

Mobilizing Against Democratic Backsliding: What Motivates Protesters in Central Europe

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Over the last decade, ruling parties in several post-communist states in Central Europe including Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have taken steps to concentrate and amplify their power, leading to democratic backsliding. After winning elections, incumbents have moved quickly to take advantage of the levers of government to degrade key aspects of liberal democracy such as counter-majoritarian institutions in the state, independent voices in the media and pluralism in the public sphere. In other post-communist states, such as Bulgaria and Romania, incumbents have taken advantage of longstanding democratic stagnation to continue to profit from rent seeking and to weaken democratic checks and balances.

In response, citizens across the region have organized strong and sustained protests opposing governments and demanding political change. In several countries, they have been the largest protests since the fall of communism in 1989 (CLS 2016). It may be easy to discount these protests as they have rarely, until a few years ago, forced ruling parties out of office or stopped them from taking further steps to undermine democracy. Sustained civic mobilization in Hungary and Poland, for example, has so far failed to dislodge incumbents whose severe attacks on democratic institutions mean that each successive election is stacked higher and higher against the opposition. Yet, following a Tillyian logic that sees democratization as a process where citizens learn to defend their rights, we can also understand the protests as evidence of blossoming democratic participation: a bottom-up counterstrike against democratic erosion (Tilly 1995, 2004; Dimitrova 2018). As the years go by, moreover, we see cases where protest movements appear to have impacted norms in politics and electoral outcomes by shaping the positions of opposition parties and by mobilizing voters. In Slovakia, for example, following the murder of journalist Kuciak and his girlfriend in March 2018, more than 60,000 citizens participated in anti-corruption protests that led to the resignation of the Fico government. More recently in the Czech Republic, protest movement has put their weight behind opposition parties that pledged to roll back democratic erosion – and these parties have defeated the incumbents at the ballot box. In Bulgaria, protests led to the creation of a number of new movements, some of which found themselves in a new coalition government since 2021.

What do these protest movements tell us about political participation and, more specifically, about the resolve of citizens to fight for liberal democracy? In this article, we

explore the motivations of protestors in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania over the last decade: Why do they participate in a protest movement? What are the specific aspects of democratic erosion that protesters focus on? What kind of political and institutional changes are they seeking? Based on a survey of individual protestors in the four countries, we analyze what motivates protesters and how they assess the impact of the protests on how the polity is governed, on contestation among political parties, and on the political awareness and engagement of other citizens. We also explore whether protestors view the EU as supportive of mobilization in defense of democracy in their country.

Our paper breaks new ground by showing how different kinds of democratic erosion motivate people to protest in defense of democracy. We argue that protesters are responding to two different kinds of democratic erosion – recent backsliding and long-term stagnation – and that this is why they favor different kinds of political change. Protesters in democratic backsliding countries prioritize changing the government or changing the political practices that have developed over the last decade. By contrast, protesters facing democratic stagnation emphasize the need to change long-standing institutions and practices that have existed since the country transitioned to democracy in 1989.

We also find important similarities across all four countries including the most basic one – that citizens have mobilized specifically to defend liberal democracy. In each country, moreover, protestors most commonly select raising public awareness and encouraging others to become politically active as the greatest impact of the protests. Our findings suggest that while poor democratic performance may spark protest movements, the participation of citizens in these movements reflects civic values that auger well for the quality of democracy in the long run (Dimitrova 2018). Our findings also highlight that, in contrast to the accession period, the EU is not perceived uniformly by pro-democracy protesters as a defender of democratic values and as a natural ally. There is instead substantial variation in how the EU is perceived and only in Poland do respondents understand the EU as a strong supporter of the values that they are fighting for.

Much of the work on protest movements in Central Europe over the last decade has focused on the symbols and rhetoric used by protestors. We complement this work by exploring how democratic erosion is perceived by citizens and how they understand the purpose of their own participation in protests against it. These questions have rarely been studied in the literature so far. We know even less about the degree to which protesters believe that their participation in protests has shaped political outcomes in their country. By conducting this exploratory analysis in a four-country comparison, our research provides new insights into the demands, goals, and perceptions of individuals who protest in defense of liberal democracy in the region.

The rest of this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, we set out two kinds of democratic erosion that have occurred in the region over the last decade: backsliding and stagnation. Differentiating between these two different kinds of democratic erosion helps us understand the context in which citizens mobilize and protest. In the second part, we theorize how different kinds of democratic erosion may engender different motivations and goals for protestors. In the third part, we present the descriptive results of an original survey of protestors in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania and subsequently analyze the goals, motivations, and perceived impact of the protests.

1. Democratic backsliding and democratic stagnation

The study of political change around the world has wrestled over the last decade with the question whether democracy is losing ground to autocracy – and, if so, how and why (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018). One of the fastest growing literatures in comparative politics today is on democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). Nancy Bermeo (2016, 5) defines democratic backsliding as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of *any* of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy.” Using executive power to capture independent institutions such as the judiciary and the media comprises a key aspect of backsliding. Scholars generally characterize democratic backsliding as a top-down project by incumbents using the levers of government and the state to amplify their own political and economic power, to prevent political turnover, and to capture state resources (Bermeo 2016, Dimitrova 2018, Vachudova 2020).

A challenge for scholars is to understand whether and how intensively democratic backsliding is taking place in individual countries. The quest for more power is perhaps universal among incumbents, so where do normal politics end and backsliding maneuvers begin? Which laws and policies are the ones that cross the line and damage democratic institutions -- and can these institutions readily recover if these laws or policies are reversed (Cianetti et al 2018)? Some scholars argue that a dichotomous measure of backsliding reflecting the presence or absence of formal institutional changes can identify democratic backsliding while avoiding conceptual stretching (Bakke and Sitter 2020). Others argue for a continuous measure of democratic backsliding that considers a broader set of interconnected changes to the polity (Scheppelle 2013; Dimitrova 2018; Vachudova 2020; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Broader changes may include replacing formal laws with informal rules and norms – for example, via practices that avoid legal requirements for transparency and representation for opposition parties in state or state-funded bodies (Dimitrova 2010; Dimitrova 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2019). They may also include clandestine, systematic changes in personnel and the resulting cooptation of the civil service, the judiciary, the police, the media and regulatory bodies for the benefit of oligarchic and criminal interests (Hanley and Vachudova 2018). They may even stem from the rhetoric of elected or appointed officials that brand opposition politicians as enemies, or that demonize groups of

citizens based on their gender, ethnicity, sexual preference and religion in ways that are likely to undermine the fundamental liberal democratic principle of equal protection under the law (Vachudova 2020). We adopt a broader definition of backsliding, which accounts for a multiplicity of changes to the polity.

Democratic backsliding has occurred in a number of countries in East Central Europe, as shown in **Figure 1**. As democratic backsliding has spread, pro-democratic mobilization has risen as well, likely in response to attacks on liberal democracy. Moreover, in every country experiencing democratic backsliding, levels of pro-democratic mobilization have exceeded levels of pro-autocratic mobilization.

