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Mobilizing against Democratic Backsliding:

What Motivates Protestors in Central and Eastern Europe?

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Several central and eastern European countries have experienced democratic erosion of different kinds. While the Czech Republic and Poland have faced democratic backsliding, for example, others, such as Bulgaria and Romania, are better characterized as struggling with democratic stagnation. Regardless of the type of democratic erosion, robust protest movements have challenged democratic erosion. What motivates protestors who face different types of democratic erosion to take to the streets? What kinds of political and institutional changes do they seek? In this article, we theorize that protestors experiencing democratic backsliding prioritize changing the government or changing the political practices that have developed over the last decade. By contrast, protestors facing democratic stagnation emphasize the need to change long-standing institutions and practices that have existed since the country transitioned to democracy in 1989. To test our hypotheses, we conducted original surveys of pro-democracy protestors in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. We found that 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. By contrast, protestors living through long-standing democratic stagnation emphasize changing the practices and institutions that have emerged since the transition to democracy in 1989. Moreover, we found that in all four countries protestors had mobilized to fight democratic erosion. Also, respondents in all four countries believed that the main impact of the protests was to increase political awareness and spread information about democracy.

Keywords: *protest; democratic erosion; democratic backsliding; democratic stagnation; ethnopolitism; state capture*

Over the last decade, ruling parties in several post-Communist states in central and eastern Europe (CEE) have taken steps to concentrate and amplify their power, leading to democratic erosion. After winning elections, some incumbents have moved quickly to use the levers of government to degrade key aspects of liberal democracy, such as counter-majoritarian institutions, independent voices in the media, and pluralism in the public sphere. In some other post-Communist states, incumbents have taken advantage of long-standing weaknesses of democratic institutions to capture state administration, profit from rent-seeking, and weaken democratic checks and balances. We view these trends as two sub-types of democratic erosion: democratic backsliding and democratic stagnation.

In response to both types of democratic erosion, citizens have organized strong and sustained protests opposing governments and demanding political change. It may be easy to discount these protests against democratic erosion.¹ While they have rarely forced ruling parties out of office or stopped them from taking further steps to undermine democracy, these protests have considerably impacted political life.

In most CEE countries, these have been the largest protests since the fall of Communism in 1989. Their impact, however, has varied. Some protests have impacted political life by mobilizing voters, strengthening opposition to incumbents, and, ultimately, shaping electoral outcomes. In Slovakia, for example, following the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018, over 60,000 citizens participated in the anti-corruption protests that contributed to the Fico government's resignation. In the Czech Republic, protestors organized by the group *Milion chvilék pro demokracii* (A Million Moments for Democracy) put their weight behind opposition parties that pledged to reverse democratic backsliding—and these parties subsequently defeated the incumbents at the ballot box in 2021. In Bulgaria, mass protests against corruption and state capture led to the creation of several new movements, some of which won power and led a (short-lived) reformist government in 2021. Moreover, the *Prodължаване промяната* (Change Continues) movement has remained a strong player in Bulgaria's volatile political scene, helping form a pro-European coalition government in 2023. In Romania, protests following a tragedy at a nightclub in 2015 resulted in the resignation of the prime minister and a technocratic caretaker government until the next elections. Furthermore, the widespread protests in Romania in 2017–2018 halted legislation that would have helped politicians escape prosecution for corruption.² In Poland, sustained civic mobilization after 2015 did not halt legislation or unseat authoritarian-minded incumbents for nearly a decade until elections in late 2023 brought opposition parties to power.

Following a Tillyian logic that sees democratization as a process where citizens learn to defend their rights,³ we explore political protests as evidence of blossoming democratic participation: a bottom-up counterstrike against democratic erosion.⁴ To do so, we investigate the motivations, expectations, and political positioning of protestors in four countries with different varieties of democratic erosion. What do protests tell us 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. We analyze why protestors participate in protests, what specific aspects of democratic erosion drive them to the streets, and what kinds of changes they seek. Based on an original survey of individual protestors in these four countries, we analyze what motivates them to organize and protest, what they expect protests to achieve, and how they think these protests have impacted governance, political party competition, and the political awareness and engagement of other citizens. We also explore whether protestors view the European Union (EU) as supportive or indifferent to their mobilization in defense of democracy.

Our article breaks new ground by exploring the link between each type of democratic erosion and protests for democracy. Based on an original data set, including the responses of about three hundred protestors in four countries, we find important similarities among protests in the face of democratic erosion. First, we find evidence that citizens have mobilized specifically to defend liberal democracy. Second, protestors in each country most commonly believe that the most important impacts of the protests have been to raise public awareness and to encourage others to become politically active. Our findings suggest that, while poor democratic performance sparks protests, the participation of citizens in these movements reflects the presence of civic values that auger well for the quality of democracy in the longer run.⁵ Our findings also highlight the fact that, in contrast to the accession period, the EU is not perceived uniformly by pro-democracy protestors as a defender of democratic values and as a natural ally. Instead, there is substantial variation in how much protestors believe the EU supports their cause. Only in Poland do respondents understand the EU as a strong supporter of the values for which they fight.

Much of the work on protests in CEE over the last decade has focused on the symbols and rhetoric used by protestors. We move the debate further by exploring how citizens who protest perceive democratic erosion, and how they understand the purpose of their own participation in protests defending democracy. We investigate whether protestors respond differently to two types of democratic erosion—backsliding and stagnation—and whether the type of democratic erosion impacts the kind of political change protestors seek. Protestors in democratic backsliding countries may prioritize changing the government or changing the political practices that have developed over the last decade. By contrast, protestors facing democratic stagnation may emphasize the need to change long-standing institutions and practices that have existed since the transition to democracy in 1989–1990.

These questions have, thus far, rarely been studied in the literature.⁶ We know little about the degree to which protestors 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 builds upon novel research on civic activism across the region⁷ and across the globe,⁸ providing new insights into the demands, goals, and perceptions of individuals who protest in defense of liberal democracy.⁹

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

Varieties of Democratic Erosion: Democratic Backsliding versus Democratic Stagnation

Over the last decade, the study of political change around the world has wrestled with the question of whether democracy is losing ground to autocracy—and, if so, how and why. One of the fastest growing literatures in comparative politics today is on democratic erosion.¹⁰

Understanding how democratic erosion affects individual countries in CEE that chose the path of democracy in 1989–1990 has been a challenge for scholars and observers. The quest for more power is perhaps universal among incumbents, so where do normal politics end and attacks on democracy begin?¹¹ Which laws and policies cross the line and damage democratic institutions—and can these institutions readily recover if these laws or policies are reversed?¹² Some scholars argue that a dichotomous measure of democratic erosion, reflecting the presence or absence of formal institutional changes, can help us identify democratic erosion while avoiding conceptual stretching.¹³ Others argue for a continuous measure of democratic erosion that considers a broader set of interconnected changes to the polity.¹⁴ Broader changes may include substituting formal laws with informal rules and norms in daily political interactions¹⁵—for example, through practices that avoid legal requirements for transparency and representation for opposition parties in state or state-funded bodies.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ and religion in ways that are likely to undermine the fundamental liberal democratic principle of equal protection under the law.¹⁹ Here, we adopt a broad definition of democratic erosion, which accounts for a multiplicity of changes to the polity.

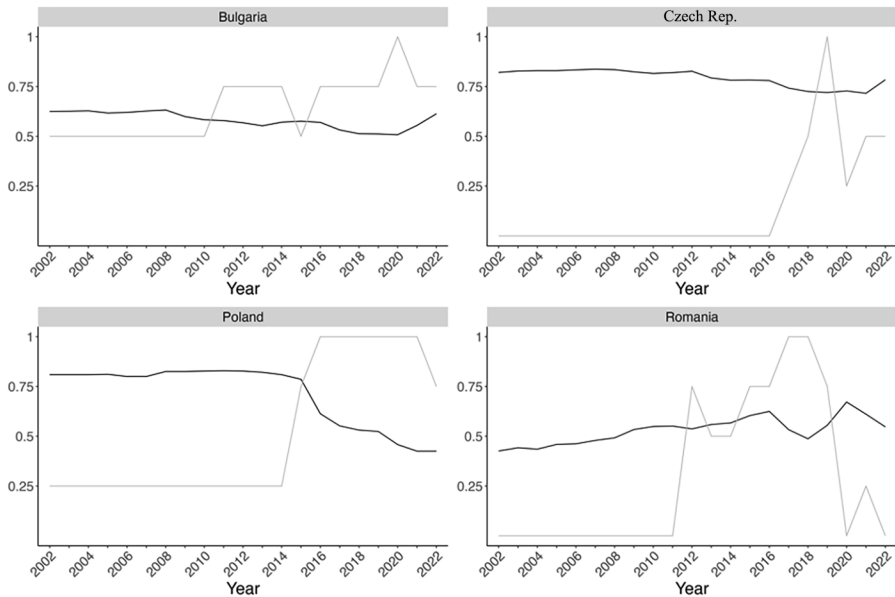
Building on these debates, we distinguish two key types of democratic erosion that may shape the goals of protestors: democratic backsliding and democratic stagnation.

