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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SCREAMING AT A WALL

Societal accountability from below in Bulgaria and Hungary

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ABSTRACT: The article investigates engagement in anti-corruption activism in Bulgaria and Hungary. Since the late 2000s, protest events occurred in greater numbers in the two post-communist countries, addressing questions either directly or indirectly related to high-level or political corruption. Bulgarian and Hungarian collective anti-corruption actors share a common framing of the issue ('state corruption' or 'state capture'), though their struggles vary in their modes and strategies ('civic self-organisation' versus the dominant role of 'transactional activism'). The article crucially reconstructs the context within which anti-corruption activism took place, the different forms of mobilisation, and the specific framing of the issue by means of original interviews with prominent Bulgarian and Hungarian activists. Finally, attention is devoted to the subaltern fortunes of these struggles in attaining the aspired goal of societal accountability.

KEYWORDS: Anti-corruption, societal accountability, activism, Bulgaria, Hungary

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1. Introduction

Very few regions have been as highly and consistently affected by corruption in their phase of democratic consolidation as post-communist Europe. Along with Mediterranean countries, Central and Eastern European countries have habitually delivered the highest perceptions of corruption in the continent – with Hungary standing out for a worsening trend over the past few years (Transparency 2017). The notion that the workings of high-level politics are tainted by malpractices has surged to fait accompli among the post-communist publics. Already at the time of transition to democratic rule and opening up to the free market, a small clique with links to the former *nomenklatura* unduly benefitted from the privatisation of national assets, reinforcing the perception that a few people had gained entire fortunes out of nowhere (Ramet and Wagner 2010). The seeming ineluctability of the collusion between business and politics has, over the years, exacerbated public apathy and disenchantment.

Perhaps also in relation to the austerity measures weathered by post-communist countries since the breakout of the Great Recession, public compliance has swiftly dissipated. Corruption, whether referring to the moral conduct or the unlawful practices of political incumbents, has given leeway to loosening party-voter connections and high levels of electoral volatility (e.g. Gherghina 2014; Engler 2016). The rejection of incompetent and/or corrupt politicians is, however, still underway. ‘Unorthodox’ or ‘anti-establishment reformist’ alternatives have thrived on the promise to complete the transition process – so as to finally attain West European standards of living – and bring rampant corruption to a halt (Pop-Eleches 2010; Hanley and Sikk 2016). As the ongoing alternation between mainstream parties and outsider alternatives seems to demonstrate, these promises are yet to be fulfilled.

Elections however offer only one among different ways to voice dissent. A closer look at grassroots participation shows that “people power in the region has been on the rise in recent years, producing some impressive outcomes” (Beyerle and Olteanu 2016). Among post-communist countries, Romania certainly stood out for its ability to sustain anti-corruption protests in the past few years (Olteanu and Beyerle, this Special Issue); and yet, the struggle for societal accountability is not limited to the south-eastern European case alone. If ever necessary, ongoing developments add to a burgeoning scholarship revisiting prevailing wisdom on weak civil participation in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Ekiert and Kubik 2014; Foa and Ekiert 2017).

Non-state responses to high-level corruption have largely remained a minor concern for both social movement studies and scholars of corruption (but see Schmidt-Pfister

and Moroff 2012; Beyerle 2014). These lacunae could be attributed to the relative novelty of anti-corruption mobilisations and protests¹, on the one hand, and the almost exclusive effort to assess the impact of corruption on institutions, on the other (e.g. Mungiu-Pippidi 2016). In an attempt to stimulate and further the debate on anti-corruption from below, the article addresses two questions in particular: How do the citizens of new democracies engage in anti-corruption activism? And how does anti-corruption activism bear on societal accountability? Drawing on instances of anti-corruption activism in Bulgaria and Hungary, the article seeks to reconstruct the context within which episodes of collective graft against corruption have occurred; elaborate on the configurations of collective anti-corruption actors and their symbolic dimensions; and finally address the issue of consequences of grassroots mobilisations.

2. Rationale and research design

Within the context of this study, anti-corruption mobilisations are defined as varying forms of collective action in reaction to a specific kind of corruption – i.e. high-level or political corruption. High-level or political corruption entails an interaction between the public and the private sphere, and refers to “the misuse of public power for private benefits” (Lambsdorff 2007, 16). Corrupt exchanges may additionally involve a whole range of actors; from politicians and party-appointed bureaucrats to favoured entrepreneurs and members of criminal organisations (della Porta and Vannucci 1999). Notwithstanding the ability of these definitions to travel well across time and space, there are inevitably elements in the perpetration of abuses that depend upon “the legal or social standards constituting a society’s system of public order” (Johnston 1996, 331). These considerations are key to grasp the rather different context within which anti-corruption graft takes place as well as the varied nature of anti-corruption activism.