We argue that the protests in defense of liberal democracy that proliferate across the region today respond directly to two forms of democratic erosion in distinctive ways in a way that reflects an engaged polity. Thus, when analyzing Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania, we identify two important yet distinct types of erosion of democracy: democratic backsliding and democratic stagnation. We theorize that the type of democratic erosion occurring will be connected to protests and their demands, the goals and objectives that emerge.

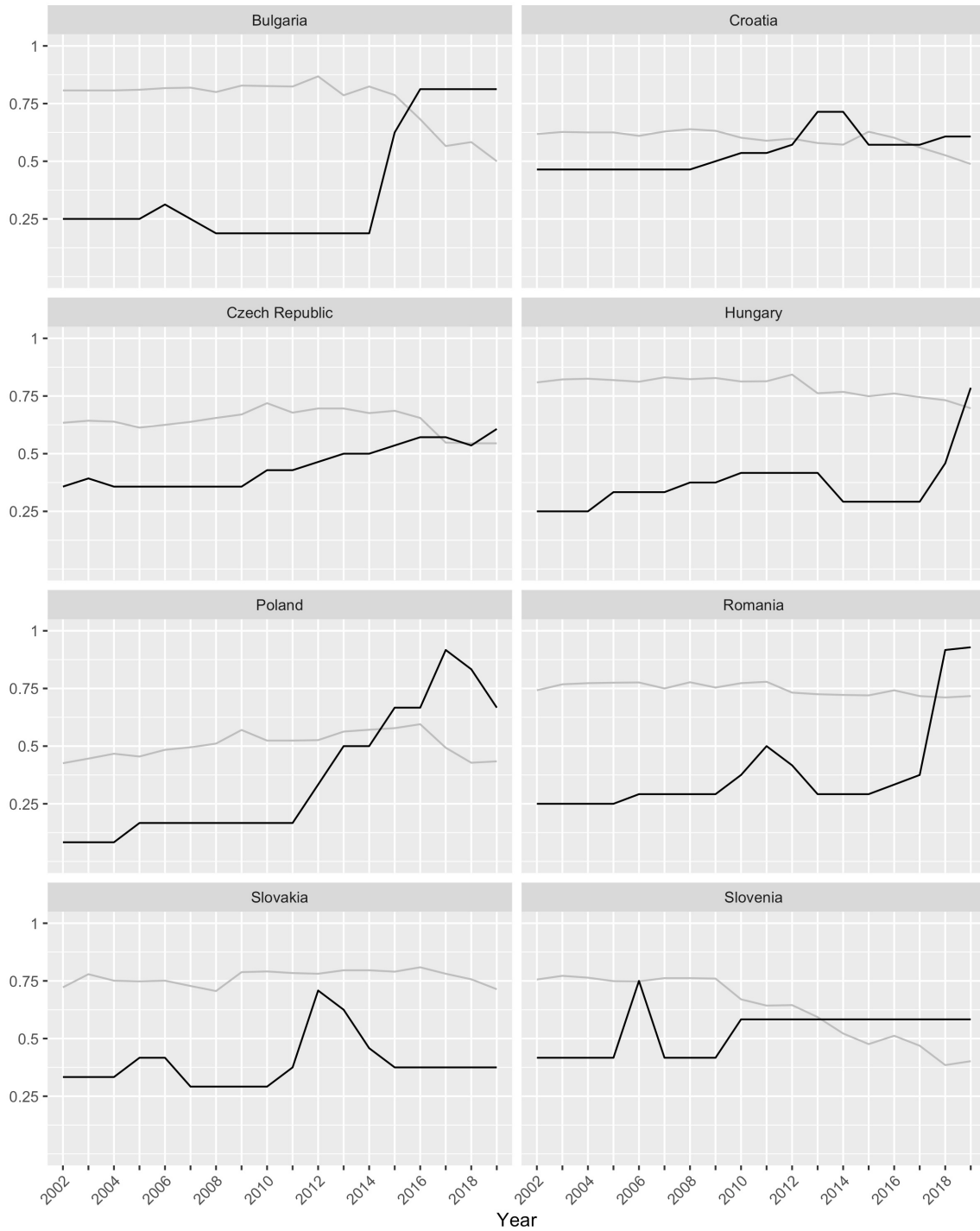
Where *democratic backsliding* occurs, incumbent governments attack and weaken liberal democratic institutions and political freedoms in order to fix the political playing field after they take office. Democratic indicators, such as the country scores from the Variety of Democracy's Liberal Democracy Index shown in Figure 1, reveal a clear downturn in the quality of democracy with a relatively clear starting point—as seen in Poland since 2015.

Conceptualizing backsliding as a top-down power grab by one specific political party and related networks helps make sense of the jarring fact that democratic degradation has taken place most severely in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, countries that were once the standard bearers of liberal democracy in the post-communist region. Incumbents have used anti-establishment, ethnopopulist and majoritarian appeals to win elections and to justify the concentration of power (Vachudova 2020, 2021). The ideological appeal of parties like Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland has been based on a flexible mix of nationalism and populism that defines 'the people' it purports to defend loosely and adaptively in opposition to any convenient enemy. As a consequence of Fidesz rule since 2010, Hungary is now an authoritarian regime. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in power since 2015 has dramatically eroded liberal democracy. In the Czech Republic coalition governments led by the ANO party that combined ethnopopulism with a technocratic frame captured state administration and policymaking for oligarchic and criminal interests (Bustikova and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019; Hanley and Vachudova 2019) before being voted out of office in late 2021.

By contrast, countries experiencing *democratic stagnation* are characterized by continued and gradually deepening practices of rent-seeking at the hands of (different) incumbent governments. In several CEE countries, including Bulgaria and Romania, democracy has exhibited persistent weaknesses, which have become gradually worse over time. While democratic institutions have not been weakened so dramatically when compared to the first group of countries, democracy languishes at roughly the same level, muddling between stagnation and slow decline. In countries like Bulgaria and Romania, politicians from a variety of parties have engaged in rent seeking and have undermined liberal democratic institutions over several electoral cycles (Dimitrova 2018). Government after government have failed to curb state capture, as privileged links with business and oligarchs have become a core feature of a model of using state institutions to enrich themselves and staying in power. Gradually, the alignment of a great part of political elites have with oligarchic circles has led to further weakening the rule of law and specific steps to undermine the independence of the legal system, so as not to constrain rent seeking politicians. The decline of democracy is still led by the executive, as incumbents may target specific institutions, such as the judiciary or regulatory or enforcement agencies, to consolidate their control.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics between democratic backsliding and political mobilization over time and differences across CEE states

Figure 1: Levels of Democracy and Mobilization across CEE



The light grey line represents the level of democracy in a country. The black line represents the level of pro-democratic mobilization in a country. The data come from the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, a measure calculated by experts.

