

FATIGUE

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Introduction

This paper written specifically for COSMOS methodological panels introduces my PhD project on contemporary protest movements in East Central Europe. The project is part of the FATIGUE research consortium that aims to understand the recent increase of populist and illiberal political tendencies in East Central Europe. Under this umbrella, my research explores the new wave of feminist social movements in the region that have emerged in protest against autocratic and far-right politics. FATIGUE research project aims to explore the rise of illiberal and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe, basing its understanding on the concept of 'delayed transformational fatigue'. It is designed to capture the gradually intensifying disappointment with the results of the initial period of reforms, particularly with the performance of the dominant post-communist elites; as well as the sense of political exclusion and economic defeat that has been growing across the society. My contribution to the project is to show how recent forms of mobilization, protest language and symbolism impact the political and cultural changes observed in Europe since the 2008 crisis. Moreover, by identifying various forms of citizen engagement in public life and politics, the project seeks to reassess the still prevailing view of the civil society in post-communist countries as 'weak'. The research is still at its very beginnings, at the stage of fieldwork planning, which brings obvious limitations that will be tackled with as the research progresses. Considering the fact that new feminist movements are one of the largest and most important current social movements in East Central Europe, as well as taking into account my previous research background on women's movements in Latin America, I have decided to start exploring the feminist movement that has started in Poland, and which has spread in different parts in various ways and forms across the region and beyond. In this paper, I position the movement in its socio-political setting in post-1989 era, lay out its most important layers related to its networks, describe the methodology I will use to answer the research question.

Feminist Movements in East Central Europe after the 1989

After the fall of state-socialist regimes in East Central Europe (CEE), social movements were described as transactional, professionalized and lacking potential for broad political mobilization (Cirstocea 2010; Petrova, Tarrow 2007). The financial dependency on foreign resources (Gal and Kligman 2003) was an element widely present in the NGO-ization hypothesis and urged scholars to study the effects of EU funding on NGOs (Roth 2007) and transnational mobilization (Paternotte 2013; Císar and Vráblíková 2010). All these accounts framed a hostile picture of activism in the region. More recent studies challenged the general understanding of the weakness and lack of capacity of movement actors to mobilize for policy change (Kriszan 2015) and emphasized a variety of mobilizations, groups and repertoires, depending on domestic political opportunities, available resources and collective identities (Jacobson and Saxonberg 2013). This shift in tactical repertoires from contentious actions to lobbying and advocacy, occasioned by access to official politics, was associated with the institutionalization and professionalization of the feminist movement (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999; Bernal 2000; Halley 2006).



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While some scholars insisted on the benefits of infusing feminist ideas and practices within the state (Banaszak 2010), others considered that institutionalization and professionalization made the feminist movement susceptible to co-optation, entailing demobilization and depoliticization.

In this line, the more organized and institutionalized sector became “institutionalized” and “NGO-ized” (Jacobsson 2015) and thus detached from both grassroots activities and the rest of the political society. However, an increasing amount of literature is challenging these assumptions, pointing to rich and dense activist networks and campaigns, often in previously overseen areas, such as family-related activism (Korolczuk and Hryciuk 2016), urban activism (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015, 2016; Domaradzka and Wijkstrom 2016; Pluciński 2012), and right-wing activism (Płatek and Płucienniczak 2017). To some extent, this is a result of Western-centered social movement theories (a trend criticized by Gagyi 2013) and the use of categories and analytical tools developed while studying Western European and North American social movements and Western-generated concepts of politics, civil society, and democracy. Also, the growing political polarization of the Polish society expressed in deepening cleavages clearly visible after the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections have resulted in a vast increase of street activities of grassroots actors.