The struggle for societal accountability can be reconciled with a bottom-up quest for social justice (e.g. della Porta and Giugni 2009); hence, it should not surprise if corruption has turned into a main concern for collective actors across the globe. Corruption has been increasingly interpreted as a side effect of the growing collusion between political and financial elites – an issue that neither the consolidation of liberal democracy nor the free market seemed able to rectify (Rose-Ackerman 1996; della Porta 2015). Against this backdrop, civil society and grassroots activists have been recognised as

¹ Yet see the volume by Davide Torsello (2012) for an anthropological take on the issue and the one by Michael Johnston (2014), in which he develops a case for ‘deep democratisation’ to counter corruption.

crucial players in curbing corruptive behaviours and practices (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013, 2015); however, only rarely have citizens and citizen activists been interpreted as ‘principals’ able to monitor and hold ‘agents’ (i.e. governments) accountable (e.g. Rose-Ackerman 1999).

Social movement scholars highlighted different types of activism to make sense of participation in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Císař 2013). Among forms of collective action, commentators have included ‘participatory activism’, such as trade unionism, and ‘transactional activism’, relating to ties between organised non-state actors as well as between non-state actors and power holders (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). Out of these first two modes of activism, only the forms of transactional activism relying on interactions *among non-state actors* may be of import for our discussion. Institutional actors and other power holders, themselves often the target of anti-corruption graft, may indeed hamper anti-corruption, instead of promoting or facilitating it. As a result, it would be easier to imagine forms of anti-corruption activism unfolding outside the governmental and institutional spheres. Precisely for this reason, the additional types of ‘radical activism’ and ‘civic self-organisation’ may better describe the articulations of collective anti-corruption action in the protest arena. With the former, reference is made to those far-right and far-left actors engaging in demonstrations and direct actions; with the latter, to spontaneous mobilisations of dedicated individuals, which are generally short-lived and de-politicised (Císař 2013). As these two last forms of activism rely on the ‘outsider role’ of the activists involved, they ideally present the likeliest configurations of the anti-corruption struggle in post-communist Europe.

Placing the anti-corruption struggle within the framework of contentious collective action additionally reinstates the ability of ordinary people to sustain interactions with opponents, elites, or authorities (e.g. Tarrow 2011, 7-9). Especially in the post-communist context, where the root cause of corruption is perceived to lie in business-politics collusions, the anti-corruption struggle may be configured as a conflict between ‘outsider activists’ – themselves voice of the deserving people – and ‘corrupt elites’. As pointed out elsewhere (Gagyí 2015), the origins of contention in Central and Eastern Europe are more chronologically proximate than Western Europe, and it seems fair to attribute mobilisations in new democracies to a reaction against governments and established politics instead of other historical causes. An ‘anti-establishment’ framing is what we may expect to provide the resonant symbolic dimension necessary to bolster collective anti-corruption action and, crucially, one of the aspects that this article sets to tackle in practice.

Corruption can be easily framed as a detrimental set of practices determined by malicious and selfish acts. In turn, the identification of corrupt and corruptors would feed

an emotional component that is consistent with a resonant injustice frame (e.g. Gamson 1992). The ability to convey and nurture an injustice component is integral to sustain the struggle for societal accountability – as is the ability to link goals and ideologies, or relate specific concerns to more general objectives (e.g. Snow et al. 1986). Especially in the post-communist context, where the mismanagement of the public good is engrained in the collective imagery, bridging anti-establishment and anti-corruption frames could significantly improve prospects for mobilisation. At least at the electoral level, a similar strategy proved remunerative for those radical challengers contesting elections against more established parties (Pirro 2014).

This study finally links the struggle for anti-corruption to the struggle for societal accountability, in that a corruption-free setting is not only a collective goal that is normatively desirable, but also an actual matter of good governance. Bottom-up mechanisms of control, exposure, and sanctioning of high-level misconducts (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000, 150) would naturally feature mechanisms to counter corruption. From this perspective, those contexts affected by public officials' malpractices may offer a breeding ground for collective action. A lack of accountability would act as a stimulus to conflict and, in turn, protest would come across as a resource for the 'unaccounted' or politically excluded (e.g. Lipsky 1968) – what could be otherwise interpreted as an 'empowering' potential of mobilisations. In a fully responsive democratic setting, the greater the prospects for empowerment of collective anti-corruption actors, the greater the chances for societal accountability. As good government is the outcome of a long and conflict-ridden processes of institutional design, observers have noted how 'empowered participatory governance' (Fung and Wright 2001), or 'co-governance' (Ackerman 2004), might prove more effective for the goals of transparency and accountability.

Yet, in line with the expected outsider role of anti-corruption activists, we may anticipate the struggle for societal accountability from below to be of little or no consequence at a strict institutional level – the reason for this expected outcome to be attributed to institutional contexts traditionally non-responsive to similar pleas. Indeed, the ability to craft a coherent set of frames and mobilise people on the basis of particular interpretations of reality may not be, by itself, a sufficient condition to attain the collective goal of societal accountability. The recent problematisation of social movement 'outcomes' (e.g. Bosi et al. 2016) however prompts us to elaborate on the subject and also account for other, more nuanced forms of impact of collective anti-corruption action, such as those affecting the life course of participants (e.g. Jasper 2014). Especially compared to political outcomes, forms of impact at the individual level come across as a more realistic prospect.