As visible from figure 1, there has been a rise of pro-democratic mobilization in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Democratic backsliding is most notable and abrupt in Hungary and Poland, while Bulgaria and Romania show stagnation, followed by incremental decline. The Czech Republic falls somewhere in the middle.

The two distinct types of democratic erosion may impact protesters' goals because different threats to democracy affect different parts of society first. When rule of law is weak, this might affect businesses and rising middle classes working in industry and services and relying on courts for the protection of property rights, among others. When institutions such as the office of chief prosecutors or secret service oversight bodies are taken over by corrupt elites, citizens might see a general threat for the rights accorded to them under their democratic system. By contrast, if backsliding is led by specific parties and ideologies that pass legislation restricting previously existing rights for women or media, these laws and actions may be visible to groups and citizens whose rights are affected.

Where democratic backsliding occurs, moves by incumbent politicians to degrade liberal democratic institutions and minority rights become a key trigger of mobilization as protestors seek to stop and reverse them. We theorize that these clear instances of quick attacks mean that protesters seek to change specific policies and specific governments. In these cases, we expect protesters to demand certain policies change and to demand a new government. We hypothesize that protesters' key goals will be to reverse the policies of 'anti-democratic' parties and to remove these parties from government as soon as possible.

By contrast, in cases of democratic stagnation, we expect that protesters target elites more broadly and do not focus on one specific government. They may focus on problems with governance and strive to address long standing weaknesses in institutions as well as stopping further negative changes. Since successive governments have failed to reform these institutions across time, we theorize that protesters do not oppose a single political party but look for far-reaching changes to reduce state capture and corruption. While protests are often sparked by specific bold-faced moves to grab power or extract rents, we expect that demands will focus on reforming institutions that have long functioned poorly rather than ousting a particular government.

We expect that protests reflect these distinct patterns of democratic erosion and that protests develop as responses to the one or another type. In the 'backsliding countries' activists may perceive a divide between 'democratic' and 'anti-democratic' parties. They may specifically strive to reverse the policies of 'anti-democratic' parties and to remove these parties from government in subsequent elections. In the 'stagnation countries' protests may be triggered by specific laws or policies, but would unite around demands to address general, long-term failings of governance. They might stress the need for institutional change, rather than for voting in a different political party.

Before we discuss our analysis, we explore key perspectives in the literature that shed theoretical or empirical light on the impact of protests.

2. Potential Impact of Protests

The State of the Literature: What are Protests For? How can we define success?

Measuring what protests have achieved presents a series of conceptual and methodological challenges. Depending on the point of time when we look and to what extent we ascribe certain political developments to protests and mobilizations that have taken place a few years previously, we may or may not find protests impactful. Social movements have different consequences at different points of their development and thus experience cyclical successes and failures (Della Porta and Diani, 2006:227-229).

In addition, the rather volatile patterns of political party formation and overall political fragmentation in CEE make it difficult to connect protests with political parties and movements that might later come to government. Identifying the cause and effect or the success and failure of a particular strategy is difficult because many factors and actors ultimately impact the outcome of a movement.

Nevertheless, it is possible to define different dimensions that scholars have focused on when seeking to measure the impact of protests or social movements: (1) policy change, (2) institutional and structural changes, and (3) societal and attitudinal changes.

First, rather than conceptualizing protesters as excluded groups seeking to mobilize marginalized constituencies (Gamson 1975, 1990), some scholars focus on protesters' capacity to change public policy (O'Dwyer, 2018; Rochon and Mazmanian 1993). When political systems respond to citizens' demands, the social movement is seen as having achieved success (Schumaker, 1975). Protesters may achieve success in the policy realm if the political system reacts by way of listening to protesters' concerns, adopting policy in line with the protesters' goals, redressing the protesters' grievances, or placing the issue on the government's agenda (Schumaker, 1975).

Beyond policy change, social movements can succeed when they change political institutions and reshape existing forms of democracy (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Protests can drive institutional change by exerting social or financial pressure on individuals capable of effecting change (Biggs & Andrew, 2015; Ingram, Yue, & Rao, 2010; King & Soule, 2007).

However, protesters' demands are not always met. Policies and political structures are not always altered. Despite this, movements can still achieve success by generating

attitudinal or value changes (Rochon and Mazmanian's, 1993). Protest actions can thus achieve some objectives when they gain media coverage and increase public awareness, which is more likely to occur when they are extreme (Gamson 1975; Myers & Caniglia, 2004; Oliver & Myers, 1999; Sobieraj, 2010; Walgrave & Manssens, 2005) or dramatic (Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Slattery, Doremus & Marcus, 2001; Wouters, 2013). When protests attract public attention and support, they can gain more political and cultural influence as well as institutional access (Burstein, 2003; Louis 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Additionally, protests can function as a recruitment tactic. Early protesters can encourage onlookers to feel a moral obligation to contribute to the cause by joining and protesting (Pearlman, 2018). Similarly, seeing others in one's network protest can generate social pressure to participate, thereby encouraging further mobilization (Enikolopov, Marakin, & Petrova, 2017).

In the case of the protests in CEE in the last decade, we expect that their impact is evaluated by protesters differently over time and shaped by the context in which they protest. In cases of democratic backsliding, protesters respond to severe attacks on democratic institutions. Since ruling parties quickly construct majoritarian coalitions on the basis of their in-group and since there tends to be a severe perceived divide between 'democratic' and 'anti-democratic' parties, we expect these protesters to be ignored by the ruling parties. As such, these protesters will likely fail to drive institutional or policy changes in the short and medium term and protesters may recognize this when looking at the impact of protests. However, by their mere presence on the street, voicing opposition to the ruling parties' actions, we expect protests to have some success in achieving attitudinal change. In general, we theorize that protesters in countries experiencing democratic backsliding will focus on influencing public awareness or public opinion on certain issues.

Furthermore, in some countries experiencing democratic backsliding, like Poland but unlike the Czech Republic, minority and marginalized groups' rights are also frequently targeted and attacked. Where marginalized groups' rights are attacked, we should also expect protesters to protest out of concern for these groups as well as a worry that they are losing longstanding rights.

By contrast, in cases of democratic stagnation, we expect protesters to focus on the long-term problem of state capture and on issues of governance. Though frequently spurred by specific power grabs or egregious attempts at rent seeking, they likely focus on changing institutions that have consistently underperformed. Existing elites may be seen as compromised, therefore, we might be more likely to see new movements and parties emerge from protests in cases of democratic backsliding. The establishment of such parties and their becoming part of the political system through entry into parliament or government may be considered as impactful and successful by protesters in the stagnation countries.

While these dimensions of mobilization and impact are based on domestic dynamics over time, the perception of protesters of the extent to which external actors may support their cause is another important and underexplored aspect of protests. The development of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe has been marked by a large role played by external actors and especially the European Union, through the process of European integration. While the EU's role has been viewed as positive in the political dynamics of post-communist states that sought accession in the late 1990s and joined the EU in 2004-2007 (Vachudova 2005), the Union's role in limiting backsliding is viewed more critically. Soon after accession, EU monitoring, funding and labor mobility appeared to play a positive role in consolidating CEE democracies (Levits and Pop-Eleches 2010). This, however, seems to have changed as democratic erosion became more pronounced in the last decade.