Where *democratic backsliding* occurs, incumbent governments attack and weaken previously consolidated liberal democratic institutions and political freedoms to fix the political playing field. This fits with Nancy Bermeo's definition of democratic backsliding as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of *any* of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."²⁰ Incumbents use their executive power to weaken or capture independent institutions, such as the judiciary and the media. 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.²¹ Incumbents belonging to a specific political party or network undermine democratic institutions that have been consolidated for some time.

Conceptualizing backsliding as a top-down power grab by one specific political party or coalition helps make sense of the jarring fact that democratic degradation has taken place most severely in central and eastern European 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.²² The ideological appeal of parties such as Fidesz in Hungary and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) in Poland has been based on a flexible mix of nationalism and ethnopopulism 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 a competitive authoritarian regime. In Poland, PiS dramatically eroded liberal democracy after winning the 2015 elections. In the Czech Republic, coalition governments led by the Akce nespokojených občanů (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, ANO) party combined ethnopopulism with a technocratic frame and captured state administration and policymaking for oligarchic and criminal interests before being voted out of office in late 2021.²³

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 democracies that have yet to consolidate.²⁴ In several CEE countries, including Bulgaria and Romania, democracy has exhibited persistent weaknesses that have become gradually worse over time. While democratic institutions have not been weakened as quickly and dramatically in comparison with the first group of countries, democracy languishes, muddling between stagnation and slow decline. An intermediary level of liberal democracy persists in an uneasy equilibrium.²⁵ In cases of democratic stagnation, politicians from a variety of parties and movements engage in rent-seeking, damaging democratic institutions over several electoral cycles. Successive governments fail to curb state capture, as privileged links tying political elites to businesses and oligarchs have anchored a model of using state institutions for economic and political gain. Gradually, the alignment between political elites and oligarchic circles undermines the rule of law, weakening constraints on rent-seeking politicians.²⁶

Figure 1.
Levels of democracy and mobilization across central and eastern Europe.



Note: The black line represents the level of democracy in a country. The gray 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 country expert coding. We categorize Bulgaria and Romania as experiencing democratic stagnation, whereas the Czech Republic and Poland exhibit democratic backsliding.

These different trajectories are illustrated in Figure 1, where we use data from the Varieties of Democracy project to plot the level of liberal democracy and the level of pro-democratic mobilization occurring in the four countries in our study: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. We selected these countries because they have experienced democratic erosion, yet citizens have responded with high levels of mobilization to defend democracy.²⁷

The Czech Republic and Poland are cases of democratic backsliding, whereas Bulgaria and Romania are cases of democratic stagnation.²⁸ In the Czech Republic, a trend of democratic consolidation was interrupted by the 2017 parliamentary elections, which brought the ANO party to power. Before being voted out in 2021, the ANO party leader Andrej Babiš expressed clear counter-majoritarian preferences, pledging to abolish the Senate, shrink the size of the lower chamber of parliament, and remove municipal assemblies.²⁹ Babiš was also implicated in many corruption and conflict of interest scandals during his terms.³⁰ Although ANO's coalition partners restrained some of Babiš' ambitions, the level of liberal democracy in the

previously consolidated Czech Republic began to worsen in 2017, improving only after ANO was voted out in 2021. Similarly, after the Polish PiS party returned to power in 2015, its leaders attacked and hobbled previously consolidated democratic institutions; they captured parts of the judiciary, changed electoral laws, and packed the boards of public media stations.³¹ As illustrated in Figure 1, this led to a sharp decline in the level of Poland's liberal democracy. In both the Czech Republic and Poland, democratic institutions that were previously considered consolidated came under attack by incumbents and their quality worsened, albeit to different degrees.

By contrast, Bulgaria and Romania experienced democratic stagnation, as the quality of democracy did not rise to the level of consolidation but rather reached a stagnant equilibrium.³² In Bulgaria, patronage relationships among politicians, businesses, and the Chief Prosecutor's office have stunted the development of the rule of law and eroded other checks and balances, such as an independent media. Democratic stagnation in Bulgaria has enabled those in power across successive governments to leverage their roles in governance to advance their own interests and undermine democratic institutions.³³ For its part, Romania has experienced stops and starts on its political trajectory, but its democracy has also not fully consolidated. Romanian politicians from various parties have challenged judicial independence and exploited democratic institutions to further entrench clientelist networks.³⁴ As depicted in Figure 1, the level of liberal democracy in both Bulgaria and Romania has remained at a lower yet fairly stable level, reflecting our conceptualization of democratic stagnation.

Despite the different forms of democratic erosion that we show in Figure 1, pro-democratic mobilization has erupted in all four countries in response to attacks on liberal democracy. Moreover, levels of pro-democratic mobilization in all four countries have exceeded levels of pro-autocratic mobilization.

We hypothesize that the type of democratic erosion taking place in a country may shape subsequent protests in defense of liberal democracy. Democratic backsliding and democratic stagnation each impact the motivations and goals of protestors in unique ways because these different threats to democracy affect different parts of society more visibly. If democratic backsliding occurs and incumbents pass legislation that weakens or removes existing rights, the individuals and groups who are directly affected will be more likely to act.³⁵ By contrast, when rule of law is weak, democratic stagnation may more quickly impact businesses and middle-class industrial and service workers who rely on courts for the protection of their property rights.³⁶ When institutions such as the office of the chief prosecutor or an oversight body for the secret service are taken over by corrupt elites, citizens may see a general threat to the rights accorded to them under their democratic system.

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. Democratic backsliding typically occurs after a party comes to power and breaks with the past governments' practices

of respecting liberal democratic institutions. After PiS came to power in Poland in 2015 and ANO came to power in the Czech Republic in 2017, party leaders took steps to undermine the quality of previously consolidated democratic institutions. As noted above, these parties' anti-democratic practices ranged from packing courts and capturing independent media to pledging to abolish democratic bodies, like parts of the legislature.³⁷ Since the parties' actions constitute a break from past instances of political parties respecting liberal democracy and involve clear instances of rapid-fire attacks on democracy, protestors may respond by seeking to change (back) specific policies and to oust the incumbents from office.

In the "backsliding countries," activists may perceive a divide between "democratic" and "anti-democratic" parties. They may strive to reverse the policies of "anti-democratic" parties and to remove these parties from government in subsequent elections. Rather than seeking fundamentally to change democratic institutions that previously were considered consolidated, protestors in countries experiencing democratic backsliding may demand an overhaul of recent measures implemented by the incumbents. Removing the political party attacking democratic institutions and reversing this party's policies may become the two main goals of protestors; they may expect a return to normality following the ousting of the incumbents. We thus hypothesize that the main goals of the protestors are to reverse the policies of "anti-democratic" parties and to remove these parties from government as soon as possible.

Hypothesis 1: In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, protestors prioritize reversing the policies of anti-democratic parties and removing them from power.

By contrast, in cases of democratic stagnation, we expect that protestors target elites more broadly rather than focusing on one or more political parties and party leaders. Where democratic stagnation occurs, politicians across different parties engage in rent-seeking and undermine liberal democratic institutions over time. Connections between politicians and oligarchs allow state capture to continue regardless of which party or parties are in power. Given that citizens have witnessed the failure of democratic institutions to consolidate and the repeated corrupt dealings on the part of politicians from many parties, people who protest in defense of democracy may identify long-standing problems with governance as the critical challenge for their polity. For instance, weaknesses in the judiciary and in the anti-corruption institutions that prevent them from constraining rent-seeking may be the focus of protestors' push for change.³⁸ Since successive governments have failed to reform these institutions over time, protestors may not seek to oust a single political party but instead may seek far-reaching changes to reduce state capture and corruption. While specific bold-faced moves to grab power or weaken institutions often spark protests, the demands of protestors may focus on reforming institutions that have long functioned poorly rather than on ousting a particular party or government. Thus, activists may unite around demands to address general, long-term governance issues.

Hypothesis 2: In countries experiencing democratic stagnation, protestors prioritize reforming institutions that have functioned poorly over time, rather than ousting a particular government.

We now turn to exploring key perspectives in the literature that help us conceptualize the impact of protests before moving on to the analysis of our data on what motivates protestors to go to the street.

