work to

solve immediate problems, as illustrated by Muzyka's efforts to inform and support family members of Ukrainian soldiers and Lemeš's fight for clean air in his hometown in BiH.

What affects civic activism's impact?

Several factors shape the strategies activists choose and their impact. Naturally, a regime's approach toward civic space matters a great deal because it influences the political opportunities and constraints for civic action. It thus makes sense that context affects activism's impact the most, and civic activists working in countries whose governments are the most authoritarian and who have adopted and implemented laws restraining or punishing independent activists face the most difficult conditions in participating in activism that brings about change. The activism of Popova, Ivanova, and Rossman in Russia vividly make this clear. Both Popova and Rossman have been declared foreign agents for their activism but have decided to continue to act even after "exiting" from Russia to use digital forms to promote gender equality and oppose Russia's war on Ukraine. Ivanova has remained in Russia, but under the current circumstances and regime, she has put on hold her grassroots work in developing sustainable communities. These Russian activists are currently using horizontal approaches to activism, which aim to change societies' attitudes and everyday actions but recognize that Russia's dangerous conditions do not now allow much room for civic actors to affect policy.

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine has dramatically reduced the space for civic activism, creating unsafe conditions for merely living in Ukraine. However, even Russia's daily military assaults throughout the country have not stopped Ukrainian civic activists. Instead, war has compelled them to work in more decentralized ways that enhance effectiveness and sustainability while minimizing physical harm. It also has compelled a shift in the focus of their work toward goals that are both closest to the activists' original goals while also addressing society's most pressing humanitarian needs.

In comparison to Russia and war-time Ukraine, the other countries featured in this book – BiH, Hungary, and Poland – have more, albeit still constrained, space for civic activism. In these countries, activists can leverage domestic, regional, and transnational networks of activists and donors, as well as popular support to realize social and policy change. Efforts that have affected social conditions include those that engage citizens in community dialogues and Gosiewski's educational initiatives on everyday patriotism in Poland, Brkan's digital activism to combat disinformation, and Lemeš's work to improve his city's air quality in BiH. Activists working in these countries have often been most successful in bringing change at the subnational – local and/or regional level, where political opportunities are more open than

at the national level. Examples include Gerwin's work, resulting in Polish cities adopting participatory budgeting, Mazurek's work on implementing gender equality policies in Poznań, Brkan's combined digital and in-person activism, resulting in the resignation of a corrupt regional prime minister in BiH, and Lemeš's work resulting in stricter regional environmental permits in BiH.

Finally, our profiles of activists working in Hungary, BiH, and Poland show that it is indeed possible – with carefully crafted strategies and tactics– to affect national policy. Madarász initiative contributed to the adoption of a new policy of homecare in Hungary, Brkan's efforts resulted in a BiH law on conscientious objection, Móra's coalition worked through the EU's Court of Justice to bring about the repeal of Hungary's law punishing CSOs for receiving foreign funding, and women's activists in BiH allied with international supporters to enact a law criminalizing domestic violence.

The history of civic activism in a country can also affect its strength and impact today. In Ukraine, Svets argues that positive examples of civic activism bringing about change during the Orange Revolution (2004–2005) and the EuroMaidan Revolution (2013–2014) continue to provide Ukrainians today with the belief that they can make a difference when they are civically engaged. This belief has helped fuel volunteerism in Ukraine during Russia's full invasion that is working to counter Russia's existential threat to the Ukrainian nation, its democratic institutions, and the state. With the help of intergenerational coalitions, civic activists across Ukraine have stepped up to address critical humanitarian needs and to help sustain the nation. Examples include Muzyka and the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers' provision of humanitarian, psychological, and legal support to soldiers and their family members; the work of more than 100,000 of Ukrainians taking action through Ukrainian Volunteer Service, and OPORA activists' collection of evidence of war crimes.

Despite democratic backsliding, Poland's parliamentary elections in October 2023 demonstrated that a country's history of civic activism can be revived and used to help it return to a liberal-democratic path. With a record-high turnout (74%), Poland also reversed a trend across Europe toward increased youth disenchantment with electoral policies with Poles under 29 years old voting in larger number than those over 60 (Higgens, 2023). And according to Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, "it's thanks to our civil society, nongovernmental organizations and local government" that opposition parties were able to push the Law and Justice party from power (Tharoor, 2023).