Ideas and findings about the EU's role with regard to backsliding diverge in the last decade. Analyses have been mostly concerned with elites and whether the EU enables autocratic elites and their survival via financial transfers or political party support in the European Parliament. There have been strong arguments that some EU institutions and party families have enabled and supported authoritarian leaders in CEE member states (Sedelmeier 2014) and have viewed the EU as an enabler of autocrats (Kelemen 2017). Other studies have found that the EU's norms and legislation could be used to hold policy makers to account when specific policies were made without reference to the EU's good governance principles (Dimitrova and Buzogany 2014).

The question of whether domestic mobilization for defending democracy at the citizen, rather than elite level recognizes the European Union as a pro-democratic force is not yet sufficiently explored. Given that in the pre-accession phase democratization worked best when supranational institutions connected to domestic mobilization (Borzel et al 2017), learning more about the relationship between protests and the EU is crucial for understanding the potential for a similar coalition to resist backsliding. Therefore, we also have sought to establish whether protesters felt their causes were supported by the EU and whether the issues that made them protest were of significance for the EU.

3. Method and approach

We selected four Central and Eastern European states that can be classified as experiencing different forms of democratic erosion or backsliding, as discussed above: the Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. These four countries have seen a number of mass protests over the last decade, as shown in Figure 1.

To establish the goals of protesters, their motivations in terms of policy, political or systemic change and their assessment of the impact of protests, we developed and ran a survey in the four countries, between December 2021 and March 2022. The survey was

developed in English but translated before dissemination. It was administered online, via Qualtrics.

We first pre-defined a set of large-scale protests in each country for the decade, which were used as the measure of identifying protesters as those who have participated in one or more of these protests¹. We asked participants about the motivation for them to participate, ranging from defending democratic institutions to protesting against specific policies, laws or restrictions of rights. We further investigated what motivated protest participation, how protesters perceive the problems facing their country which led them to mobilize, and what impacts they thought the protests have had. Next to multiple choice questions, we also included questions on the role of the European Union in terms of support for the issues that were important for the protesters. Finally, we included several open questions allowing respondents to describe why their protested and what protests mean for them in their own words. The full version of the survey can be found in Appendix 2.

The group we have targeted is not and cannot be representative of the broad populations in the countries where we investigate protests. It is, however, an important sample of protesters who are a group that is difficult to reach, but important in terms of political awareness. We used different strategies to find and recruit respondents. First, protesters were targeted based on existing contacts and asked to spread the survey further on the snowballing principle. Second, we posted the survey to protest organization groups on Facebook and distributed it on Twitter. Third, some other civil society groups were approached.

The total number of respondents in our sample is 397, with protesters comprising 299 of these, the rest were respondents who did not participate in protests. Protester respondents were distributed by country as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Country	Protester respondents	Non-protester respondents
Bulgaria	62	46
Czech Republic	78	5
Poland	96	9
Romania	63	38

¹ We define large-scale protests as those that involved at least 10,000 people across several days. We include protests from 2010 to 2020. Appendix Table 2 provides an overview of these protests.

4. Analysis

The first important finding of our survey is that even though protests had a variety of motivations, protesters actively defended democracy and democratic institutions. Protesters were often interested in systemic issues, rather than exclusively specific policy issues. In open-ended answers in the four countries, protesters often mentioned that they felt a duty to protest. Bulgarian protesters often mentioned that they felt a “responsibility to protest” as well as “a need to for the voice of [their] generation to be heard” (Bulgarian respondents). Romanian respondents felt their protest participation was a “civic duty” and “human duty”. (Romanian protesters). Czech protestors also shared that they felt that it was their “civic duty” to take action and that they had a responsibility to stand up for what they believe in (Czech respondents). Similarly, Polish respondents frequently expressed that they protested out of “a sense of duty” and to “fulfill civic moral values” (Polish protesters). Indeed, one Polish protester went so far to say that they protested out of a sense of duty and because they had “a mirror in the bathroom so [they had] to take action” (Polish respondent). In general, protesters saw protest participation as part of their role as active citizens.

Beyond their commitment to democracy and institutions, however, the focus of protesters in different countries was indeed different. We aimed to see to what extent different forms of democratic erosion are linked to different protest motivations and issues identified as problematic.

We theorized that in countries where democratic backsliding occurs, protesters will believe that changing specific governments as quickly as possible is the key solution to redressing the problems they experience. In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, some degree of consolidation already occurred and therefore, protesters may believe that changing the government will begin to redress many of the issues they experience. By contrast, in countries experiencing democratic stagnation, we expect protesters to change political institutions and practices that have existed since 1989 because in countries that stagnate, long-standing issues with institutions do not lend themselves to quickly being solved by changing the government.

Descriptive findings, presented in **Figure 2** reveal some support for our expectations. Our survey asked protesters to indicate what they believed was the main solution to the problems that they see today. Respondents were allowed to select one answer.

In Bulgaria and Romania, where democratic erosion is a long-standing feature of politics, protesters overwhelmingly viewed changing political institutions and practices that

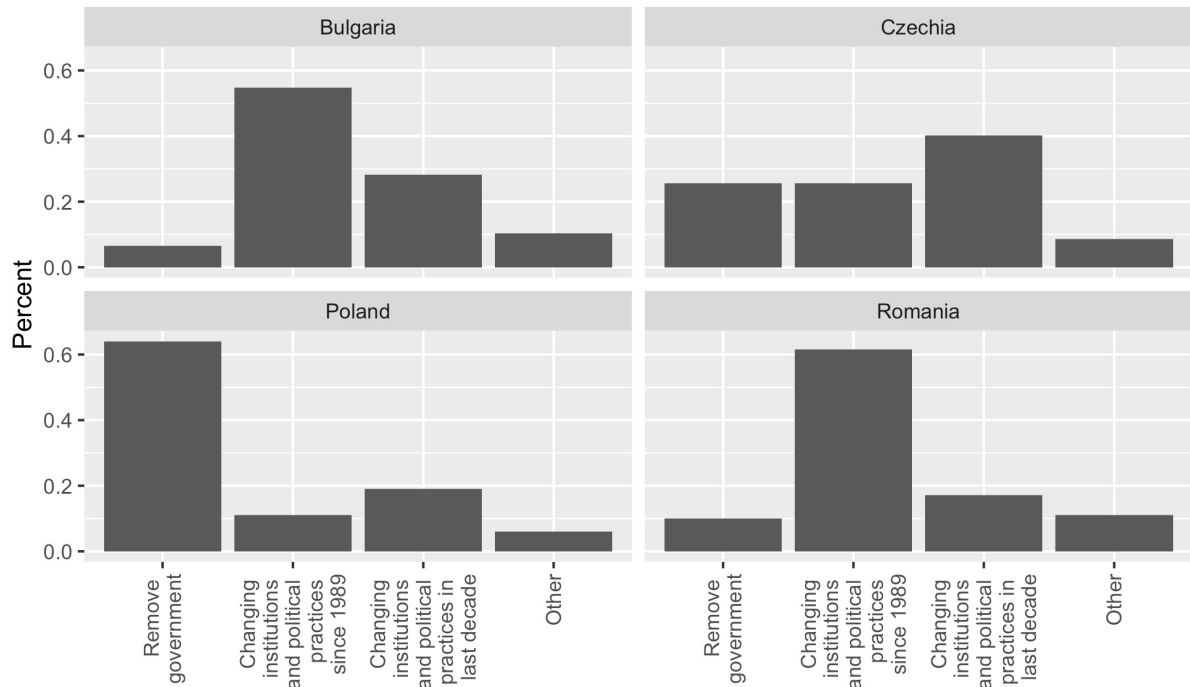
have existed **since 1989** as the most important area to address. This finding suggests that protesters in our cases of democratic erosion believe that the problems they face have deep roots and require more than a change of government to address them.