New feminist mobilizations in new regimes

Since 2016, East Central Europe has been witnessing an unprecedented wave of feminist protests. Attacks on reproductive rights have mobilized the public and brought thousands of people into the streets in Poland. Around these protests, a largely important and effective activist platform has started to form, countering ultra-right wing and patriarchal governments. These mobilizations are part of recent women’s mobilizations and feminist protests that have occurred all over the globe. In spring 2016, a group of Ukrainian, Russian and Kazakh activists organised a social media based campaign, in which they emphasized the enduring prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in contemporary post-Soviet societies. Campaigners used the #IamNotScaredToSpeak hashtag, which was quickly shared by thousands of women in the above-mentioned countries. These mobilizations that started originally in Ukraine long preceded the more known #MeToo movement in Northern America, and were focused specifically on women from lower classes. In the past two years, we have witnessed women’s marches in the US and the anti-violent protests in Latin America organized by Ni Una Menos movement, and many more. My research focuses on women’s protests and the rise of feminist movements in East Central Europe that are connected to the recent political changes that have occurred in countries in the region, more specifically the rise of autocratic and illiberal politics. At this stage of the research, I start with focusing on one of the largest mobilisations in recent times, the Polish Black Protest and the AllPoland Women’s Strike, that can be viewed as part of women’s protests taking place around the world. Women in Poland organised several influential demonstrations against the total ban on abortion that was planned by the government in 2016. It was called “Black Protest” due to the colours of the clothes worn by the participants. It was popularised by a #czarnyprotest (black protest) hashtag. The peak of the protests organised on October 3, 2016, called All Poland Women’s Strike, mobilised hundreds of thousands of women all over the country, becoming the first widespread demonstration on such a scale since the early 1980s. It became an important point of reference for international women’s movements and one year later, women in Poland joined the International Women’s Strike on 8 March 2017 (see Majewska 2018, Korolczuk et al 2019).

The impact and strength of this new type of mobilisation, which some see as the most recent face of new social movements (Melucci 1980), reveals something new about the current need for feminism. The political opportunity structure (Della Porta and Diani 2009) has recently been widened, unlike in previous research on feminist mobilisations in the region, which was focussed mainly on middle-class, white, native inhabitants from big cities. Recent mobilisations have brought new types of actions with them. Particular novelty of recent mobilisations concerns the action, which has taken place in new contexts, in political, economic and cultural terms, in the post financial crisis social landscape, marked by austerity measures. The new populist governments, which combine a pronatalist approach and the objectification of women with a certain investment in social welfare, serve as a different kind of opposition to what was in place before, that is neoliberal governments, which avoided all debate on reproductive rights and refused to make social expenditure a priority, while threatening feminist movement with de-politicization and ngo-ization. Black Protest mobilizations have also opened up questions about how new forms of women’s protests shape feminist debates. In the Central European context one can observe a shift towards a more intersectional



feminism (Collins & Bilge 2016), in which issues of gender, class, citizenship and status are brought together. In the context of social movement scholarship, intersectionality can be defined as an approach (both in terms of theory and practice) which enables analysis of such phenomena that is focused on the overlap of a variety of social categories. Taking these together influences the social position of both individuals and groups in society, as well as the dynamic of particular social movements themselves (Wojnicka 2019). As such, there is a need to stress elements such as the importance of class and, in general, a more intersectional approach in contemporary Central and Eastern European women's protests analysis.

Furthermore, the new type of activism, as observed in Poland and other countries in the region, raises questions about the type of mobilisation. Scholars working on the participants of mobilisations such as the Black Protest and the Women's Strike define independent initiatives of "ordinary" women who had hitherto remained silent. Such arguments seem to be prevalent in the analysis of both Black Protest (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018; Ramme and Snochowska - Gonzalez 2018, and, to some extent, Nawojski, Pluta and Zielińska 2018) and on-line anti-violence activism (Sedysheva 2018). One conclusion that arises from these discussions seems to suggest that in recent mobilisation, "ordinary" women, despite their constant presence in the feminist movement (Wojnicka 2019) finally gained public attention, which in the past was focussed mainly on "celebrity" feminists. Moreover, they gained voice due to the new multiway means of communication and the multitude of protest locations (Kubisa 2016, Kubisa 2018, Majewska 2017). The model of organisation of the protests allows a multiplicity of voices and narrations, in which the senders and receivers constantly construct and reconstruct the messages, amplifying the collective voice. It makes a significant change compared to older forms of feminist activities, organised in bigger cities, directed by the few. However, one can consider whether without this previous feminist activity, the current manifestation would be even possible (Kubisa 2017).