Potential Impact of Protests

Measuring what protests have achieved presents a series of conceptual and methodological challenges. Social movements have different consequences at different points in time and thus experience cyclical successes and failures that vary widely based on how an observer perceives and defines success.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ Some protestors in the region even seek to have an impact by boycotting elections; this further complicates measuring the efficacy of social movements in shaping political outcomes.⁴¹ 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, scholars have theorized that protests and social movements may impact political outcomes in three main ways: policy changes, institutional and structural changes, and societal and attitudinal changes. Rather than conceptualizing protestors as excluded groups seeking to mobilize marginalized constituencies,⁴² some scholars focus on the capacity of protestors to change public policy.⁴³ When political systems respond to citizens' demands, the social movement is considered successful. Protestors may succeed in the policy realm if the political system listens to protestors' concerns, adopts policies in line with the protestors' goals, redresses the protestors' grievances, or places the issue on the government's agenda.⁴⁴ Beyond policy change, social movements can succeed when they change political institutions and reshape existing forms of democracy.⁴⁵ Protests can drive institutional change by exerting social or financial pressure on individuals capable of effecting change.⁴⁶

The demands of protestors, however, are not always met. Policies and political structures do not always change. Despite this, movements can still succeed by generating attitudinal or value changes.⁴⁷ Protest actions can thus meet some of their objectives by attracting media coverage and increasing public awareness, which is more likely to occur when they are extreme⁴⁸ or dramatic.⁴⁹ When protests attract public attention and support, they can gain more political and cultural influence as well as institutional access.⁵⁰ In addition, protests can function as a recruitment tactic. Early protestors can encourage onlookers to feel a moral obligation to contribute to the cause by joining and protesting.⁵¹ Similarly, seeing others in one's

network protest can generate social pressure to participate, thereby encouraging further mobilization. Meanwhile, participating in a protest can help change protestors' attitudes, aligning them more closely with the cultural frames and policy preferences expressed during the protest.⁵²

As we consider the protests in CEE over the last decade, we expect that participants evaluate their impact differently over time, partially due to the context in which they protest. In cases of democratic backsliding, protestors respond to severe attacks on democratic institutions. Since ruling parties quickly construct majoritarian coalitions based on their in-group and since there tends to be a perceived divide between "democratic" and "anti-democratic" parties, we expect ruling parties to ignore these protestors.⁵³ As such, these protestors likely fail to drive institutional or policy changes in the short and medium term. Protestors may recognize this when reflecting upon the impact of protests. However, by their mere presence in the streets, voicing opposition to the ruling parties' actions, we expect protests to have some success in achieving attitudinal change. While this attitudinal change may be small or insufficient to oust politicians who have altered political dynamics in their favor by undermining checks and balances, protestors in countries experiencing democratic backsliding may find changing public awareness to be a necessary step and important impact of protests. Protestors in countries experiencing democratic backsliding may define success in part as influencing public awareness on issues related to their protests.

Hypothesis 3: In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, protestors will identify influencing public awareness of democratic decline as an important impact of their protests.

By contrast, in cases of democratic stagnation, we expect protestors to focus on the long-term problems of state capture and governance issues. Although frequently sparked by specific power grabs or egregious attempts at rent-seeking, protests focus on persistent institutional shortcomings.⁵⁴ Existing elites may all be seen as compromised.⁵⁵ Therefore, in cases of democratic stagnation, we may be more likely to see the creation of new parties and movements that subsequently compete in democratic elections. Protestors may consider the creation and election to parliament of these new parties or movements to be one important result of their protests. As such, we expect protestors in countries where democracy stagnates to consider the creation of different political parties and movements as a critical impact.

Hypothesis 4: In countries experiencing democratic stagnation, protestors identify the emergence of new parties and movements competing in elections as an important impact of their protests.

While these dimensions of mobilization and impact are based on domestic dynamics, over time the protestors' perception of whether external actors support their

cause is another important and underexplored aspect of protests. The development of democracy in CEE has been marked by the important role played by external actors, especially the EU. The EU's role in promoting democratic institutions and citizens' rights has been viewed as positive in the post-Communist states that sought accession in the late 1990s and joined the EU from 2004 to 2007.⁵⁶ Even just after accession, EU monitoring, funding, and labor mobility appeared to play a positive role in consolidating CEE democracies.⁵⁷

Since 2010, however, the EU's role in limiting backsliding has been viewed much more critically. The EU has increasingly been seen as allowing or even enabling the democratic erosion that became more pronounced over the last decade. Scholars, however, have diverged in their findings. Some studies have argued that the EU enabled the consolidation of power by autocratic elites by providing financial transfers. They have also argued that EU institutions and political parties, like Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have provided political cover for authoritarian leaders as part of deals in the European Parliament.⁵⁸ In short, they have characterized key actors within the EU as enablers of autocrats.⁵⁹ Other studies, however, have found that the EU's norms and legislation can still be used to hold policymakers to account when specific policies are made without reference to the EU's good governance principles.⁶⁰

We do not know much about how protestors have viewed the EU over the last decade. Given that the pre-accession phase of democratization worked best when supranational institutions connected to domestic mobilization,⁶¹ learning more about the relationship between protests and the EU is crucial for understanding the potential for a similar coalition to resist backsliding. However, since the EU has largely struggled to halt democratic backsliding or stagnation, pro-democracy protestors experiencing both types of democratic erosion may not believe that the EU is an important actor supporting protests.

Hypothesis 5: In countries experiencing either democratic backsliding or stagnation, protestors do not identify the EU as an actor supportive of protests against democratic erosion.

Method and Approach

We selected four central and eastern European states that can be classified as experiencing either democratic backsliding or stagnation: the Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. We identified large-scale protests in each country over the last decade. We define large-scale protests as protests over the last decade (from 2010 to 2020) that involved at least 10,000 people protesting for several days or weeks. Table A1 provides an overview of these protests. We used these sets of protests to identify protestors who have participated in one or more of them. To establish the goals of protestors, their motivations, and their assessment of the impact of protests, we developed and ran an original survey in each country between

Table 1
Type of Respondent across Country

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

December 2021 and March 2022. The survey was administered online via Qualtrics in the national language of the country.

To study the relationship between protests and democratic erosion, we designed different ways to ask protestors about what they consider to be the protests' goals and outcomes. We asked participants what motivated them to participate, with response choices ranging from defending democratic institutions to protesting against specific policies, laws, or restrictions of rights. We further investigated how protestors perceived the problems facing their political system and country that led them to mobilize, and what—if any—impacts they thought the protests had. Given the debates on the EU's role in dealing with democratic erosion, we also included questions on whether the EU is supportive of the issues that were important for the protestors. Finally, we included several open-ended questions that allowed respondents to describe why they protested and what protests meant for them in their own words. The full version of the survey can be found in Appendix B.

Our survey represents a rare attempt to build a data set that captures the motivations and outcome assessments of protestors across several countries on a somewhat large scale. The group we have targeted is not and cannot be representative of the general populations of our four target countries. It is, however, an important sample of protestors—a group that is difficult to reach but important in terms of political awareness and civic participation. We recruited respondents in several ways. First, we asked existing contacts to share the survey further, using snowball sampling. Second, we posted the survey to protest organization groups on Facebook and distributed it via Twitter. Third, some civil society groups—including non-political communities of interest—were approached by us or one of their members to distribute our survey.

The total number of respondents in our sample is 397; protestors comprise 299 of these, while the rest are respondents who did not participate in protests. Protestor respondents were distributed by country as shown in Table 1. Importantly, we do not seek to compare protestors to non-protestors in our analysis, nor did we try to obtain a representative sample of non-protestors. Our explicit focus is to understand the motivations and expectations of protestors as well as their perceptions of how the protests had shaped political outcomes in their country. While some non-protestors

answered some survey questions, the results presented below filter out all non-protestors. Finally, in Figures A1–A5, we show the age, gender, type of residence, education, and type of employment of the protestors in each country in our sample. While these distributions do not match each country's general demographic distribution, this makes sense because protestors typically comprise less than 5 percent of the adult population in any given year and are therefore a small group that is unrepresentative of society at large.⁶²