Beyond Poland and Ukraine, our other countries have fewer positive historical experiences with civic activism bringing about desired changes. Chapter 2 discussed how political and social polarization can weaken the chances for broad-based civic activism, even in Poland, to bring change at

the national level. Russia, BiH, and Hungary have had bursts of grassroots activism that have contributed to short-term changes, but they have failed to bring about deeper or longer-term change, which has contributed to citizens' sense that their civic engagement does not in the end make a difference. One lesson is that citizens need to see results – even if small – of civic activism that improves social or political conditions for a broad base of society (rather than a narrow slice) to feel empowered and encouraged to continue their engagement. This is also true for youth; to encourage their continued engagement rather than "exit," they need some sense of positive change. An ongoing challenge for civic activists is then to sustain activism and scale up changes made at the local level, for example, on the problem of citizen participation in decision-making to the more contentious national level of politics.

Regime and country context, however, are not enough to explain variation in the impact or success of civic activism; individuals and strategies also matter. Activists need to recognize, appreciate, and capitalize on different ways that citizens engage community needs, as well as how activists, strategies, and tactics interact with evolving country conditions. In Hungary, activists have responded to democratic backsliding and the shrinking civic space by forming coalitions of CSOs working together to protect independent space for engagement (Móra) and in efforts mainly at the local level to involve citizens in decision-making (Madarász). Moreover, according to the activists featured in our book, coalitions of activists appear most powerful and effective if they bring together those with different but complementary skills. This is illustrated by the coalitions of activists of different generations with different skill sets that Mazurek and Svets have worked to build in Poland and Ukraine, respectively. They have brought together older activists with experience and younger, more nimble activists, with better digital and informal mobilization skills.

As Mazurek and Svets indicate, bridging social divides, whether they are generational, ideological, rural-urban, or approaches to activism, to effectively respond to existential threats to a large group of citizens, like threats to reproductive rights in Poland or Ukraine's authoritarian ruler's use of violence against civilians in 2014, requires concerted and careful effort. Another is the example of the Coalition to Protect Rivers in BiH, which bridges urban-rural, ethnic, and subregional divides by linking together grassroots activists rooted in rural communities with regional or national NGOs with experience in advocacy and expertise in legal processes (Chapter 6). The humility of urban NGOs in learning from and collaborating with – vs. taking over from – small grassroots groups has helped maintain the coalition and increase its effectiveness.[2] In these examples, civic activists generate social capital that bridges divisions most often through building coalitions focused on a common cause rather than within their own groups.

Our stories of activists shed light on the effectiveness of participatory approaches aimed at building and mobilizing mass support and transactional approaches, where activists seek to influence policy makers to realize change (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). A few activists featured, including Móra in the opposition to the closing public space, Lemeš in the fight for clean air, and Svets in the fight for accountability, have worked hard to win the trust of and participation of their constituents – ordinary citizens to bring change. Without mass support, Svets would not have been successful in contributing to the pro-democratic EuroMaidan movement in 2014 and efforts afterward to sustain that democracy through oversight of democratic elections.

Participatory approaches that broadly engage citizens are often embraced by activists who seek to change society's attitudes and behavior, building change from the ground up. Yet, mass participation in civic action does not guarantee policy change, as illustrated by the Women's Strike in Poland. While it mobilized people who had not previously engaged in civic action, it was not successful in preventing the further restriction of reproductive rights. In contrast to participatory approaches, activists can directly lobby and work with politicians to enact change. Mazurek's work changing laws on gender equality is a good example. But activists' approaches need not be either transactional or participatory but can employ both. Our book supports scholars who argue that activists combining participatory and transactional approaches can bring substantial change (Puljek-Shank & Fritsch, 2019). Mazurek in Poland, for example, uses transactional activism to advocate for gender equality from her perches in Poznań's university and then local government but also engages in participatory activism on reproductive rights. Another example is Lemeš's work first to mobilize citizens to protest toxic air, which gave teeth to Eko Forum's legal and advocacy approaches, that eventually resulted in policy change, factory investments in reducing emissions, and cleaner air in Zenica.

Yet, Tufekci's (2017) study of informal activism facilitated by digital tools warns that non-institutionalized activism that lacks good leadership, clear goals, and supporting coalitions can fail to bring enduring change. Nonetheless, in the most repressive and dangerous environments, like Russia after its full invasion of Ukraine, institutionalized activism is often not feasible. In these conditions, it is too easy for the Russian government to target and disable formal CSOs. Another lesson is that those who adopt a non-institutionalized or horizontal approach are intentionally doing so to democratize activism, as with young Polish feminists (Chapter 4), Ivanova's prefigurative activism promoting sustainable communities, and Rossman's feminist anti-war action. Each of these activists provides evidence of their impact on participants. Indeed, these activists take such an approach because they are in it for the duration, to bring about long-term change. In addition, as with participatory and transactional approaches to activism,

non-institutionalized and institutionalized approaches can be combined. Lemeš's locally based CSO joined a coalition of both formal and informal groups to advocate for policies to protect BiH's rivers, achieving a regional level law banning the construction of mini-hydroelectric power plants (Chapter 6). Beyond the most repressive environments, digital and in-person approaches to activism can also be combined, as illustrated by Brkan and *Why Not?*'s work that compelled the resignation of a regional prime minister in BiH.