By contrast, in our cases of democratic backsliding, protesters appear focused on shorter-term solutions. In Poland, most protesters believe that removing the government is the main solution to the problems they have identified. The second most popular response was changing the institutions and political practices that have developed in the **last decade**—about two thirds of this time correspond to the current government’s rule. As such, Polish protesters seem to point to problems that have affected politics in the last decade. In the Czech Republic, where the populist government was ousted about a month before we launched our survey, protesters appeared to believe that the solution to their problems lay in changing the political institutions and practices that developed over the last decade.

These findings are reinforced by the answers to the open question asking protesters to identify which politicians are responsible for the erosion of democratic institutions. While protesters in Bulgaria identified specific politicians from GERB, the political party in government for most of the last decade, they also pointed to leaders of other political parties, coalition member parties from previous governments and oligarchs. The spectrum of politicians identified as responsible for eroding democracy was broad, even if dominated by former prime Minister Borissov. By contrast, Polish protesters almost exclusively named PiS politicians—while some also blamed the far-right Konfederacja party as well. Czech protestors similarly almost uniformly mentioned the (former) Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Czech President Miloš Zeman; some Czech respondents added extreme right politicians, mainly Tomio Okamura.

Overall, it seems that protesters who protest in response to democratic stagnation are focused on long-standing practices and deficiencies of institutions or various parties and political leadership, whereas protesters who protest in response to democratic backsliding are more focused on changing recent political institutions or developments.

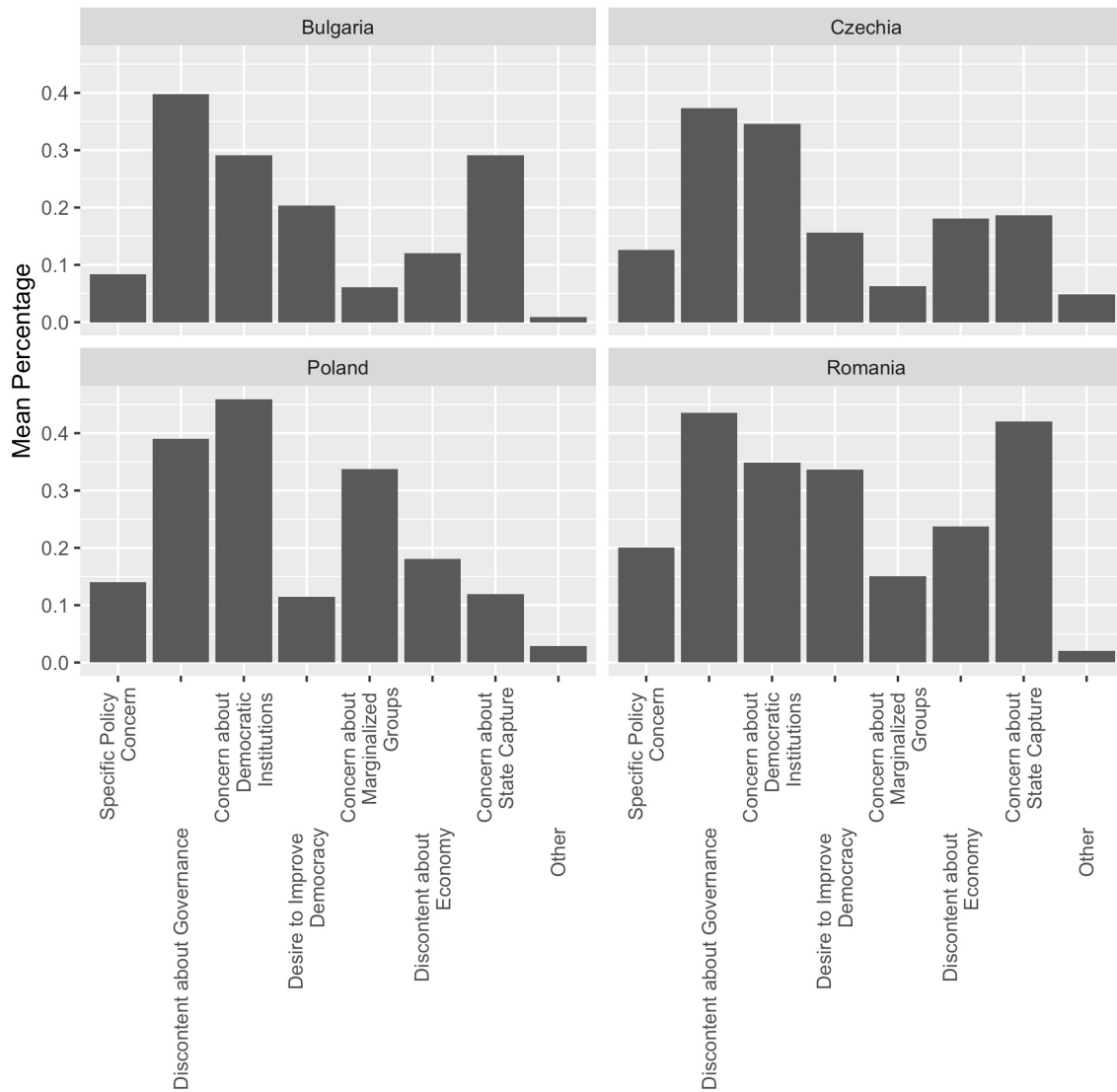
Figure 2: When you think about the political problems of the country today, what do you see as the main solution?