Case selection and methodology

Amid the occurrence of corrupt exchanges, the article praises the potential of collective actors to mobilise and redress some of the issues related to poor societal accountability. The article subscribes to a broad reading of collective action, so as to include those groups of individuals, emerging from particular structural preconditions, who collectively engage in activities by means of organised investments (e.g. Melucci 1995; Tarrow 2011). Through this particular understanding, it is indeed possible to account for different forms of mobilisations, such as loosely organised and largely spontaneous groups summoning at protest events/campaigns; those 'dense informal networks' characterising full-fledged social movements (della Porta and Diani 2006, 21); yet also those political organisations that, started out as social movements, have eventually transitioned towards the political party form (Kitschelt 2006). Among these actors, we could also list people involved in the non-profit sector that, while not resorting to the unorthodox, dramatic, or contentious performances of social movements (Wilson 1973, 227), still share a social and moral commitment to the anti-corruption cause. These qualifications are substantially in line with the articulation of the anti-corruption struggle along the transactional, radical, and civic activism outlined above.

The opportunity to focus on collective anti-corruption actors in Bulgaria and Hungary rests in a number of factors. First, the article values the variable configurations of collective action amid equally non-responsive institutional contexts; such a variation could highlight differences – if not at the symbolic level, at least in the outcomes of anti-corruption mobilisations. The two cases at hand indeed account for different forms of activism: in Bulgaria, societal accountability from below almost exclusively rests on civic self-organisation; in Hungary, a coherent anti-corruption struggle is primarily articulated through transactional activism. Starting from these premises, the article wishes to investigate how anti-corruption is framed by activists in the two countries, so as to ascertain whether the expected frame bridging between 'corruption' and 'state capture' holds across different collective action forms. Second, the spread of corruptive practices in the two countries elevates the question of societal accountability to one of primary importance. The ability to attain transparency and accountability is a first instrumental step to restore trust in democratic institutions; as evidence of inverse mechanisms abounds (e.g. Dalton 2005), this could also stimulate virtuous feedback effects. In essence, the article seeks to establish whether different forms of anti-corruption activism bear on the aspired goal of societal accountability. The dominance of specific forms of anti-corruption activism in Bulgaria and Hungary should highlight whether street-based protests, rather than other forms of collective action, lead to distinct outcomes.

The research strategy primarily relies on original data gathered through semi-structured interviews. An *ad hoc* questionnaire was drafted for comparative research purposes and administered to the most relevant anti-corruption actors in the two countries. The advantages of interviewing actors directly involved in anti-corruption practices are manifold. In terms of access to sources, the importance of drawing first-hand information from anti-corruption actors provides insights that are commonly not derivable from secondary data. Interviews additionally allow us to extrapolate those frames and elaborate on those collective action outputs, which would be otherwise difficult to reconstruct outside a single research framework based on a coherent data gathering strategy.

Another crucial advantage of this study rests in the profile of those actors interviewed. The 12 interviews (six for Bulgaria and six for Hungary) were either conducted with high-profile figures and official spokespersons, or the most visible activists in the anti-corruption struggle within the framework of social movements, movement parties, NGOs, watchdogs, or investigative journalist teams (full list of interviews in Appendix). The following section moves on to describe the background of collective anti-corruption action in the two countries.

3. Background context

Throughout their democratic history, Bulgaria and Hungary never quite qualified as hotbeds for large-scale upheavals. Though for different reasons, their transitions from one-party communist rule to multi-party systems had been non-violent. Despite the patrimonial (Bulgaria) and national-accommodative (Hungary) nature of their communist regimes, the countries respectively undertook pre-emptive reform or negotiated transition (see Kitschelt et al. 1999), *de facto* preventing the rise and/or consolidation of full-fledged democratic grassroots movements.

This notwithstanding, Bulgaria experienced a momentous season of protest in the Winter of 1997. Towards the end of 1996, the country was hit by a dramatic economic and financial crisis. Amid worsening living standards and galloping inflation, roughly two-thirds of commercial banks went bankrupt and thousands of investors lost their savings. The crisis was mainly attributed to the inability of PM Zhan Videnov (Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP) to introduce fundamental policy changes, but allegations of corruption of the governing party played a crucial role in outbursts of social discontent. While PM Videnov had resigned by the end of December 1996, the BSP sought to complete the governing mandate. This decision sparked a series of anti-government and

anti-corruption protests orchestrated by the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), the centre-right coalition sitting in opposition.

What is specific for the Bulgarian case is that collective activities did not commence by themselves, i.e. as a spontaneous reaction of the citizens against the failure of the government to conduct structural reforms. They were *planned* and *organised* initially by the opposition bloc of parties ... under the form of protest demonstrations. (Djoreva 2001, 102)

At the height of protest, on 10 January 1997, around 50,000 people gathered in front of the National Assembly. The protest was repressed by the police with the use of batons and teargas, leaving several injured. The protest activities continued through the month of January, and included rallies, marches, strikes, blockades, and occupations (Djoreva 2001). With the country paralysed by demonstrations, the BSP returned its mandate in early February and new elections were scheduled for May 1997.