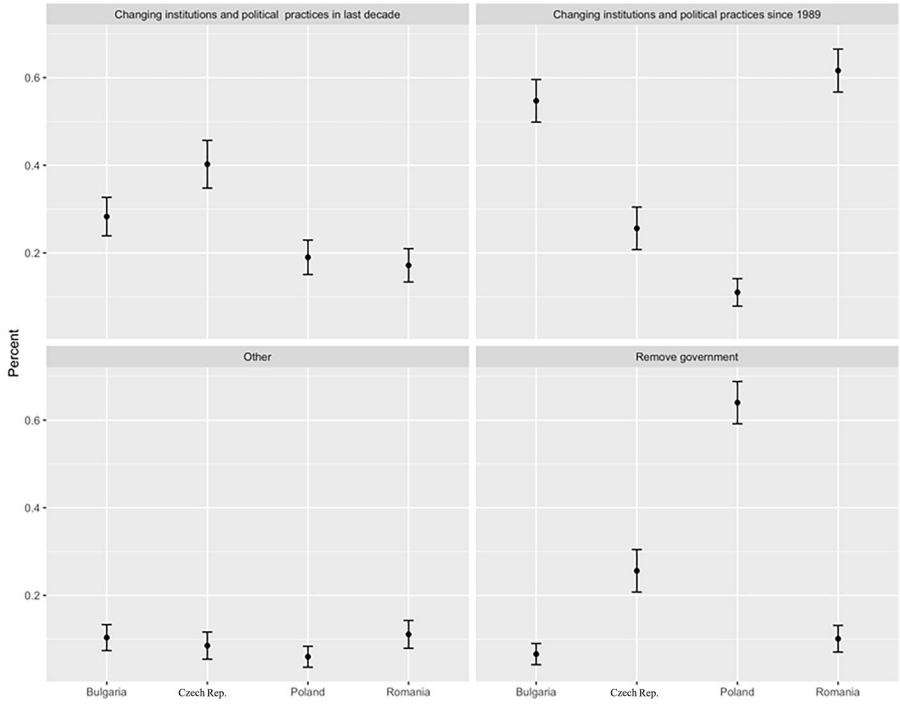
Analysis

The first finding of our survey is that even though a variety of motivations for protesting existed, the most important was the shared need to counter democratic erosion. Protestors in all four states actively defended democracy and democratic institutions. They were most often interested in systemic issues, rather than just specific policy issues. Their answers to the open-ended questions provide further insight into this shared motivation: protestors stressed that they felt a civic duty to protest. Bulgarian protestors often mentioned that they felt a “responsibility to protest” as well as “a need for the voice of [their] generation to be heard.” Romanian respondents felt their protest participation was a “civic duty” and “[their] personal duty.” Czech protestors also shared that they felt that it was their “civic duty” to act and that they had a responsibility to stand up for their beliefs. Similarly, Polish respondents frequently underscored that they protested out of “a sense of duty” and to “fulfill civic moral values.” One Polish protestor claimed to have protested out of a sense of duty and because of having “a mirror in the bathroom, so [I had] to take action.” In general, protestors saw protest participation as part of their role as active citizens in a democracy.

Beyond their commitment to democracy and democratic institutions, however, the focus of protestors in different countries varied. Our goal was to understand to what extent different forms of democratic erosion are linked to different motivations for protesting, spurred on by different issues that protestors have identified as problematic.

Our first hypothesis was that in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, protestors would prioritize reversing the policies of anti-democratic parties and removing these parties from power. Protestors would believe that changing specific governments as quickly as possible would redress the problems they experience because some degree of democratic consolidation had already occurred, and therefore protestors may believe that changing the government will begin to address many of their concerns. By contrast, our second hypothesis was that in countries experiencing democratic stagnation, protestors would prioritize reforming institutions that have functioned poorly over time rather than ousting a particular government. In these countries, long-standing issues with democratic institutions, such as the

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



Note: The points represent the mean percent. The error bars show the standard errors.

judiciary or anti-corruption agencies, do not lend themselves to being solved quickly by changing the government.

Our descriptive findings, presented in Figure 2, reveal some support for our first two hypotheses. Our survey asked protestors to indicate what they believed was the main solution to the problems that they see today. Respondents selected one answer.

In cases of democratic backsliding, protestors appear focused on shorter-term solutions. In Poland, most protestors believe that removing the government is the main solution to the problems that they have identified. The second most popular response by Polish protestors is changing the institutions and political practices that have developed in the *last decade*. About two thirds of this decade corresponds to the PiS government’s rule. As such, Polish protestors seem to point to changing the practices of the PiS government after 2015. In the Czech Republic, where the populist government was ousted about a month before we launched our survey, protestors

also appeared mainly to believe that the solution to their problems lay in changing the political institutions and practices that developed over the last decade. We thus find support for our first hypothesis.

By contrast, in Bulgaria and Romania, where democratic stagnation is a long-standing feature of politics, protestors overwhelmingly viewed changing political institutions and practices that have existed since 1989–1990 as the most important area to address. This finding suggests that protestors in our cases of democratic stagnation believe that the problems they face have deep roots and require more than a change of government to address them. We thus find support for our second hypothesis.

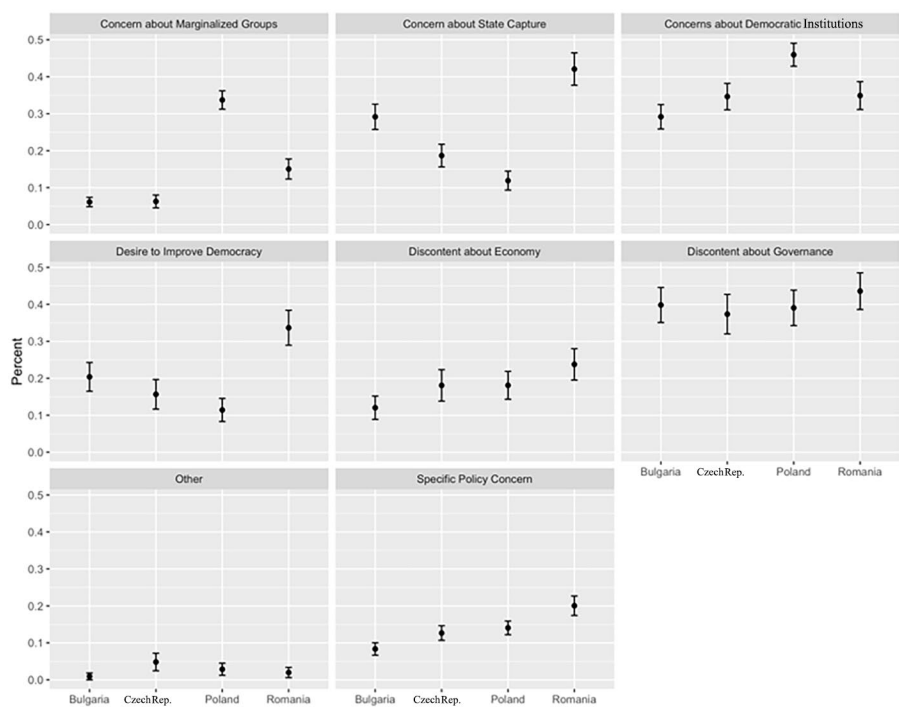
These findings are reinforced by the answers to an open-ended question asking protestors to identify which politicians are responsible for the erosion of democratic institutions. While protestors in Bulgaria identified specific politicians from *Grazhdani za evropeisko razvitie na Bŭlgariia* (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, GERB), the political party in government for most of the last decade, they also pointed to leaders of other political parties from nearly all parts of the political spectrum, ranging from small coalition member parties such as the *Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi* (Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS) to well-known oligarchs. By contrast, Polish protestors almost exclusively named PiS politicians—though some 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 protestors who protest in response to democratic stagnation are focused on rather long-standing practices and institutions, whereas protestors who protest in response to democratic backsliding are more focused on recent political changes and opposing specific political parties and leaders seen as harmful to liberal democracy.

We also find support for our first two hypotheses when we examine the main reason that protestors joined protests, presented in Figure 3. In all four countries, concerns about democratic institutions drive protests. However, important differences exist. In the cases of democratic backsliding, Czech and Polish protestors combine concerns about democratic institutions with discontent about governance. In cases of democratic stagnation, Bulgarian and Romanian respondents combine concerns about institutions, discontent with governance, and concerns about state capture. Concerns about democratic governance are generally shared. However, focus on state capture is more pronounced in Romania and Bulgaria, closely followed by the Czech Republic. In Poland, the erosion of rights also motivated protestors to protest, as seen from the high percent of protestors concerned about marginalized groups, which likely stems from the attacks on LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus [others]) and abortion rights.⁶³

We also moved beyond asking protestors what drove them to begin protesting for liberal democracy: we asked them what impact they thought the protests had on their