The responses to our question regarding causes for protest, presented in **Figure 3**, do not entirely match our theoretical expectations. While concerns for democratic institutions rank highly for protesters regardless of the type of democratic erosion, in three of the countries, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania, concerns about governance come in the first place and concerns about democratic institutions take a close second place. In addition, in Bulgaria and Romania, respondents state they joined the protests out of concerns about **governance and state capture**. In Poland, by contrast, protesters began mobilizing largely out of concerns about **democratic institutions and governance**. The Czech Republic falls somewhere in the middle. While many are concerned about governance and democratic institutions, a sizeable contingent of protesters also worries about state capture. Though not as salient as in Bulgaria or Romania, state capture concerns are widely held.

Additionally, in Poland, where the ruling party has attacked several minority groups' rights while engaging in democratic backsliding, protesters are also strongly motivated by concerns of **losing rights** they had and concerns about marginalized groups. In this context, abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and other minority groups' rights have been attacks, so it makes sense that protesters also mobilize on the basis of concern about marginalized rights.

Figure 3: Please identify the main reasons you joined the protest.



Please identify the main reasons that you joined one or more protests.

The next question is whether protesters find that their protests have achieved their goals or have had an impact, in terms of making changes in the political system, in terms of changing government, policies or creating awareness of the problems of democracy. To what extent are the successes that protesters emphasize related to the type of democratic erosion in their country?

We theorized that in cases of democratic backsliding, protesters will be more likely to emphasize success in the form of public awareness or public opinion changes. In these contexts, protesters will have a harder time influencing the ruling parties because ruling parties quickly construct majoritarian coalitions and sideline protesters. However, in cases of democratic stagnation, protesters are likely to focus of changing institutions that have

consistently underperformed. For them, success might take the form of a new political party or movement appearing in order to try to accomplish the goal of institutional reforms.

As shown in **Figure 4**, our expectations are not entirely supported. Most protesters in all four countries highlight the impact of protests in raising awareness, especially among young people. In addition, the formation of a new party is highlighted for most as an important impact.

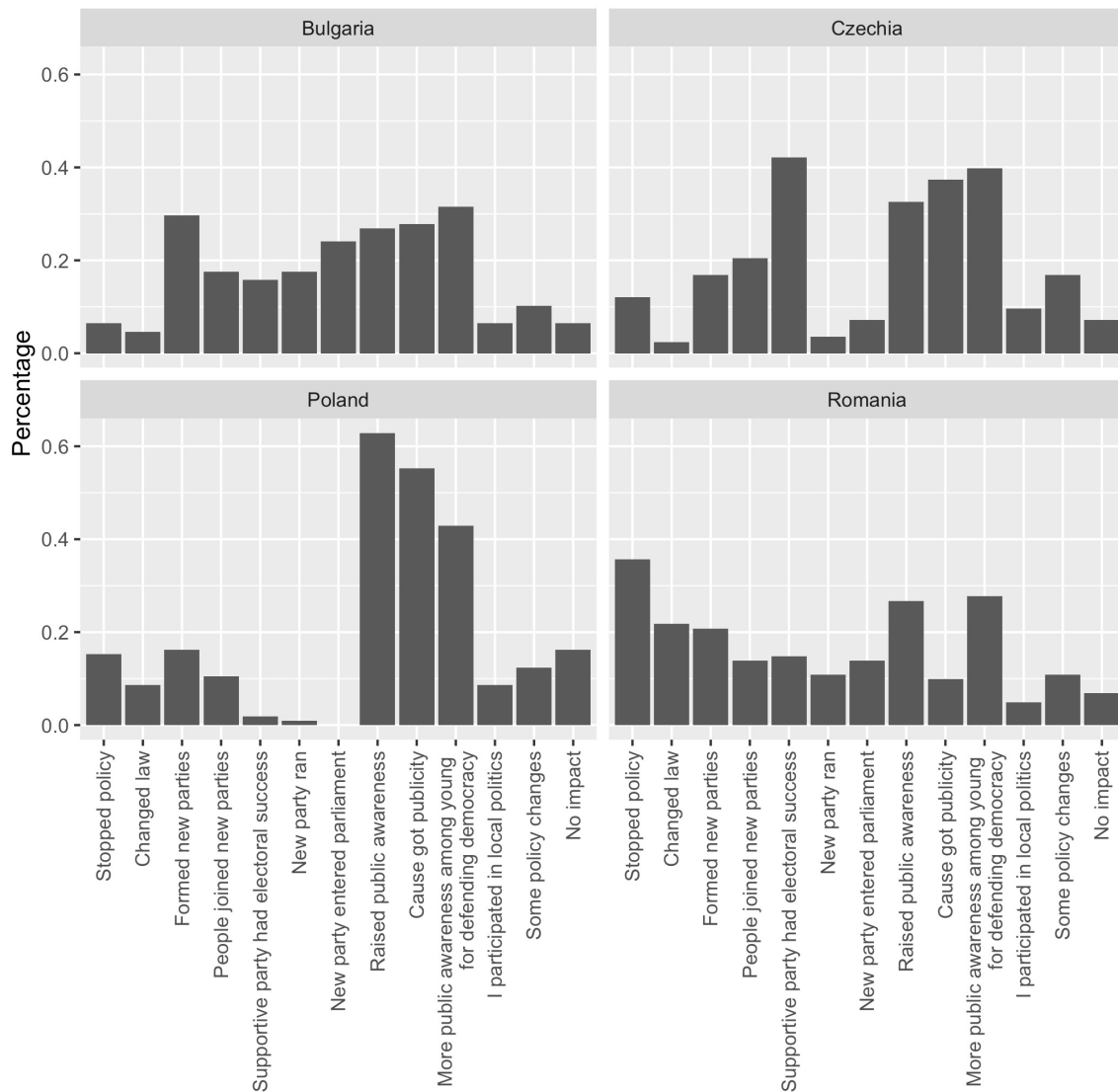
These results are supplemented by the answers to the open question, in which many respondents from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic highlighted the change of government: thus, in the countries where a change of government occurred and winners were related to protest movements or parties supporting protests, this is highlighted as a key, although not the only, desired achievement of protests. The formation of new ‘protest’ movements in Bulgaria is highlighted. Similar evidence of impact can be found in the responses from the Czech Republic, where the party that undermined democracy was ousted a month before our survey. There, protesters underscore that the electoral success of a party having electoral success was a key impact of their protest participation. In Romania, the ability of the protests to stop a policy or change a law are highlighted as part of the impact of the protests

In Poland, where the party attacking democracy remains in power, protesters are much more pessimistic. Indeed, we asked protesters to write the top three impacts of the protests. The vast majority of Polish respondents wrote that nothing changed, nothing was accomplished, or the situation has worsened since they began protesting.