The current women's movement faces unprecedented challenges in political terms. The same Polish government that refuses fundamental women's rights, however, has adopted selective social policies that help to secure the material existence of numerous families in Poland and effectively diminish labour market precarity. How can the women's movements solve this puzzle? Even though the governmental policies financially support selected families, their political approach is still based on objectification of women. Women's movements, on the contrary, are giving space and voice to these issues, which is transforming into women's agency (Kubisa 2017). The issue of representation of "ordinary women" is especially vital in regard to the political context. Populist governments are eager to claim that they are representing "ordinary people", while advancing anti-women policies. Feminist movements in CEE countries clearly need comprehensive, intersectional frameworks for inclusive political actions that would recognise the specifics of CEE contexts - the state and the gender regimes, and the recognition of gender relations. Particularly, it is important to theorise feminist movements from within.

Black Protest Movement

Abortion has been a highly contested and politicised topic in Poland since the early 1990s. Ever since, we have witnessed ongoing debates and mobilisations of representatives of both "anti-choice" and "pro-choice" groups. For both sides, the discussion and social mobilisation around the introduction of 1993 Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion, imposing serious limitations to legal access to abortion in Poland, marks a groundbreaking moment. The former groups, supporting the introduction of stricter laws or even a total ban on abortion, have spread across the country with the strong support (both institutional and ideological) of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland (Mishtal 2015:37). The latter groups, whose structure was formalised to a varying degree, protested against the planned restrictions on abortion as well as broader retraditionalisation trends and reinforcement of the patriarchal order that accompanied the post-1989 Polish socio-political transformation (Mishtal 2015, 68; see also: Fuszara 2005). Since around 2009, we have witnessed the intensification and radicalisation of claims for limiting or banning access to legal abortion in Poland, initiating yet another chapter of the debate on abortion. Between 2011 and 2018, several bills were introduced to the parliament seeking to impose such changes. They were drafted by anti-choice groups with the support from the Roman Catholic Church and the right-wing politicians in the government (especially from Law and Justice (PiS) political party). Each mobilisation on the anti-choice side also triggered resistance and a response from the supporters of the pro-choice opinion, especially at the civil society level.



Women's groups, with the help of liberal politicians drafted their bills proposing the liberalisation of the 1993 law and submitted them to the parliament. Nonetheless, Civic Platform party in government between 2007 and 2015, opposed all attempts to restrict or liberalise the 1993 law by either not processing the submitted bills or rejecting the proposals at a very early stage in the parliament. Most politicians from that party justified their votes as a need to keep the "abortion compromise," which had been reached at the beginning of the 1990s. However, Civic Platform's reluctance towards the revision of the existing laws resulted not from their concern for women or their rights. It rather stemmed from the party's attempts to prevent the potentially disruptive implications of opening a discussion on the existing abortion laws.

The outcome of the 2015 parliamentary elections changed the political context of the debate on abortion (Korolczuk 2015:2016). The winning coalition of right-wing conservative parties led by Law and Justice party had supported anti-choice claims while still in parliamentary opposition. Therefore, the groups criticising the existing abortion laws and demanding additional restrictions on access to legal abortion in Poland saw their seizure of power as a new window of opportunity to pursue their claims. In April 2016, the Stop Abortion initiative began collecting signatures to support the bill proposing a complete ban on legal abortion in Poland, backed by the Roman Catholic Church. In parallel, the Save the Women pro-choice initiative for the liberalisation of the abortion laws also started collecting signatures in support of their proposal. The bills reached the parliament in July and August 2016 respectively, and were discussed jointly in the plenary session on September 23, but only the former was voted to be further processed. The latter bill proposing the liberalisation of the laws was rejected (Król and Pustułka 2018:373).