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



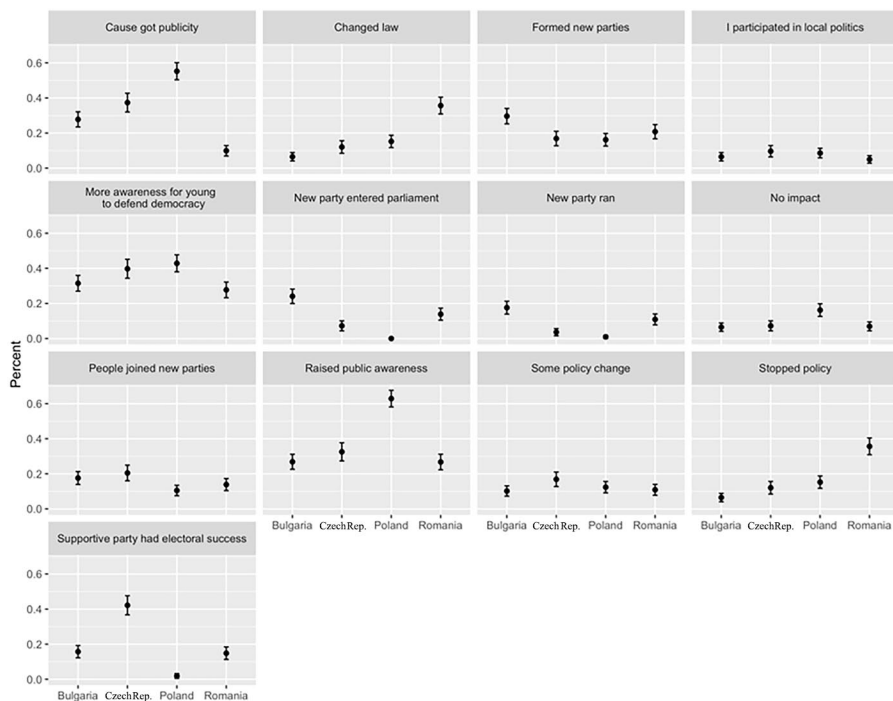
Note: The points represent the mean percent. The error bars show the standard errors.

country. Questions explored whether protestors believe that the protests have had an impact by changing the political system and the government or government policies, or by raising awareness among citizens of the problems of democracy. In this way, we sought to differentiate between the motivations of protestors and the effect these protestors believe their protest participation had.

Our third hypothesis was that in cases of democratic backsliding, protestors would emphasize success in the form of raising public awareness. In these contexts, protestors have a harder time influencing the ruling parties because they quickly construct majoritarian coalitions and sideline protestors. However, in cases of democratic stagnation, we hypothesized that protestors would express the view that their protests achieved success by creating new political actors to replace compromised elites and compete in future elections (Hypothesis 4).

As shown in Figure 4, we do not find support for our third or fourth hypotheses. Most protestors in all four countries highlight the impact of protests in raising public

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



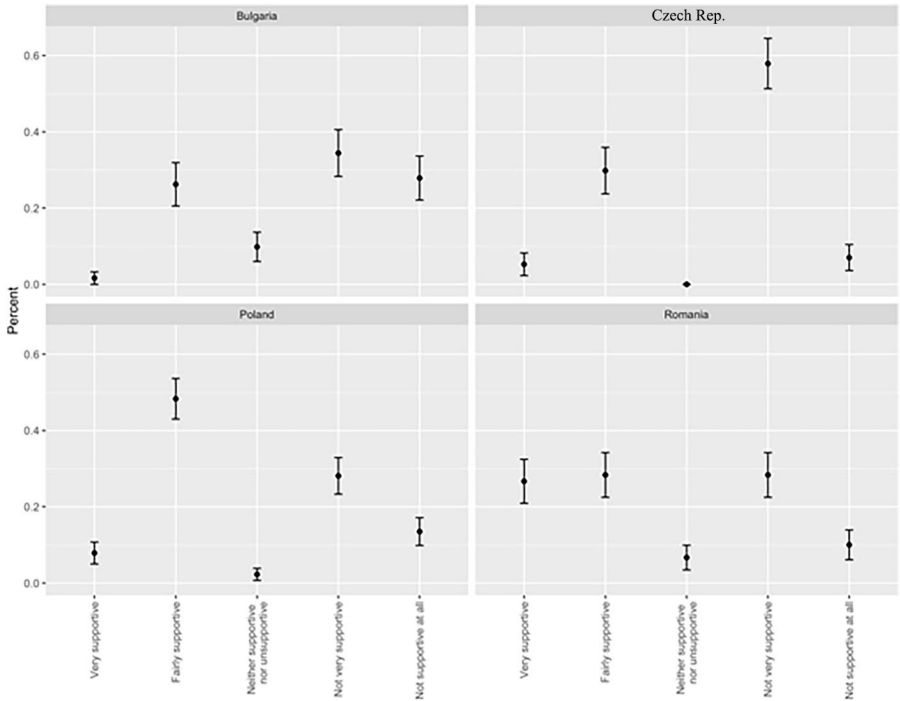
Note: The points represent the mean percent. The error bars show the standard errors.

awareness on issues connected to the protests, irrespective of the type of democratic erosion. In all four countries, protestors also emphasized that their protest had an impact by raising awareness of the need to defend liberal democracy among young people. A minority of protestors in all countries responded that the formation of a new party or political movement was an important outcome of mobilization. In the Czech Republic, however, over 40 percent of respondents did indicate that a positive outcome of the protests was that parties supportive of the protests had electoral success. The parliamentary elections ousting ANO took place two to five months before we fielded our survey. It thus appears that different types of democratic erosion do not necessarily alter how protestors define or perceive the success of their protests. This finding can be explained in the context of the shared motivation of protestors that is, above all, a concern about democratic institutions.

The lack of support for our third and fourth hypotheses is further elucidated by the answers to an open-ended question asking them to describe the most important effects of their protest participation. Many respondents from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic highlighted the change of government as an important outcome of their protests. The formation of new “protest” movements in Bulgaria takes center stage in the responses of Bulgarian protestors when asked about the impact of protests. While this is in line with our fourth hypothesis, the same finding does not emerge in Romania. Instead, Romanian protestors typically highlighted the ability to stop a policy or change a law as an important outcome of their protests. Furthermore, in the Czech Republic, we would not have anticipated such an emphasis on political party alliances emerging in a case of democratic backsliding, per our third hypothesis. In Poland, where the party attacking democracy remained in power at the time of the survey, protestors were much more pessimistic. Indeed, when asked to tell us the top three consequences of recent protests, most Polish respondents wrote that nothing had changed, that nothing was accomplished, or that the situation had worsened since they began protesting.

In all countries, regardless of the type of democratic erosion, protestors do emphasize that their protests have had an impact by raising public awareness about important political and governance issues, by raising awareness among the young, and by garnering publicity for their cause. Protestors see their ability to generate attention and awareness as an essential aspect of their protest participation. This finding is mirrored in the responses to open-ended questions on what protesting means for respondents. In all countries, protestors stress civic duty and making others aware of political issues and democratic problems. In the Czech Republic, several respondents mentioned the importance of fostering public engagement and showing others the importance of participating in civic life. In Romania, some protestors argued that the key consequence of protesting was their ability to influence politics “from the streets” and to develop “grassroots democracy.” Despite this sentiment, most Romanian protestors 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 protests. Similarly, in Poland, protestors 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.” In Bulgaria, protestors suggest that protests have led to an “awakening of the people, very slowly but clearly taking place” and that “there has been a change in the way people think.” One Bulgarian protestor suggests that protests have meant no less than “a civic awakening to preserve democracy.” Contrary to our third and fourth hypotheses, changing public awareness appears as the primary success that protestors think that their protests achieved in their country in cases of democratic backsliding and stagnation alike.

Figure 5.
How supportive was the European Union of protests?

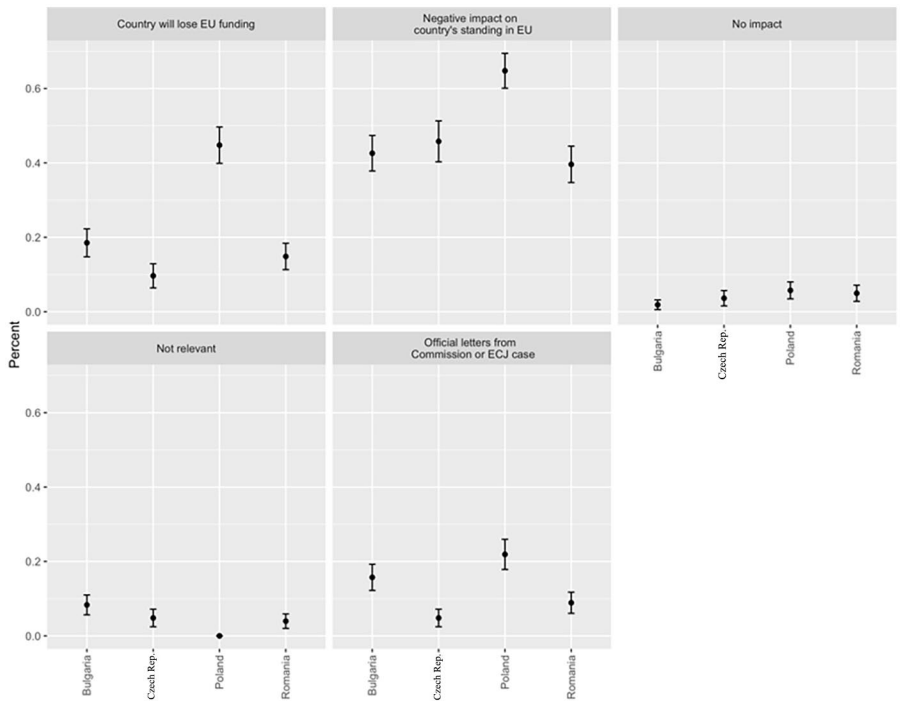


Note: The points represent the mean percent. The error bars show the standard errors.