Engagement in critical self-reflection has also played a role in activists' decisions to innovate and develop their current approaches. Móra's current coalition of CSOs is rooted in more flexibility, includes CSOs closer to their constituents, and develops flexible coordination mechanisms around some shared goals. She adopted this approach only after learning from the disintegration of a more rigid attempt to unify a diverse coalition of CSOs in 2014. As discussed earlier, the lessons Brkan, women's activists, and Muzyka learned while battling prior crises were quickly applied toward responding to new ones, such as new disinformation campaigns, a spike in vulnerable women, and mounting needs of soldiers' families. Lemeš adopted his current approach of working simultaneously with citizens and with policy makers, as well as at the local and international level, after learning that prior isolated approaches failed to bring change. Popova and Mazurek both reflected upon the differences in their own activism and those of younger activists to appreciate and embrace the use of emotion in their appeals to citizens to end patriarchal practices. Many activists featured have reflected upon their strategies and the rapid evolution of digital technologies to both use digital technologies as essential tools in their activism but also to recognize the power of activism that combines digital and in-person activism to realize their goals.

Profiled activists have made different decisions about whether or how to engage politics, depending on their goals, theory of change, and/or regime context. Popova and Mazurek have sought out political positions to promote gender equality. While Mazurek became a public official in Poland, Popova did not in Russia, which is hardly surprising given Putin's regime. Though they both work in Poland, Mazurek went into political office, while Gosiewski chose to take an apolitical or non-partisan approach to everyday patriotism, which he felt could reduce polarization. In the narrower space for civic action in Hungary, Móra views an apolitical approach as infeasible and instead has formed a coalition of CSOs to oppose the government's shrinking of space. Because he sought to change environmental policy, Lemeš felt it necessary to remain non-partisan but to engage political authorities who make policy. Using a non-partisan, apolitical approach seeks also to build support among a broad base of citizens, who often view politicians and parties as self-interested (Chapter 6). Even apolitical approaches can

change social attitudes, conversations, and sometimes behavior and policy. An apolitical approach is different than an anti-political approach (Brković, 2016), where activists view the only avenue for change as rejecting interaction with politicians or authorities in state institutions and instead working to build a parallel society. Of the activists featured here, Ivanova's work on building sustainable communities is closest. Her goals are more modest than other activists we profile.

The decision of several of the activists profiled to use an apolitical approach to build support among a broad base of citizens points to the importance of careful, calculated framing to enhance activism's impact. Environmental activists in BiH, for example, have used apolitical framing to describe environmental problems as an injustice that directly and concretely affects them to mobilize citizens for policy change. In developing their digital activism, Popova has emphasized her choice to use campaigns that evoke emotions while Brkan has considered how his campaigns connect with issues that personally touch citizens.

Activists' suggestions for the future

It is fitting to end a book featuring activists so centrally with their ideas and specifically their suggestions for how to strengthen civic activism in an uncertain future. It is activists themselves who have been, as Brkan admits, "living the work" of civic activism day in and day out. They work persistently, despite often enduring setbacks due to harassment, different types of insecurity, and a variety of formidable obstacles. Seven of the activists involved in this research provided suggestions for strengthening civic activism to different stakeholders: citizens in CEE, other civic activists in the region, domestic policy makers, and potential donors.[3]

In their suggestions to citizens in CEE, activists urged people to realize their own capacity to express their views and to bring about change by using all possible legal means. This appeals to citizens to "voice" their interests and concerns to improve their communities rather than to cope with challenges by laying low or deciding to "exit." As Móra put it: "active citizens build better communities." Brkan adds, "engaging feels good." Activists from different countries also encouraged citizens to engage in and support public activities, including digital and online activities, issues that personally touch them and impact their lives. In interviews for their profiles, many activists told us that they were motivated to engage in civic activism on a topic they or their family members directly experienced, such as domestic violence against a friend (Popova), illness from air pollution (Lemeš), or corruption in high school (Svets). Finally, Lemeš urged citizens to better understand what he views as the role of civil society: to get institutions to do their jobs properly rather than to solve complicated problems. This understanding would discourage

frustration that citizens often have, because civic activists cannot solve all of societies' problems but can encourage the government and other actors to do so.