When the SDS came to power in 1997, it realised a series of reforms, but privatisation deals were constantly perceived as corrupt. Measures to contrast corruption remained slow and disappointing (Spirova 2010, 416). It should not surprise if the issue remained a critical element in the negotiations of EU accession and beyond. In July 2008, just 18 months after entry into the EU, the European Commission froze aid to Bulgaria over failure to fight corruption, organised crime, and misuse of EU funds. Overall, the 1997 protests in Bulgaria provided a prime example of collective anti-government and anti-corruption action, and an unprecedented case of large-scale mobilisation – aspects to be matched and surpassed only by the #ДАНСwithme protests object of this enquiry.

The anti-corruption struggle in Bulgaria has been possibly aggravated by an adverse political and institutional context. As a matter of fact, collective actors generally lack allies operating within institutions. Although a number of political parties have campaigned on the issue, very few deeds have followed to tackle high-level corruption. In addition, parties that stood for additional measures to curb corruption (e.g. Pirro 2015, 139), had become themselves target of anti-corruption protesters; this is the case of the far-right Political Party Attack (Ataka), which has provided support to the Oresharski government between 2013 and 2014. Therefore, neither the presence of potential allies in the struggle, nor the shifting political alignments seem to play in favour of collective anti-corruption actors.

Though also elite-driven and non-violent, the transition to democracy and the free market in Hungary somewhat started out on a better footing. Unlike other post-

communist countries, the opening to market economy had already begun in the early 1980s; the Hungarian economy performed relatively well up until the 2000s. By the mid 2000s, political developments however precipitated a prolonged internal crisis (e.g. Beissinger and Sasse 2014). The credibility of PM Ferenc Gyurcsány (Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP) waned in the aftermath of the 2006 elections, above all in connection to the leak of a private speech that resulted in a major political scandal.² The prospects of severe austerity measures and several allegations of corruption fed into anti-government protests that spread across the country in the Autumn of 2006. Though not exclusively related to the issue of corruption, a growing sense of injustice and the lack of accountability motivated the mobilisation of thousands of citizens in one of the major protest events since regime change. Evidently due to the role of the MSZP as incumbent, nationalist groups spearheaded protest activities – with far-right groups leading the most disruptive actions. From 2007 onwards, several other anti-government demonstrations were staged by the Hungarian right, protesting against the Socialist-led government plan to introduce austerity measures and accordingly demanding its resignation (Beissinger and Sasse 2014, 358-360; Greskovits 2015, 33-35). With Fidesz's eventual return to power in 2010, economic protest lost resonance; civic self-organisation decidedly veered towards single-issue campaigns with an overarching anti-government frame.

Reasoning on a larger scale, the collusion between political parties and organised crime has long undermined the reputation of political elites and parties, irrespective of their location on the left-right ideological spectrum. Just as in other post-communist countries, Hungary replicates a demarcation between old/established (e.g. Fidesz and MSZP) and new/anti-establishment parties (e.g. the far-right Movement for a Better Hungary, Jobbik, and the green/libertarian Politics Can Be Different, LMP). Only the latter have indeed presented clear anti-corruption stances (Pirro 2015, 142-143). Scandals revealing corrupt exchanges are now a daily occurrence in Hungary. Against this backdrop, very little steps have been taken to make party financing transparent. Moreover, those attempts to curb corruption in the police forces and the healthcare sector have delivered only mixed results (Bozóki and Simon 2010, 218-219).

Prospects for collective anti-corruption action hence look rather slim. Despite the presence of allies, or actual agents, in institutions (i.e. anti-establishment movement parties), none of these organisations have been able to push forward an anti-corruption agenda and attain policy goals. Instead, the political dominance of Fidesz in the past few years has ostensibly consolidated certain malpractices and their impunity.

² Reference is made to the so-called 'Őszöd speech', in which Gyurcsány admitted to have lied in order to win a second consecutive mandate in 2006.

Partial responsibility for this unfolding of events should be attributed to the disproportionality of the Hungarian electoral system – which has granted Viktor Orbán political *carte blanche* following the landslide victory of 2010 –, but also to the lack of a cohesive left-wing opposition able to challenge Fidesz’s dominance. Hungary has infamously become known as a ‘country without consequences’, where political crime and corruption often go unpunished. This perception has been intensified by the constitutional changes introduced by the Orbán’s government, which have considerably limited the independence of the judiciary (e.g. Bánkuti et al. 2012). Given these premises, it should not surprise if the Orbán government did not co-opt any of the stances of collective anti-corruption actors.

Within this context, it has been noted that “Hungarian investigative journalism does a good job of revealing some outrageous cases of corruption” (Bozóki and Simon 2010, 220). The struggle for societal accountability has clearly depended upon the engagement of bloggers, journalists, and other activist profiles. The issues of freedom of the press and the internet tax have been closely related to anti-corruption activism, as testified by the string of demonstrations held in the 2010s (e.g. Krasztev and van Til 2015). The study took these aspects into account and included representatives of investigative journalist teams and high-ranking officials of movement parties, among other interviewees.