Our survey also helps capture how respondents perceived the role of the EU in relation to the type of democratic erosion they face. Our fifth hypothesis was that in countries experiencing democratic erosion, protestors do not consider the EU supportive of their protests.

We find that the EU is largely viewed as indifferent to the protests by pro-democracy protestors. As evident in Figure 5, the only country in which the EU was viewed as fairly or very supportive of protests was Poland. Respondents in the Czech Republic found the EU to be neither supportive nor not supportive. For their part, respondents in Bulgaria and Romania were mixed in their assessment of the EU, but a great number of them chose to answer that the EU has been neither supportive nor not supportive. In sum, protestors in these four countries do not appear to find the EU to be a key actor supporting their pro-democratic protests at the present time, aligning with our fifth hypothesis.

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



Note: The points represent the mean percent. The error bars show the standard errors.

However, as shown in Figure 6, protestors saw the issues for which they protested as relevant for the EU, and liable to affect their countries' standing in the EU. In all countries, protestors stated that if the issue driving them to the streets were not resolved, it would negatively impact their country's standing within the EU. Many protestors worried about their country facing a case at the Court of Justice of the EU, receiving official letters from the European Commission, or losing EU funding due to governance concerns. Thus, despite a general feeling among the protestors that the EU has behaved indifferently toward their protests, they still felt that these issues were consequential for the EU and, if left unchecked, would eventually have repercussions for their country's standing within 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 who are intent on amplifying their power. CEE is no exception. While the quality of democracy and the content of political contestation vary substantially, the region includes the two EU countries where democratic backsliding has been particularly severe—Hungary and Poland—along with several additional countries that have experienced democratic erosion of different kinds.

Over the last decade, relatively large protests in defense of liberal democracy have taken place across the region. Our study breaks new ground by building a novel data set that explores 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 protesting and how they assess the effects of their protests. We chose four countries where large-scale protests have taken place, but which 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 motivations, goals, and perceived effects on the political environment when compared to those protesting in countries where instead long-standing democratic stagnation had occurred.

Our findings show that protestors who are protesting in response to different kinds of democratic erosion envision solutions on different time scales. In accordance with our first two hypotheses, protestors in countries where incumbents have pursued rapid democratic backsliding prioritize changing the government or changing practices that have taken root over the last decade. For their part, protestors living through long-standing democratic stagnation emphasize changing practices and institutions that have emerged since the transition to democracy. Furthermore, we note that in all countries, protestors are motivated by concern about democratic institutions and governance.

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. However, democratic stagnation includes rent-seeking practices spanning much of the political class, eroding liberal democracy and its institutions. There have also been indications of increasing attacks by incumbents on institutions responsible for checks and balances—above all the judiciary—but also on competition and media regulators. Most of our respondents from Bulgaria and Romania did not indicate that they believed that a change of government would fix the problems bringing them to the streets. Rather, they see the problems as rooted in the political practices and institutions that have developed since 1989–1990. By contrast, most Polish and about one-third of Czech protestors felt

that a change of government provided the possibility of a meaningful, if partial, remedy. Thus, changing the government or new policies emerging during the backsliders' period of governance appears important for protestors experiencing democratic backsliding, whereas structural changes to unconsolidated democratic institutions are prioritized for protestors experiencing democratic stagnation, as expected by our first two hypotheses.

Furthermore, protestors in countries experiencing both types of democratic erosion relay the belief that influencing public awareness on issues related to liberal democracy was central to their protests' impact. Respondents in all four countries report that a key consequence of the protests was increasing political awareness and spreading information about political issues and democracy in general. This finding contradicts our third and fourth hypotheses, which expected protestors to emphasize different effects of their protests based on the type of democratic erosion they were stepping onto the street to oppose.

Finally, in accordance with our fifth hypothesis, in countries experiencing both types of democratic erosion, the EU is not perceived as a strong supporter of pro-democratic protests. Outside of Poland, there is a remarkable absence of perceived support from the EU for protests. At least for protestors, the EU is not seen as the key pro-democracy actor that it was before accession.

In this article, we have presented a first broad study of protest motivations and their perceived impacts across four states in CEE. Along with other studies, it helps counter the long-standing argument in the comparative politics literature that civil society and political participation in CEE are weak.⁶⁴ We have explored what motivates protestors, what they perceive to be the impact of protest, and how differences in the type of democratic erosion help shape what remedies protestors expect would put the polity on a better track. Based on a sample of protestors that differs by country, the results presented here should be viewed as a starting point for future studies that explore the dynamics of protest in response to democratic erosion of different kinds. Future research could investigate more systematically the distinction between protests focusing on rights versus protests focusing on governance. What we can already conclude, however, is that protestors view mobilization as a strategy to defend liberal democracy when politicians erode it in different ways.

Appendix A

Table A1
Protests, Timing, and Grievances

Year	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 Tribunal and independent media	Government corruption
2016			Constitutional Tribunal, against abortion restrictions, defense of free media	
2017			Protests against judicial reforms	Government corruption
2018		Anti-government	Anti-abortion law, chain of lights	
2019		Judicial independence, demonstration for the resignation of Andrej Babiš	Pride marches, National Council of the Judiciary	Government corruption
2020	Appointment of prosecutor general, rule of law and judiciary, corruption	In defense of democratic institutions	National Council of the Judiciary and anti-abortion law changes	

Figure A1.
Protestors' age distribution.

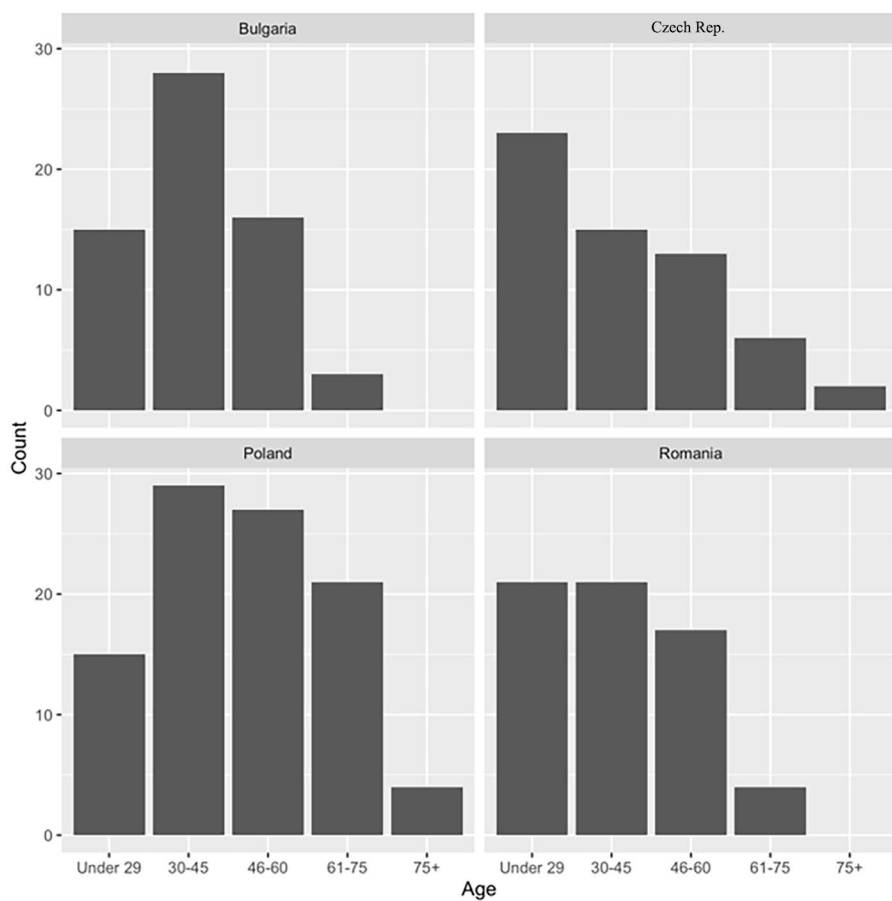


Figure A2.
Protestors' gender distribution.