In all countries, regardless of the type of democratic erosion, protesters emphasize that their protests had an impact through raising public awareness about important issues, raising awareness among the young and garnering publicity for their cause. Protesters clearly see their ability to generate attention and awareness as an essential aspect of their protest participation. This finding resonates with the answers to open questions on what protesting means for respondents. In all countries, protesters stress civic duty and making others aware of political issues and democratic problems. In the Czech Republic, several respondents mention the importance of fostering public engagement and showing others the importance of participating in civic life. In Romania, some protesters argue that the most important consequence of protesting was their ability to make politics “from the streets” and to develop “grassroot democracy” (Romanian protesters). Despite this, most Romanian protesters also emphasize the importance of creating a “sense of union” and “raising awareness” while “fighting” for the “evolution of society” as the key impacts of the protest movement (Romanian protesters). Similarly, in Poland, protesters almost all mention an inability to impact politics or the decisions of the government. However, they also indicate that their protests will “pay off in the future” because they are “spreading public awareness,” “mobilizing young people,” and “building a sense of solidarity” with “young” and “like-

minded people” (Polish protesters). In Bulgaria, protesters suggest that protests have led to “awakening of the people, very slowly but clearly taking place” and that “there has been a change in the way people think”. One Bulgarian protester suggests that protests have meant no less than “a civic awakening to preserve democracy”.

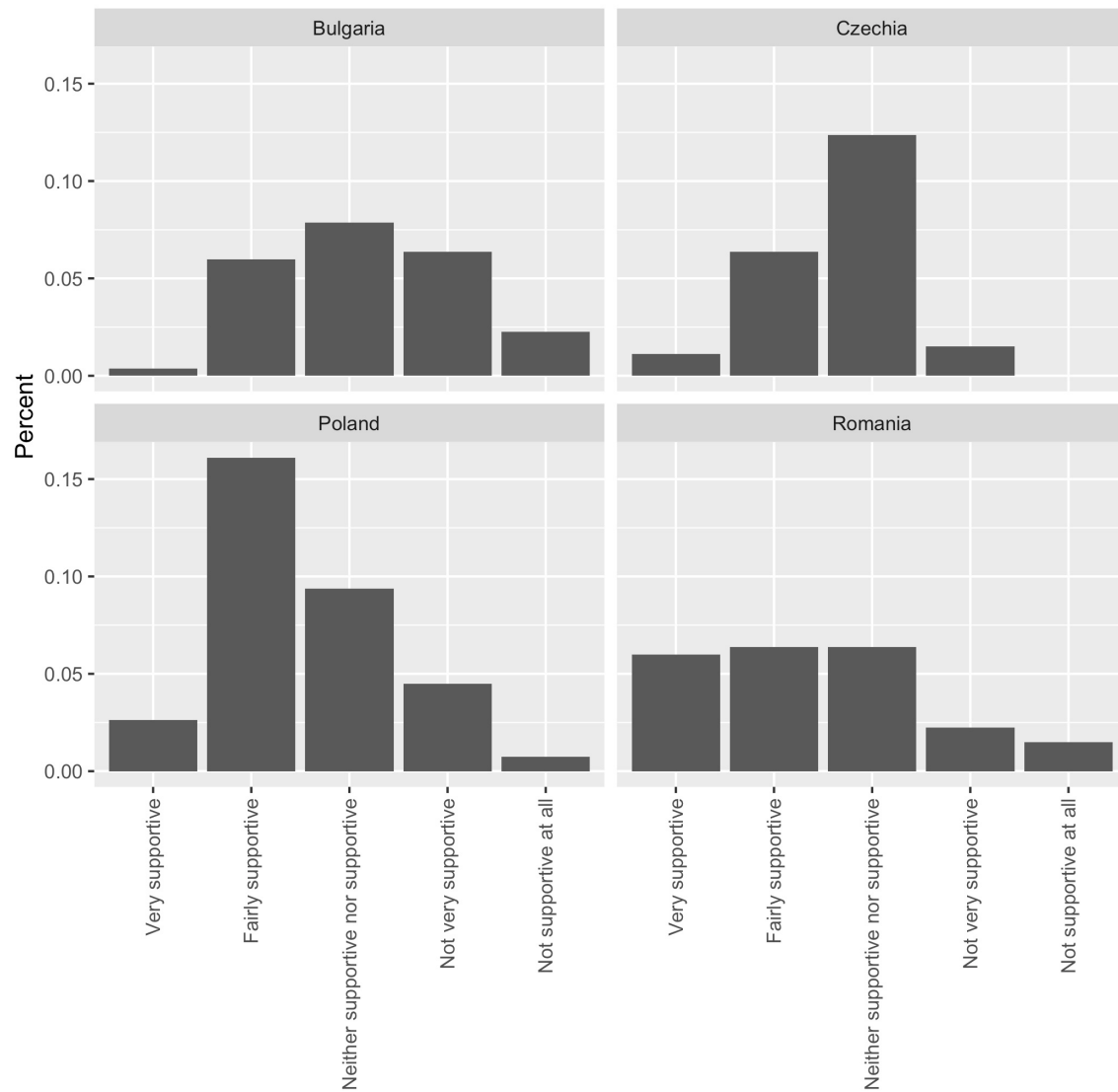
Figure 4: What is your impression of the impact of the protests? Please select all that apply.



It was important also to capture how the protesters perceived the role of the European Union in relation to both backsliding and democracy. Theoretically, there have been two very different trends in the literature that could lead to different ideas about protests and the EU.

We find that the EU is not seen as a clear ally of pro-democracy protests, even though the role of the Union in relation to protests for democracy is perceived differently in the four countries. As evident in **Figure 5**, the only country in which the EU was viewed as fairly supportive of protests, was Poland and even there the second most frequent answer was the EU was not supportive at all. Respondents in the Czech Republic found the EU not supportive, while responses in Bulgaria and Romania were more mixed, but with assessment of the EU being not supportive having the highest score.