The outcome of this voting sparked massive demonstrations across the country on October 3, 2016, labelled as the Polish National Women's Strike or Black Monday. Participants expressed strong opposition to the Stop Abortion bill and the ruling party's support for it (Majewska 2017; Kowalska and Nawojski 2018). This moment marks the birth of a wider social movement fighting for reproductive and women's rights in Poland, tagged with the umbrella term "Black Protests". In contrast to earlier pro-choice mobilisations, the Black Protests resonated more deeply with the Polish society, reaching well beyond the usual supporters of such initiatives, namely groups of metropolitan and well-educated women and men (Majewska 2017; Korolczuk 2016a). In contrast, the Black Protests mobilised people from very diverse backgrounds – men and women of different ages, sexuality and class. Furthermore, the protests were not only limited to big cities, as had been the case with earlier pro-choice initiatives, but also took place in peripheral areas, small towns, often organized by self-organised, grassroots initiatives (Kowalska and Nawojski 2018).

Distinctiveness of the new feminist movements in the East Central European Context

The popularity and the mobilising effect of the Black Protests need to be seen in a broader political context. The support that the ruling party gave to the bill proposing drastic restrictions on access to legal abortion and punishment of women having an abortion coincided with numerous other initiatives of this party aiming to limit citizens' freedoms in Poland (e.g. changes to the Constitutional Tribunal, the amended law on public gathering) (Korolczuk 2016a). The social support for the Black Protests should therefore also be considered as part of a wider resistance mobilisation against the ruling party's policies. Nonetheless, what distinguishes Black Monday from other protests against the government's activities is its unprecedented scale (Black Monday was the biggest grassroots manifestation in Poland since the Solidarity protests of 1980 [Król and Pustułka 2018:375]) as well as the social visibility and support for these protests (according to representative public polls, 88% of respondents had heard about the Black Protests and 58% declared their support for them [CBOS 2016]).

Firstly, the Black Protests created new public spaces where a variety of women's experiences and identities have found expression. They constituted a forum for discussion on the barriers for women's full involvement in social and public life. Moreover, the emergence of such spaces allowed for the articulation of various topics, previously "locked" in the private sphere, to be transferred to the centre of the public sphere and political mainstream (Korolczuk 2016b). The discussions during and around the Black Protests sensitised the issue of the limitation of women's subjectivity and sexual autonomy, visible in both the barriers in access to reproductive rights and representation in the political discourse. As a result, these deliberations allowed for a change in the articulation and perception of women in the debate on abortion from being a subject to an agent equipped with the right to shape it (Kubisa 2016).



Secondly, by opening such new discursive areas, the Black Protests also challenged the narrative praising the current laws, often presented as a successful “compromise” between anti and pro-choicers. The cases showing how women are limited in their ability to execute their right to access legal abortion under the current law (e.g. the consequences of doctors’ conscientious objection, a lack of clear decision and appeal procedures) revealed the reality of the “compromise”. It showed that in practice it often translates into women’s limited access to their reproductive rights (Chmielewska, Druciarek and Przybysz 2017:12) and women being deprived of their sexual subjectivity and autonomy (Król and Pustułka 2018). Therefore, the Black Protests not only stimulated the debate on women’s rights in Poland, but also linked it with the question on the condition of Polish democracy. As such, reproductive and women’s rights became a litmus test for respect for human and citizens’ rights in Poland under the rule of Law and Justice.

Finally, the distinctive character of the Black Protests stems from their organisational and territorial dispersion as well as their inclusive character. Demonstrations were organised in many places in Poland and abroad, included various types of acts (e.g. taking part in protests, wearing black clothes, supporting protests via social media etc.) and often covered issues exceeding reproductive or even women’s rights (Majewska 2018; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2016). As such, the Black Protests exemplify subaltern counterpublics, that is the emergence of “parallel discursive arenas” allowing for invention and circulation of counter discourses, which in turn contributes to constructions of women’s alternative identities, interests and needs (Fraser 1990:67). The mobilisations themselves could therefore be regarded as new forms of citizens’ mobilisation and practice (see Kowalska, Nawojski and Pluta 2018) and were explicitly articulated as such by the protesters via their slogans and claims.

