

Contesting Post-Socialism

Transformation of the Czech Economic Protest between 1989 and 2021

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Abstract

The study applies the Polanyian perspective on post-socialist economic protest using the theory and methods of social movements studies and relational sociology. It formulates three research problems. First, stressing complex, chaotic and reactive mobilizations reflecting the processes of commodification and de-commodification, it aims to identify the key collective actors and overall structure of this resistance. Second, focusing on the meso-level, it inspects the role of weak, strong and cross-sectoral interactions among collective actors for promoting and sustaining political activism and addresses the problem of “weakness” or “patience” of post-socialist societies towards the economic and political transformation after the fall of socialist regimes. Third, following the concept of embeddedness, it aims to inspect the role of the changing economic and political context in economic protest cooperation and its dynamics.

To accomplish these goals, the study reviews existing research on collective economic protest both worldwide and in post-socialist context, introduces existing theories of economic collective action and applies the concept of collective action field to analyze both structural and dynamical aspects of the economic contention.

The study builds on the protest event data capturing Czech economic protests between November 1989 and December 2021 (N=2157) and applies the tools of formal social network analysis.

The study shows, expectedly, that formally organized actors (trade unions, political parties, and professional associations) are the most active in protest cooperation and, unexpectedly, that informally organized ones represent a major type of actors in the field, which contrasts with the focus of many contentious politics or industrial relations studies. Second, it reveals the overall and continuing fragmentation of cooperation in the field of economic protest, which provides an alternative explanation of the weakness of Czech civil society. Third, it demonstrates that instead of linear evolution or long-term cycles in economic protest, the short-term changes in economic threats and political opportunities play the most visible role in shaping the relational aspects of economic protest.