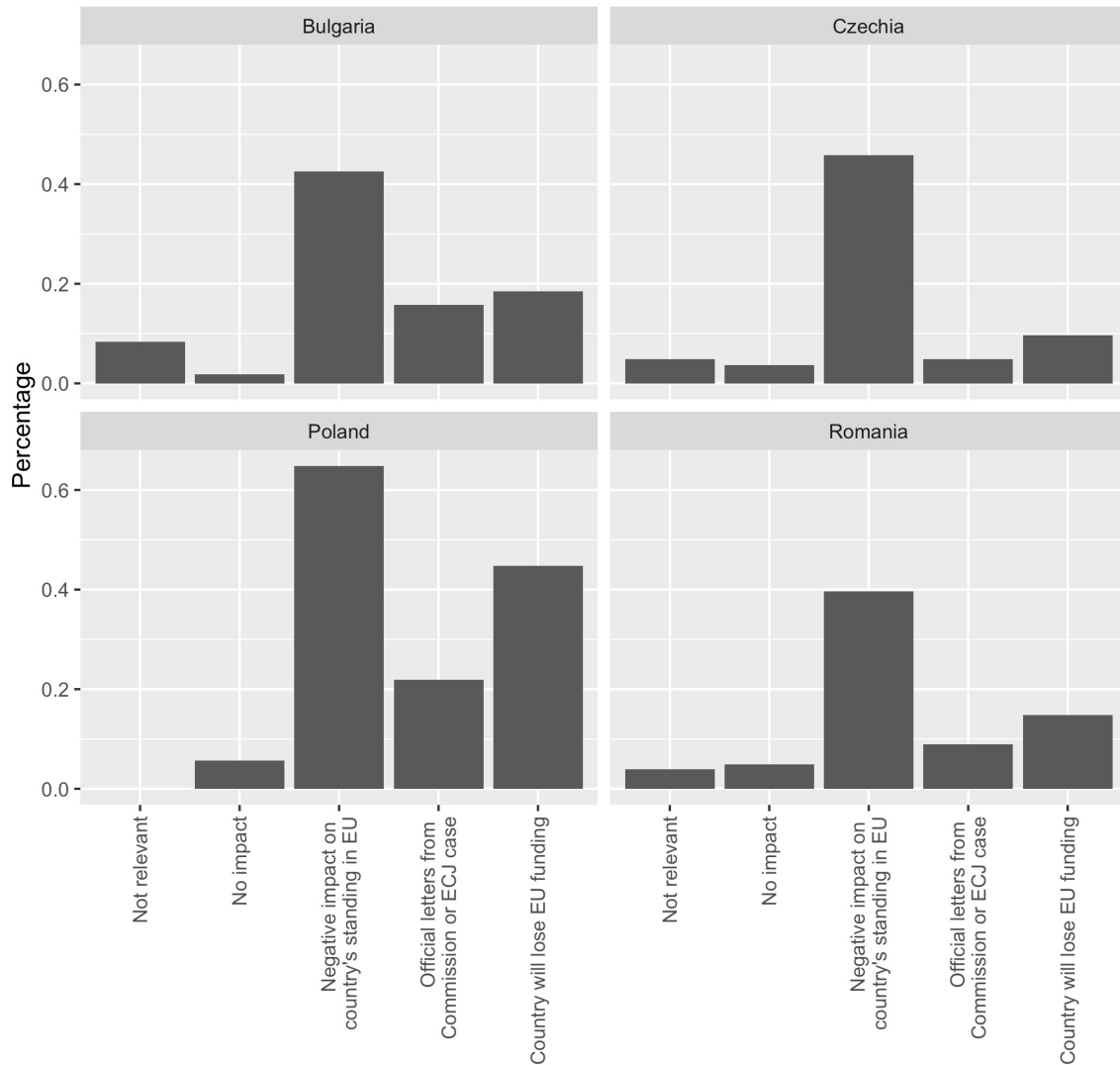
Figure 5: How supportive was the EU of protests



In your opinion, was the EU as a whole supportive of the protests that you participated in?

At the same time, as shown in Figure 6 protesters clearly saw the issues which they were protesting about as relevant for the EU and able to affect their countries' standing in the EU.

Figure 6 Impact of causes for protest on relationship with the EU.



If the issue that made you protest is not resolved, what impact do you think this will have on your country's functioning inside the EU?

Conclusion

The last decade has not witnessed a victory lap for liberal democracy. Instead, across different regions of the world, scholars are debating why liberal democracy is under attack by powerful incumbents intent on amplifying their power. Central Europe is no exception. The region includes the two EU countries where democratic backsliding is severe: Hungary, by some measures already an authoritarian regime, and Poland, standing on the precipice. And while there is substantial variation in the quality of democracy and the content of political contestation in the region, several other countries have experienced democratic erosion of different kinds.

What is striking is that over the last decade very large protests in defense of liberal democracy have taken place across the region – even in states that had not experienced a sudden and dramatic attack on liberal democratic institutions by incumbents as took place in Hungary after 2010 and Poland after 2015. We were curious what protestors may have in common and how they may differ across countries experiencing different kinds of democratic erosion. We were especially interested in how individuals relay the purpose of joining the movement and how they assess the efficacy of their protest actions. We chose four countries where large scale protests have taken place but that have experienced different kinds of democratic erosion over the last decade – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania. We hypothesized that protestors in countries experiencing sudden democratic backsliding at the hands of incumbents would have different solutions than those protesting in countries where instead long-standing democratic stagnation had set in.

Our findings do show that protestors who are protesting in response to different kinds of democratic erosion envision different solutions: Protestors in states where incumbents have pursued rapid democratic backsliding prioritize changing the government or changing practices that have taken root over the last decade. This was starkly the case for protestors who filled out our survey from Poland, but also for those from the Czech Republic. Protestors living through long-standing democratic stagnation, however, emphasize changing practices and institutions in place since the transition to democracy in 1989. This the case for protestors from both Bulgaria and Romania who filled out our survey.

We know that democratic stagnation in Bulgaria and Romania has not brought the same comprehensive attacks on democratic institutions as democratic backsliding in Poland and, less severely, in the Czech Republic. But democratic stagnation includes rent seeking practices that are embedded across different parts of the state and span much of the political class. There have been indications that attacks on institutions responsible for checks and balances, above all the judiciary, but also competition, media regulators have intensified in recent years. Some of our respondents from Bulgaria and Romania did not indicate that they believed that a change of government would be sufficient to fix the problems at hand that they see as part of the political practices and institutions developed since 1989. In Poland and, less so, in the Czech Republic, protestors felt that change of government provided at least the possibility of a partial remedy.

Protesters in the countries – Bulgaria and the Czech Republic – where a change of government was linked to new movements or existing parties that came to power after protests, highlight the change of government as a key impact of their activities. Increasing political awareness and spreading information about political issues and democracy in general is viewed, across protesters in the four countries, as a key impact.

Last, but not least, with the exception of Poland, there is a remarkable absence of perceived support from the EU for protests. At least in relation to protests, the European Union is not seen as the key pro-democracy actor that it was before accession.

This paper presents a first cross comparative exploration of protest motivations and their perceived impacts across four CEE states. We explored protesters motivations, the perceived impacts of protests and differences in how protesters view democratic erosion in their country and what they think should change to remedy it. Based on the sample of protesters which differs by country, the results presented here should be viewed as a basis for future exploration of the dynamics of protests as a response to backsliding. Future research could explore more systematically the distinction between protests focusing on rights versus protests focusing on governance. What we can already conclude, however, is that protesters view mobilization as civic duty to defend democracy, rather than a narrow representation of specific interests.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 2: Protests, timing and grievances

Year, month	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Poland	Romania
2011				Austerity measures
2012	-Forestry law, transparency, inclusion of civil society			
2013	-Energy bills -Corruption, rule of law, appointment of oligarch as head of secret service committee,			Shale gas exploitation Rosia Montana
2014	Corruption, rule of law, appointment of oligarch as head of secret service			
2015			Constitutional court: retirement of judges/media	government corruption
2016			Black Monday anti abortion Restrictions media freedom	
2017			March of freedom Support for judiciary	Government corruption

2018			Anti-abortion law Chain of lights	
2019			Pride Marches National Council of judiciary	Government corruption
2020	Appointment of prosecutor general, rule o law and judiciary, corruption		National Council of Judiciary Anti-abortion law changes	