Black Protest and its transnational mobilizing structures

The mass mobilization of the #BlackProtest was facilitated by social media networks *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* (Gals to Gals). The Gals to Gals in Warsaw gathered over 90 thousand members just a few hours after it was initially formed (Korolczuk 2016a). Soon other Gals to Gals networks were formed, including internationally – most importantly in London and in Berlin. Other initiatives, including *Ratujmy Kobiety* (Save the Women) also played an important role in social media bottom-up mobilization of supporters. However, the most important role was played by *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (All-Poland Women’s Strike), an informal, non-partisan initiative of women, both non-affiliated and belonging to various women's organizations, which took on the role of connective leadership for the whole movement (Della Ratta and Valeriani 2014). Its main function is to connect people and information and curate, pack and frame the information in a way that generates support for the mobilization both internally and externally. The All-Poland Women’s Strike maintained and updated a website that framed the information about the movement and its activities and put it into context. The All-Poland Women’s Strike, also maintained a help desk, which coordinated and supported local activities and oversaw the movement’s social media presence. Collective leadership emerged also at the regional level, in different smaller cities, where activists rooted in the communities became responsible for coordinating and mobilizing regional protests and demonstrations.

According to my observations from within the movement, transnational networking has been created in various levels. Polish women living in Berlin responded to everything that was happening in Poland by organizing solidarity events in Berlin. This was their group’s own initiative and as such it was not directly coordinated with the #BlackProtest organizers from Poland. Similar situation appeared in Oslo. Unlike the activist in Berlin, however, feminists from Oslo did not feel the need to maintain close relations with the center of the #BlackProtest organizing, and limited their communication to sharing links to their events on the center’s social media pages. Organizers of the #BlackProtest from London have maintained a very strong relationship with the center. The relationship between the diasporic #BlackProtest organizers and the center of the protest was maintained through the connective leaders, the *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet* (All-Polish Women’s Strike) website and with some disruptions through social media networks, mainly the *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom* (Gals to Gals). The feminist diaspora both obtained information about mobilization plans in Poland and updated the center about their solidarity mobilization activities in London, Oslo, Berlin and Brussels. In addition to keeping contact with the #BlackProtest organizers in Poland, the activists from London maintained contact with feminists who were mobilizing around reproductive rights in other countries: Italy, Argentina, Ireland, Malta, and South Korea, to name just a few countries that had experienced backlash against reproductive rights around the same time as Poland did. The support they offered each other was also facilitated by



social media and came down to occasional messages and “liking” and commenting on each other’s social media activity.

Black Protest in Provinces

For many of the activists, Black Monday was the first protest they participated in, and has shaped their future activism. In social movement literature, this is often dubbed a “transformative event”. Transformative events are, in this theoretical framework, not only the emergence of an “innovative contentious action” (McAdam 2003, 293), but also connected to a “collective interpretation” that reads “new understandings” of changing structures through experiments in collective action (McAdam and Sewell Jr. 2001, 119–120; Sewell Jr. 2005, 244– 248). The meaning of such events can over time become “relatively fixed” and act as a reference in both the staging and interpretation of similar protest events in the future, thus becoming part of a relatively stable repertoire of contention (Sewell Jr. 2005:243).

One of the characteristics of small towns is the dense network of interconnections between people. This applies not only to the family or friendship networks, but the connections are often extrapolated to business relations. In this understanding, being an activist poses a threat when the boss is connected to the opposing political camp. This not only affects the relations with the boss, but also the functioning of entire companies. In many provincial towns, the opportunities for employment are limited and often managerial positions are political prey. Situation is even worse when it comes to employment in the public sector. The close connections between residents also affect private businesses who fear losing their clients over their political self-declaration. With a limited clientele, the business owners in small towns are not likely to be picky and the fear of losing customers is a potential deal breaker for them.