When looking at Bulgaria and Hungary, we can therefore argue that, amid different pathways to democratisation and politicisations of corruption, the two countries provide similarly unfavourable contexts for grassroots anti-corruption struggles. Effective mechanisms of societal accountability are simply not in place, and established political actors still refrain from moving legislative steps towards their attainment. Corruption represents a serious problem in both countries, yet the articulation of collective responses has been different. In Bulgaria, collective anti-corruption action has taken the form of a prolonged season of street protests within the framework of civic self-organisation, known as #ДАНСwithme. In Hungary, the repertoire of anti-corruption actors is clearly more varied and unfolds at different levels; without excluding forms of radical activism and civic self-organisation, we can however note the prominence of transactional activism in the pursuit of societal accountability. In the following section, the article will assess the most important elements of these collective actions and their consequences.

4. Mobilisations in Bulgaria and Hungary

Although the anti-corruption activities object of this study took place in times of economic crisis, they cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as forms of ‘anti-austerity’ or economic protest (e.g. Rone 2017). Anti-corruption frames gained prominence particularly through the protests against the Oresharski government in Bulgaria (2013-2014) and, albeit to a lesser extent, the Internet Tax protests in Hungary (2014). Though critical moments for the anti-corruption struggle, they were not the only relevant episodes, nor the sole arenas, for the aspired goal of societal accountability.

Bulgaria

The origins of the protest season in Bulgaria can be traced back to the early months of 2013, when demonstrators mobilised nationwide against unusually high utility bills. Demonstrations started in Blagoevgrad in January 2013, at a time when austerity measures had already put a considerable strain on the Bulgarian population. Protests swiftly expanded to all main Bulgarian cities. The dispute initially centred on the reassessment of the monopolistic system governing electrical power distribution. However, protests soon took on a broader anti-government breadth. Poorer strata of society represented the core of demonstrators; they were not only motivated by mismanagements of the economy, but also by a plea for justice and the general idea that every government in the country is corrupt (Interview BG2). At the height of protests in mid-February, violence escalated between police forces and protesters. Protesters even resorted to self-immolation – for a total of five casualties – amid several suicide cases reported since the beginning of the year (BBC 2013). The anti-government protests were effective in obtaining the resignation of the Borisov government, but they proved inconsequential as far as economic and policy changes are concerned.

The Winter demonstrations spilled over into a new season of protest. The parliamentary elections held in May 2013 did not deliver a clear majority. Negotiations eventually led to the establishment of a coalition between the BSP and the ethno-liberal Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS); by boycotting the confidence vote, the far-right Ataka practically acted as a kingmaker of the new government. Those hopes placed in a change of political course after the Borisov government were to be quickly abandoned (Interview BG4). As the new cabinet led by PM Plamen Oresharski quickly took shape, MP Delyan Peevski (DPS) was elected as head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). A very controversial figure in Bulgaria, Peevski exerted substan-

tial control over the media, owning numerous newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations. On top of other commercial interests, he was the owner of Bulgartabac – the biggest tobacco company in the country – and maintained close links to the Corporate Commercial Bank.

The elections stirred a public outcry – “it was funny to see the biggest mafia boss to be nominated” (Interview BG6) – and protests broke out across the country. Protesters were continuously active for more than a year; these mobilisations clearly represented a momentous phase in the democratic history of the country. Experienced activists were responsible for the organisation of protest activities through social media at first, successively coordinating different groups as a proper movement (Interview BG2). This pool of human resources was largely drawn from those eco-activist circles that mobilised from 2007 onwards (e.g. Interviews BG3 and BG4). Among other things, anti-corruption had become a dominant issue in their attempt to block the amendment of the Forestry Law in 2012 (Interview BG3).

One of the ‘diaspora’ activists involved in the organisation of protest campaigns abroad³ suggests that the DANS case was the last straw amid broader high-level abuse:

There were different layers of animosity involved, there is an overly important class element to them, and also participants’ vigour was fuelled by a quite eclectic mix of motives on top of that – pretty much a rebellion against everything the eye can see, or the state of general collapse and implosion in the Bulgarian society. ... We are a very young and inexperienced democracy, a severely starved economy, and a nation recovering from a historic catastrophic collapse a generation ago, and then another one that’s been unravelling for the last 10-15 years. (Interview BG1)

Although Peevski declared he would resign from the post, protests continued and demonstrators increased their demands. Upon Peevski’s resignation on 14 June, protesters called the whole Oresharski government to step down (“because of the arrogance of the political class”; Interview BG5) – a prospect that did not materialise until a year later. In addition, protesters knew that Peevski’s resignation would not change the state of affairs, hence their stances radicalised, and pleas for a new constitution and system change progressively gained traction (Interview BG2).

A clear demarcation between institutional politics and outsider challengers emerged from the protests, with a related attempt to leave outside any activist involved in party politics. Unlike the Winter protests that brought together poorer strata of society, the Summer protests displayed a marked urban/middle-class component. During this sec-

³ The ‘diaspora’ indeed refers to the group of Bulgarian activists abroad.

ond phase, criticism was initially directed at the Socialist government – one of the slogans being ‘every Socialist government is corrupt’. The anti-communist/anti-socialist frame would lend credence to the claim that the mobilisations were partly orchestrated by the rightist Reformist Bloc, which tried to replicate the dominant discourse of the 1990s (Interview BG2).