Most activists counseled their fellow activists to learn, be persistent, and to build partnerships to work toward their goals. Learning, however, involves both listening and sharing. Rossman, for example, urged grassroots activists working in CEE to allow others from her region to "speak in their own voice at events" and to do more to bring to light their stories of activism, which too often remain invisible. Highlighting the importance of learning from experiences and from others helps activists deal with setbacks, boost morale, and put into practice effective strategies. All these contribute to resilience and sustained work toward goals. The suggestion to focus on building partnerships demonstrates that civic activists recognize that they are stronger when they build allies than they would be on their own. Lemeš encouraged activists in BiH to use dialogue to try to form partnerships – even with those who were former enemies. Activists advised others to innovate, including using digital means and unconventional ways to work toward goals. Several also emphasized the importance of building trusted connections with citizens, with Brkan pointing out the importance of understanding citizens and Ogrodnik urging activists to work transparently and apolitically.

A widely supported message to domestic policy makers was to consider civic activists as allies and partners that can help society solve problems. Those activists working in political systems that are more open and allow for more public engagement encouraged policy makers, especially at the local level, to consider civic activists as effective partners in developing and implementing better policies. But Popova believes further autocratization in countries like Russia mean that policy makers have unsustainably avoided or been unable to improve social conditions.

Activists urged donors to prioritize local citizens' needs, rather than their own shifting interests, in their programs. When designing their programs and deciding whom to support, donors should empower activists, including those who do not belong to CSOs, to work in ways they know are effective in the often-long-term struggle to achieve their goals. This allows activists to build on their wealth of experience and their understanding of the local context, important factors that no donor can fully comprehend. Activists encouraged donors to emphasize activists' record of effectiveness in achieving outcomes (not just activities) and their commitment toward their goals when selecting recipients. Even convening like-minded activists or those working across sectors can help cross-fertilize ideas and bolster activists. Madarász urged donors to sustain their support of activists, understanding that activists can use technology, to innovate and bring about positive change – without a lot of resources and even during hard times.

There are many possible futures for activism in CEE, but what we established in this book is that activists from CEE have much to offer activists around the world, as well as to those who worry about the future of civic activism and democracy. Their wealth of experiences with transitions, democratic backsliding, generational dynamics, polarization, and environmental degradation, among other challenges, provide useful lessons and even models for responding to challenges and opportunities that many countries and societies around the world face today.

Since we are writing this book at such a unique time, with Russia's full-blown war in Ukraine already more than two years old, it is hard to predict the future of activism and civil society in this region. However, Poland's October 2023 election in which women, youth, and civil society organizations fueled record voter turnout provides meaningful evidence that people power does matter and that there is much the world can learn from this region. As in the past, there are several likely futures, depending on the outcome of the war, economic realities, and domestic political conditions, as well as an array of other domestic and international factors. Regardless of the challenges or the opportunities, civic activists in CEE will find ways to respond and to try to bring about positive change, at least at the local or community level. In countries as diverse as Brazil, Egypt, and India, we are also observing new forms of activism emerging, which are less hierarchical, grounded in local issues, exist both in-person and online, and focus on everyday practical issues to avoid political polarization (Youngs, 2017). Thus, as in CEE, it may indeed be the case that civic activism is moving from the margins to a more central place, addressing rising populism, economic inequality, democratic backsliding, and the shrinking space for civil society, among other challenges and hard times.

Notes

1 We cannot claim that the strategies profiled activists find successful can be generalized to all activists in the CEE countries of focus since we neither used a nationally representative sample of activists nor included substantially prior activists who gave up their activism. Thanks to Chris Howard for highlighting this. In addition, while the activists in our book sought to achieve a range of different goals and advocated for values ranging from progressive to traditional, none advocated for illiberal democracy or autocracy. Future research should include understudied activists: those who have given up and those who use non-violent means to support illiberal democracy.

2 Interview by Pickering with Civic Activist BL in Bosnia and Herzegovina on October 18, 2022.

3 Thanks to activists who provided suggestions: Darko Brkan, Samir Lemeš, Csaba Madarász, Marcin Ogrodnik, Alena Popova, Ella Rossman, and Galia Chimiak. Ogrodnik and Chimiak participated in a workshop on civic activism hosted by Pietrzyk-Reeves at Jagiellonian University in September 2022.

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