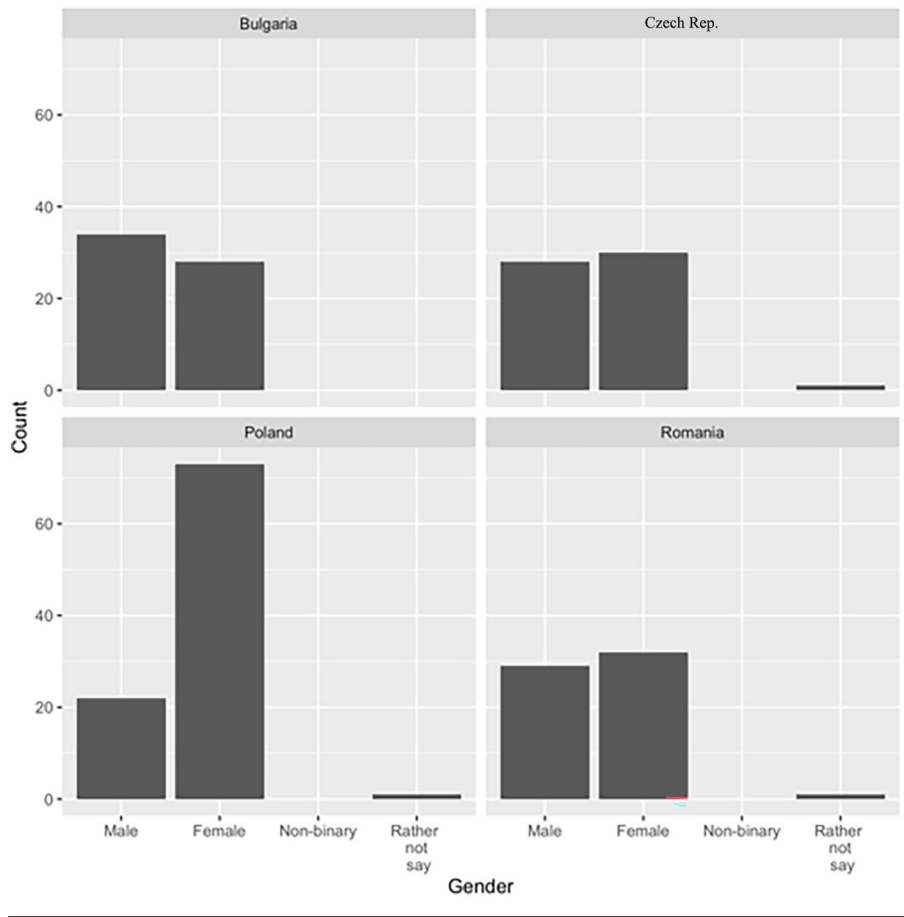


Figure A3.
Protestors' type of residence.

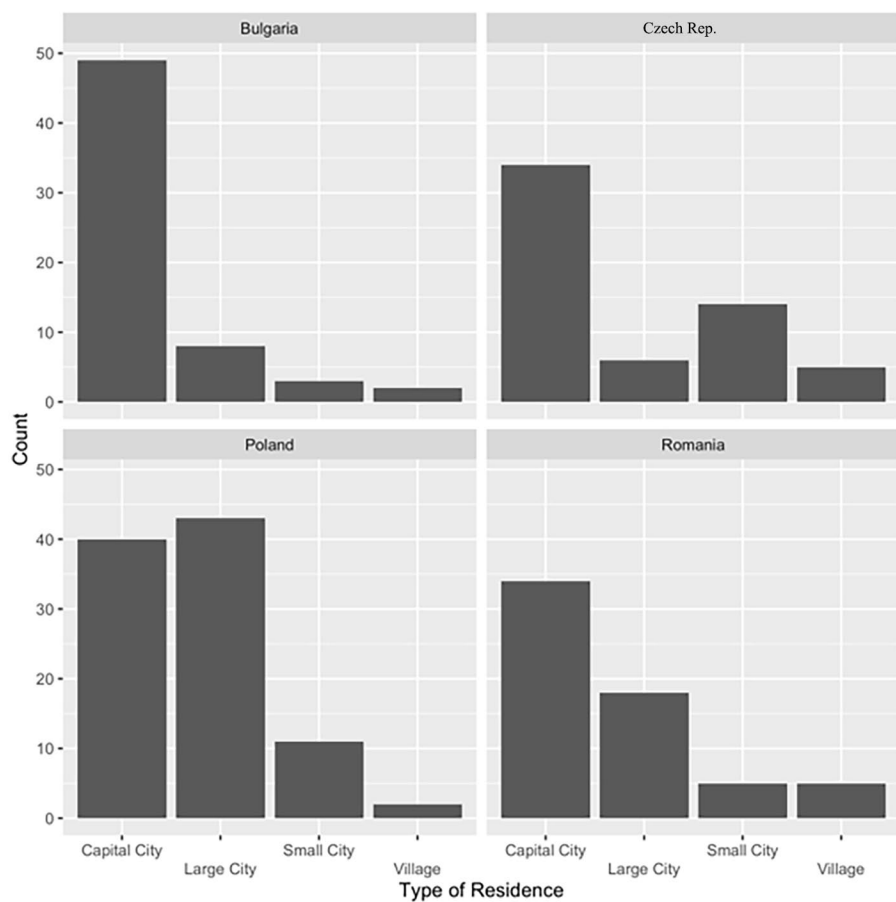


Figure A4.
Protestors' educational attainment.

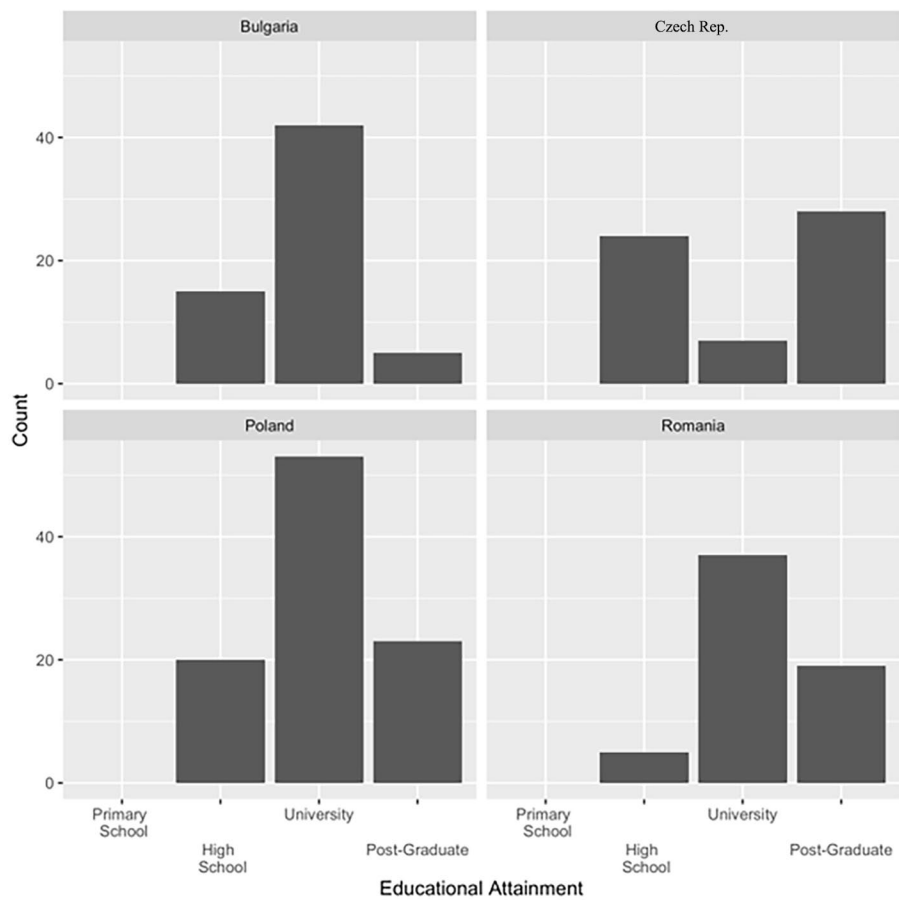
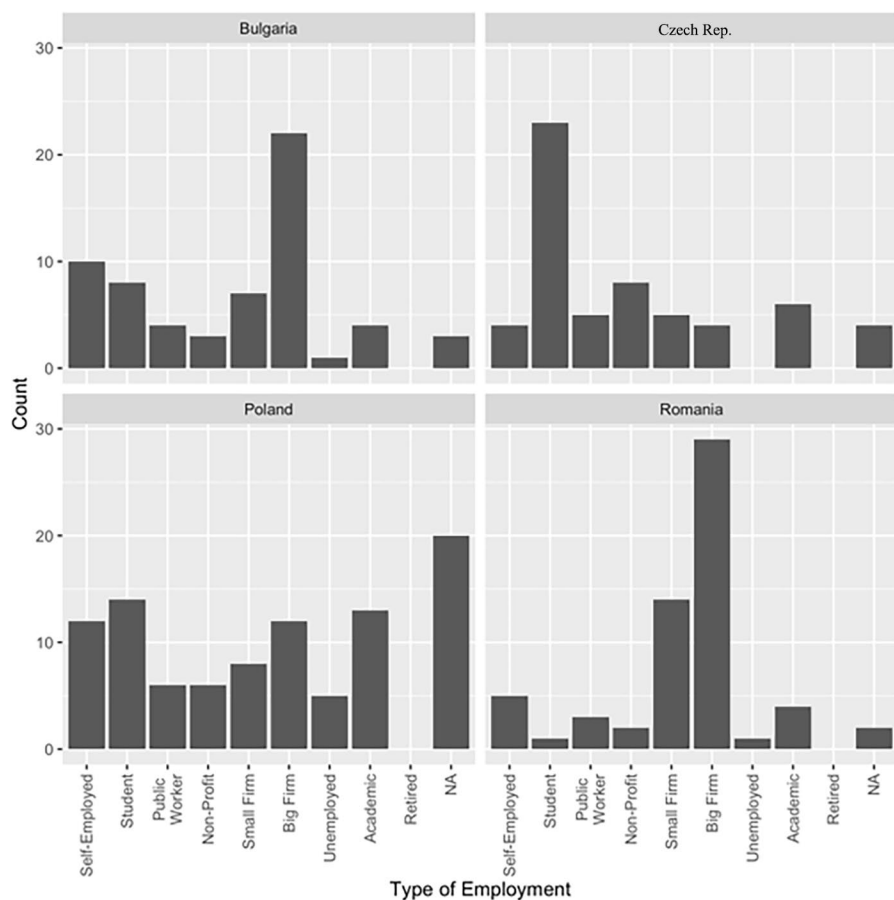