As previously argued, the anti-establishment frame is a natural counterpoint to the anti-corruption struggle – no matter whether the corrupt elites are defined in political, economic, or cultural terms. When corruption turns into a basic component of elites’ pursuit, it spreads to ordinary people and it becomes common practice; that is, it becomes culturally embedded. The sense of injustice that grows from it stems into a call for change that does not resolve with a contingent change of government, but with a broader systemic transformation. Protest is then used as a means to change the culture and is, in itself, understood as a ‘cultural event’ (Interview BG2). Especially for the younger activists, the struggle for societal accountability had been clearly about their own future as a generation (Interview BG6).

Corruption is a negative, pervasive, and widely recognised phenomenon in Bulgaria. Other leading activists attribute Bulgaria’s role as the poorest EU member state precisely to the collusion between oligarchs and politicians, themselves responsible for the malfunctioning of the system and the distortion of competition (Interview BG3). As corruption only works “for those who get bribes, many problems depend on corruption”; as a result, there is an inherent “benefit for everyone mobilising against it” (Interview BG5). The causes of corruption have been also attributed to an incomplete transition to liberal democracy; and, in terms of consequences, corrupt exchanges are seen to drain state resources, decrease opportunities, and fuel public distrust – all to the benefit of organised crime (Interview BG4).

As the protest ended up lasting more than a year, different phases could be identified. The student movement in particular took the lead after Summer 2013. Their repertoires of action included the occupation of university buildings – an idea that had been brewing since 2010 –, though they tried any peaceful means to gather public attention (Interview BG6). They notably attempted to surpass the frames that had been dominant until then, and ultimately sought new sources of legitimation:

After the organisation of our movement, scholars formed a group called ‘Teachers in Support of the Student Occupation’, to which more than 300-400 professors from different universities participated. They were the most important ally. Teachers’ support legitimated the movement within universities. They decided not to lead, but to follow the students, showing full support and solidarity. That was important for our autonomy. To

day, I understand that we had big support from the opposition. During the occupation we didn't know that, because nobody used party symbols, rhetoric, etc. We had a rule – 'no party symbols, position, and propaganda'. We issued several declarations against the official opposition, trying to separate our movement from them, and also from the right-wing anti-communist movements of the 1990s. The General Assembly decided this – the student movement was different from prior protests and we didn't want to form coalition with the official opposition. I think that we tried to form a post-ideological movement – which now I think was a fault –, but most of our allies were traditional liberals, conservatives, and anti-communists. (Interview BG2)

The student movement has been otherwise defined as the 'locomotor' of the protest movement, and the perception that it could be used for partisan advantage was shared by other activists as well (e.g. Interview BG5).

For what it concerns the aspect of consequences, the assessments range from the individual to the collective sphere. Among the student movement, activists listed the ability to organise protests as an achievement per se (Interview BG2). The attainment of results would extend to the establishment of a collaborative network with the media and other portions of civil society, which have been involved in preventive and lobbying activities after 2014 (Interview BG4). Other activists have noted how the 2013-2014 protests managed to overcome standing differences within Bulgarian society and bring people together under a common activist framework. Most importantly, however, they were able to raise awareness (Interviews BG5 and BG6), expose the wrongdoings of the Oresharski government, and finally prompt its resignation (Interview BG3). For yet other activists, collective action represented an opportunity to meet like-minded people and friends, share common values with them, and discuss critical problems such as the establishment of a just system (Interview BG4).

While most assessments rightfully point at the fact that these mobilisations had 'made people think', they also suggest that only small steps were moved towards greater accountability. In the broader scheme of things, however, mobilisations may have not been particularly effective, for a clear political change simply did not materialise.

Hungary

The Hungarian anti-corruption struggle appears definitely more fragmented. While large-scale grassroots mobilisations have been a rare phenomenon, none gained mo-

mentum through an exclusive anti-corruption frame. This is well exemplified by two protest campaigns that took place in recent years – ‘One Million for the Freedom of Press in Hungary’ (Milla) between 2011 and 2012, and ‘100,000 against the Internet Tax’ in late 2014. The main theme underlying these protests was the opposition to a number of contentious policies put forward by the Orbán government.

In the case of Milla, mobilisations occurred in direct response to the changes introduced with the 2010 media law. The legislation, widely perceived as undermining freedom of communication and expression, was met with apprehension by European authorities. Fidesz’s control over the media has expanded ever since (Freedom House 2012).⁴ Milla managed to aggregate these as well as other concerns coming from civil society, placing emphasis on the politics of civic participation – an envisaged remedy to the excesses of the political establishment and rampant political corruption (e.g. Petőcz 2015). Though short-lived, Milla was a first laboratory of grassroots participation, upon which future anti-corruption experiences would hinge. One of the founders and leading figures of Milla, Péter Juhász, later went to act as co-chairman of the party Together and assemblyman of the V. district in Budapest, where he waged a far-reaching battle against corruption – both within institutions and on the streets.