The small scale of the environment brings us to another of the characteristics of small-town activism, which is a lack of anonymity. Apart from the issues described before, occasionally this becomes a burden for the activists for other reasons. The lack of anonymity pushes people away, especially those who have exposed public functions; in smaller towns and in provincial Poland, public image is worth a lot, much more than in big towns and affects more cohorts of people than in big towns.

The Catholic church in Poland plays an important role in the country’s life. Its role is very often stressed by women as one of the key challenges they had to face in their activism. In Poland, approximately 94% of the population is baptized and – according to a recent study by the Catholic Statistical Office – 38% attends Sunday service weekly. In the context of small towns, the role of the church is even greater. Priests often attack the feminist activists, as their proclaimed political and ideological enemies during masses. Some of the activists are personally insulted (with their names mentioned) by the priests. Due to the greater authority and influence of the Church on the daily life of residents in small towns, such a stigma has a much higher impact and power of punishment than in big cities. The influence of the Church is exercised not only through the clergy, but is also proxied through hardcore believers. The final challenge for the feminist activism in provinces of Poland are the traditional gender roles stemming from the conservative setting of Polish provinces. Within the prevailing conservative gender roles, being involved in politics (street politics included) is not an occupation for women. Women’s and feminist activism openly challenges these gender roles. This prompts a feeling of being threatened among the men, whose gender roles are being questioned and challenged.

Regarding political activism, the environment of small and provincial towns overlaps with some more general trends observed in Poland. In a poll from March 2017, 58% of respondents of a CBOS study declared that they feel they should exercise self-censorship and do not feel free to express their political views. This is a major change considering that after the regime transformation of 1989, only 33% of the population shared this attitude. This forms an obstacle for political activism in the streets because not only does it become a challenge for the activists, but also for potential supporters. However, as Cezary Obracht-Prondyński says (in Socha 2017): In Warsaw, a dozen or so people no one will notice, but here it’s potential, on which you can build something [...] Because people get to know each other, they experience something together. Later it is easier because they know that they can count on each other.”



Research questions and methodology

This research will address the inner dynamics of contemporary protest movements in East Central Europe in post-1989 era, as political actors from various groups, subgroups, class and backgrounds pursue diverse social, political and economic goals. More specifically, the project will address the research question of how do activists from the new contemporary movements in respective movements imagine, build, and (re)negotiate the collective objectives and resistance strategies within the movements' milieu. Primarily, the research project will explore political participation and new forms of mobilizations, and will analyze contemporary forms of protest politics and social movements as crucial components of today's political development. In my research I am interested in exploring the following points:

- The strategies of protest movements: the organizational model of these protests and what is novel about them in terms of strategies of mobilisation, patterns of leadership, alliances, narration, and institutionalization
- The place of social class in the movement, in its narration and in its strategies. Whose voice is being foregrounded?
- The new actors and patterns of mobilisation and organization (e.g. digital technologies)
- The human geography of the protests – on the local, national, transnational and virtual levels – the forms of international solidarity, transnational activism and their local varieties
- The political and theoretical relation between the movements and contemporary populism/illiberalism
- The political framework of the protests – against which hegemony and oppression? How are they constructed, what kind of categories are used?
- The theoretical and methodological implications of the new forms of protest movements

This research project will be based on a schedule of activities organized around three major phases from 2018 to 2021, under FATIGUE project research framework. The first phase will involve refining the proposal and methodology and building inter-sectoral networks to ensure research impact. The fieldwork will apply a multi-sited ethnographic approach to provide an understanding of multi-layered inter-relationships of various actors in countries of East Central Europe. This methodological approach to the field is necessary as the project deals geographically with various case studies. The research will primarily apply traditional ethnographic methods of participant observation methodology. The project will build on my previous research experience and already established knowledge of protest movements and political participation in general, as well as more specifically in Central-Eastern Europe. It will be embodied in the scholarship of engaged anthropology and sociology (Cox 2011; Graeber 2009; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009; Sitrin 2012). The final phase will conclude the data analysis, present the research findings and release the results.

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