Figure A5.
Protestors' type of employment.



Appendix B

Survey Questions in English

Dear participant,

Thank you for considering participation in this survey. The purpose of the survey is to understand better what drives political mobilization to protest in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. The survey has been developed by scholars from different countries and universities: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States and Leiden University in the Netherlands. We are interested in learning more about motivation behind protests and the impact protesting has had on individuals and politics. We would very much appreciate your assistance!

The questions you will see pertain to protests in one country only, over a longer period of time. We hope you will complete the whole survey, which should take twenty to twenty-five minutes of your time.

The survey is online and anonymous. We do collect some personal data related to age, education, and employment to understand better who protest participants are. To protect your personal information, all data we collect will be de-identified and saved in a password-protected folder. Your information will not be shared with others. The data will be used for academic analyses and papers, which may also be presented to media and think tanks. We are not asking for an email address, to better protect your anonymity, but if you would like to receive a short summary of our findings, please send an email to (email redacted).

You can stop your participation at any time. You can address any questions or comments about the survey to the researchers involved, specifically per country:

Bulgaria: (email redacted).

Czech Republic: (email redacted)

Poland: (email redacted)

Romania: (email redacted)

Have you participated in a protest in the last ten years?

Yes

No

If you have not participated in protests so far, what problems would make you protest?

The government is not effectively responding to an economic crisis

The government is not effectively responding to a transnational crisis that is affecting the economy

The government and politicians in power are destroying democratic institutions

The government is preparing a law that restricts my freedom and rights

The government is preparing a law that restricts the freedom and rights of specific minority groups

The government is preparing a law that changes policy in a way with which I strongly disagree

What is your age?

Less than 29

30–45

46–60

61–75

More than 75

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

Where do you currently live?

Country of survey (e.g., Bulgaria)

In another EU member state

In a state outside of the EU

Do you live in:

The capital city

A big city

A small town

A village

What is the highest level of education you have?

Primary school

Secondary school

University

Postgraduate degree

Are you:

Self-employed

University student

State or public employee
Working for a non-profit or civil society organization
Working for a small private business
Working for a big company
Unemployed
Working for an academic institution
Pensioner

Do you think that the parties in government today (or parties in the last regular government for Bulgaria and the Czech Republic) have damaged democracy with their actions?

Yes
No

Are there any specific politicians who have been in power and who have damaged democracy or are damaging democracy with their actions? If yes, would you like to indicate who?

Yes: _____
No

Do you think that the politicians and parties in government today (last regular government for Bulgaria and Czech Republic) have damaged democratic institutions and principles?

Yes
No

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

Removing the current government from power
Changing the institutions and political practices that have developed in this country since 1989–1990
Changing the formal and informal political institutions and political practices that have developed in the last decade
Other

Do you believe that the issue that brought you into the streets is rooted in:

Long-standing problems of domestic governance
Recently arisen problems of domestic governance
A global or transnational problem or challenge

Did you participate in the protests in the following occasions?

Insert protest for each country—See table in Table A1 for a country list

All of the above

Think back to when you decided to participate in one or more protests. What was your main purpose?

Put pressure on the government to change a recent law or appointment

Put pressure on the government to resign

Raise awareness about poor governance in my country

Inspire other citizens to participate and take a stand

Demonstrate solidarity with groups disadvantaged by the government

Other: _____

Please identify the main reasons that you joined one or more protests (you can select a maximum of five options):

Discontent about specific policy measure planned or taken by the government

Proposed law or regulation that negatively affects my life or the wellbeing of my family

Proposed law that negatively affects my business

Discontent about failure of the government to implement a specific policy that is already a law

Discontent about the way the country is governed

The rule of law and independence of the judiciary are in danger

The survival of independent, fact-based media is in danger

Some courts are being captured by the government and their freedom to judge independently is limited

Our democracy is in danger

Our democracy needs improvement

Our society should support those who live on very little or people with disabilities

Because I think society should support minorities who are disadvantaged

Our society should recognize and accept those who are different

The rights of those who are different should be better respected

We are losing rights, which we had when we established democracy

Our government does not run the economy well

There is too much corruption

There is too much privileged access to resources by those connected to the government

Other: _____

In your opinion, from what age groups were the protestors in the protests that you participated in?

15–29

30–45

46–60

61–75

Older than 75

Fairly evenly divided

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Resolving the issue that motivated me to protest would generate broader, systematic change.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

What is your impression of the impact of the protests?

Please select all the responses that are applicable.

They stopped the policy measure against which we protested.

They resulted in changes in the law against which we protested.

They resulted in an adoption of a law that we requested.

They resulted in a set of actions of the government, parliament, or judiciary to fix the issues we raised.

They resulted in the formation of new political movements and parties.

They resulted in some people joining new political parties.

They resulted in better government policy.

They resulted in the electoral success of a party supporting the protests.

They resulted in a new party that ran for parliament.

They resulted in a new party that participated in elections and entered parliament.

They resulted in more people being aware of what we are struggling for.

They resulted in more publicity for our cause.

They resulted in more awareness among young people that we should defend democracy.

They made me participate more in politics at the local level.

They made me join a political party.

They made me think of standing in an election.

They resulted in improvements in governance in a specific sector.

They resulted in including some of our representatives in talks with government.

They resulted in some changes in policy.

They had no impact.

For those protests in which you did not take part, why did you not participate?

I do not think that democracy needs defending in my country.

I do not think that the judiciary needs defending in my country.

There were no protests near me.

I was busy at work and at home.

I did not think that my participation in protests would make a difference.

I was concerned that participating in protests would negatively affect my job.

I was concerned that participating in protests would negatively affect my social standing.

I did not agree with the protests' goals.

In your opinion, how important are the issues that made you protest for the European Union (EU)?

Very important

Fairly important

Neither important nor unimportant

Not very important

Not important at all

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

Very supportive

Fairly supportive

Neither supportive nor unsupportive

Not very supportive

Not supportive at all

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?

It is not relevant for the way my country functions inside the EU

No impact

It will negatively impact my country's standing in the EU

There will be official letters from the Commission and/or a case in front of the European Court of Justice

My country will lose funding from the EU

Do you believe the EU shares the values that the protests in which you took part are defending?

Yes

No

Thinking back over the last five years, what do you see as the three most important consequences of protest?

(open)

Thinking back over the last five years, do you think the actions of the government have effectively addressed the issues of the protestors? Please explain.

(open)

What does your protest participation mean to you?

(open)

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