The 2014 Internet Tax protests – among the largest political demonstrations to date in post-communist Hungary – somewhat started on similar premises. Besides demonstrating against the proposal to introduce a tax on Internet usage, the streak of protests bore a significant anti-government component, and successfully managed to take the aimed 100,000 crowd to the streets of Budapest (28 October 2014). The Hungarian government, re-elected for a second consecutive term in April 2014, had been involved in a series of corruption scandals – from the nationalisation of tobacco shops to the Quaestor scandal. Popular dissatisfaction precisely tapped into the perception that Orbán managed to establish a corrupt oligarchy in the country (e.g. Puhl 2017). Among pleas for regime change and democracy, the anti-corruption frame played an important motivational role, as also demonstrated by the tenor of posts on the Facebook page of the campaign.⁵ However, it was only after Fidesz backtracked on its proposal that the activity of protesters decidedly elaborated on wide-scale corruption and bad governance. As the organiser of the protests argued, corruption did not bear the same mobilising potential of a ‘transversal’ issue such as Internet usage – and, at the time, it seemed crucial for citizens to first win that specific battle with the government (Inter-

⁴ Concerns were far from unfounded as the main left-wing daily, *Népszabadság*, was forced to shut down in October 2016.

⁵ The Facebook page of ‘100,000 against the Internet Tax’ is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Ne.legyen.Internetado>.

view HU2). These two protest campaigns were possibly the largest events articulating an anti-corruption discourse, though a related initiative called the 'Day of Outrage', held in November 2014, gathered about 20,000 demonstrators on related themes.

Despite two thirds of the population deemed the Orbán government highly or very highly corrupt, and that about the same share regarded corruption as systemic (Index.hu 2016), the activists interviewed recognised that protest events centring on anti-corruption hardly manage to mobilise the same amount of people as events focusing on other issues (e.g. Interviews HU1, HU2, and HU6). Therefore, setting micro goals for an ever-cynical citizenry is of the utmost importance; with 3-4 scandals emerging each day, it has become increasingly difficult for civil society actors to find alternative ways to raise awareness on the issue (Interview HU1). Other anti-corruption actors attribute the lack of a more proactive behaviour to the poor living standards of the average Hungarian – and, thus, a general fear for their lives. Additional reasons may lie in the fact that the critical mass has already emigrated abroad; that the legal system is defective, for the Constitutional Court has been filled with Fidesz affiliates (Interview HU3); or even that social movements in the country are constantly demonised (Interview HU6).

In essence, the anti-corruption struggle in Hungary very much depends on the sustained commitment of a rather small set of individuals, who generally act within the framework of movement parties (e.g. LMP and its splinter Dialogue for Hungary, PM), NGOs and watchdogs (e.g. *K-Monitor*), and investigative journalist teams (e.g. *Atlatszo* and *Direkt36*) – hence their interpretation as collective anti-corruption actors. The repertoire of actions of these actors can be associated with 'brokers' of various types (de la Porta, this Special Issue), in their systematic use of resources, know-how, and information to influence public opinion and raise awareness. Activists explicitly subscribe to a *social* anti-corruption mission – on top of their specific role within their organisations/groups/teams. They aim at bringing about impact and playing a role in a democratic society (e.g. Interview HU4).

The spread of corruption in the country, and the responses articulated in reaction to it, partly confirm how activists seek to bridge anti-government and anti-corruption frames. The framing of corruption simply cannot be disentangled from high-level abuse; and its effects are seen to affect society as a whole:

Especially in developing countries, the education system is lacking funds, lots of investments would have to be made. ... There are lots and lots of problems in this country, to which the answer would be spending more money, and spending it in an effective way. Corruption is obviously a channel where public funds are distributed to private people,

who use them for their own purposes, depriving the system. It really destroys social cohesion, rule of law, and people's trust in democracy, and it's worth caring about the collective [dimension]. ... People feel that they are outside the system, and they care less and less, meaning that those in power go to government and do whatever they want. (Interview HU1)

The repercussions on people's lives, politics, and institutions seem incontrovertible. Breaking the rules with taxpayers' money ('state corruption') has the ability to destroy trust, stop social mobility, and hopes for a better future (Interview HU4). And yet, the role of the European Union (EU) – or, better, EU funding – is often neglected. These monies are the principal source of support to corrupt businesses; hence, their misuse helps nurturing a culture of corruption (Interview HU3).

Corrupt exchanges have become the norm amid shady political financing and spending of public funds – worrying developments that may be attributed to the lack of law enforcement by the government of the day: "There is no commitment to fight corruption on the part of the government" (Interview HU1). Still, there is no obvious blaming of one portion of the establishment over the other, as the perception of impunity extends to all the actors involved in the democratic history of the country:

People did not see any high-level politicians going to jail in the last 25 years, so nothing has a consequence. I think this is a huge problem – no one is afraid of being corrupt at the top level and nobody expects to be put in jail. (Interview HU1)

Within a rather unfavourable political and legislative context, and a fairly unstructured activist environment, the assessment of consequences of collective action is far from straightforward. The watchdog *K-Monitor* launched a series of small-scale campaigns willing to raise awareness on instances of corruption and shady party expenditures during electoral campaigns. The impact of these campaigns has been generally positive, not least due to the number of people directly involved in the process of data gathering: "I wouldn't say that we managed to change the system through such actions, but we reached the goals that we set" (Interview HU1).

Orbán's backtracking on the Internet Tax proposal could be also read as a successful outcome of the protests occurred in the Autumn of 2014. It is doubtful, however, that the anti-corruption frame that emerged from the protests bore any consequence vis-à-vis societal accountability. As regards sustained efforts, significant are those of anti-corruption advocates such as Péter Juhász (Milla, Together) and – possibly more so – Ákos Hadházy (LMP), who has set up weekly press conferences to reveal information on corruption cases. Consequences can be framed in terms of exposure of corrupt ex-

changes that resonate across the public arena, for these stories are always picked up by non-aligned media. A similar perception is shared by those activists operating within investigative journalist teams, who have at least recognised a shift of awareness among the public at large (Interviews HU3, HU4, and HU5).

Looking at the engagement of movement parties, both LMP and PM articulate a clear anti-corruption agenda, and collectively seek to follow up corruption cases both within and outside the institutional arena (e.g. Interview HU6). However, the ability to steer policy-making in the direction of greater transparency or accountability has yet to materialise.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Post-communist Europe has proven a fertile terrain for corrupt exchanges. While corruption was by no means a new phenomenon when the Iron Curtain fell, the transition to the free market and the privatisation of national assets seem to have favoured practices of corruption, clientelism, and cronyism. This is not only a widespread perception among the publics, but also practices emerging with significant frequency. The problems related to the numbing of an overly cynical and disillusioned citizenry poses an evident dilemma for the prospects of grassroots mobilisations. The dilemma evidently extends to the possibility that activists might withdraw from civic and public life (resignation), instead of sustaining efforts to enhance accountability (indignation) (Bauhr and Grimes 2014).

Indignation has so far prevailed, though taking different forms in Bulgaria and Hungary. In the first case, collective anti-corruption action could be reconciled with the more traditional protest type of civic self-organisation (Císař 2013). Bulgarian activists managed to elevate anti-corruption to the level of primary importance – as in the large-scale 1997 and 2013-2014 protests – and organise long-lasting street mobilisations that are now used as benchmarks for grassroots efforts. Without ruling out the pursuit of societal accountability through multiple forms of activism, Hungarian anti-corruption graft has seen the dominance of transactional activism (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). In essence, the struggle for societal accountability is more coherently and effectively articulated by collective actors behaving like ‘brokers’; they deploy resources, know-how, and information in ways that resemble – or actually pertain to – the repertoires of NGOs. Conversely, those demonstrations that have lately mobilised larger numbers raised anti-corruption concerns within the context of protests over other contentious issues (e.g. freedom of speech and taxation on internet usage). This seems to

suggest that anti-corruption advocates in Hungary have so far benefited from forms of radical activism and civic self-organisation prioritising other themes.

When reference is made to the symbolic dimension and the aspect of consequences, it is possible to detect a number of similarities across the two cases. Concerns over the spread of corruption were systematically linked to criticism of the political establishment in both Bulgaria and Hungary. This juxtaposition between a deserving people and the corrupt elite has certainly propelled a number of new actors to (at least a degree of) electoral success in the two countries. A number of collective actors have themselves bridged anti-government and anti-establishment frames in their mobilisations. As expected, it is almost impossible to disentangle anti-corruption and anti-government/anti-establishment discourses, especially when high-level corruption is linked to the abuses of incumbents and poor governmental accountability.

Other similarities pertain to the little consequences of the anti-corruption struggle. A first glance at the Bulgarian case shows that loosely organised but highly motivated activists set new prospects for themselves as the protest evolved, and demonstrated until the Oresharski government resigned over 400 days later. The results attained by Hungarian anti-corruption actors included exposing corrupt exchanges and raising awareness on the issue. However, a more stringent assessment – generally shared by anti-corruption actors themselves – would acknowledge that no changes in policy courses or elite behaviour has followed from those government resignations or back-trackings reported upon. No transparency or societal accountability has been attained as a result of either civic self-organised or transactional activism, leaving us with the perception that activists have been often just screaming at a wall. Therefore, a strong case for ‘empowerment’ of the deserving people could at best apply to the individual life experiences of activists and the increased awareness among the public. Anti-corruption activism has been otherwise largely inconsequential in terms of institutional change.

To what extent could resignation replace indignation remains an open question. Extreme scenarios might entail, on the one hand, an all-out subduing of collective action *vis-à-vis* ‘state capture’ and, on the other, breakout of violence to uphold the anti-corruption struggle. What is clearer though is that, in the face of a persistent lack of societal accountability, the prospects and alternatives for collective actors are shrinking.

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Appendix: List of interviews

Bulgaria

Interview BG1: Bogdan Hristov
Interview BG2: Ivaylo Dinev
Interview BG3: Tsvetozar Valkov
Interview BG4: Konstantin Pavlov
Interview BG5: *Anonymous*
Interview BG6: Angel Zlatkov

Hungary

Interview HU1: Sándor Lederer
Interview HU2: Balázs Gulyás
Interview HU3: Ákos Hadházy
Interview HU4: Gergő Sáling
Interview HU5: Gábor Vágó
Interview HU6: Tímea Szabó

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