

## **Social movement or subculture? Alterglobalists in Central and Eastern Europe**

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### **Abstract**

*Most of the research on the alterglobalist, also known as the global justice, movement has focused on Western Europe and North America, with occasional research on other parts of the world. There has been little research done on this movement in the postsocialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring the key events of the movement as well as the genealogy of grassroots social activism in the region. It offers insight into a movement that developed in a region that, due to its history, has been rather hostile to leftist ideologies and groups. This paper examines the development of the alterglobalist movement in the region and traces its inspirations and path dependencies. It also poses questions about the nature of the movement and ways to analyse it – whether as a politicized social movement or a subculture and lifestyle choice. The close connections of Central and Eastern European grassroots social movements to subcultures and counterculture might suggest a new and fresh perspective for studying social movements.*

### **Introduction**

It seems that the best times of the alterglobalist<sup>1</sup> movement are over. At the peak of its popularity, it caught the attention of scholars, journalists and public opinion, and became a powerful mobilizing frame for many activists. Starting with the 'Battle for Seattle' that accompanied the ministerial round of negotiations of the World Trade Organization in November 1999, the alterglobalist movement has spread and received media attention all over the world. Central and Eastern Europe was not an exception, as street riots accompanied the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meeting in Prague in September 2000. However, when compared with its counterparts in the US or in Western Europe (which is what the activists usually compare themselves to), the movement in Central and Eastern Europe shows several characteristic features.

This paper aims at presenting the characteristic features of the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe and suggests possible explanations for its distinctive features. The paper shows that historical legacies and the genealogy of social movements in the region - dating back to the mid-1980s –

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term alterglobalism because it is most commonly used by the activists in Central and Eastern Europe where terms such as Global Justice Movement for instance, have not caught on and the term anti-globalist was quickly abandoned at the beginning of the 21st century.

are the key factors shaping social movements as well as their reception today. Although it developed simultaneously with its counterparts in other parts of the world, the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe is different. When compared to other regions, it has more in common with subcultures and counterculture than politics. In the CEE countries, social movements developed from youth subcultures and are still influenced by them. I will argue that this is strongly related to the genealogy of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe and the transition that these countries went through after 1989.

Most of the empirical data for this article were collected during fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation and other research projects that followed. The ethnographic fieldwork, based on in-depth interviews and participant observation, was conducted between 2007 and 2012 in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Around 40 key activists were interviewed (mostly in English and Polish; in one case in Hungary the interview was translated by a colleague of mine) and outcomes of the interviews were cross-referenced with publications coming from the movement as well as with observations during meetings and protest events. I relied on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) and on what Luis Fernandez (2008) calls ‘drive-by research’, in which the emphasis is on the meaning of the research for the researcher, the researched subjects, and other academics. In general, the aim is to understand the activists (in the Weberian sense of *Verstehen*) rather than simply describe them. I have spent several months in Prague and Budapest and frequented many activist events in Poland. I also closely followed the preparations to the Warsaw countersummit in 2004 and the Climate Change Conference in Poznań in 2008.

The vast majority of activists that I interviewed were in their late twenties or early thirties and already had a couple of years of activist experience: they took part in international protest events, went abroad in connection to their activism, edited journals, managed websites etc. People a few years older than them were already leaving the movement as they started families or got permanent jobs. Nearly all of the activists were students or had a university degree, mostly from social sciences or studies connected to environmental protection. Special attention was given to the practices of the activists on the organizational level. The activists that I interviewed defined themselves more through the ideologies and experiences they shared, rather than through membership in organizations. This may be because many of the coalitions were made ad hoc and for a particular protest event. Some of the activists were moving from one group to another, depending on which of the groups best met their ideological needs, and the majority of the groups did not have any kind of formal membership.

I interviewed people from the anti-radar campaign in the Czech Republic that belonged to several groups (such as the Humanist Movement and *Socialistická Solidarita*), people from *Nesehnutí*, squatters from *Milada*, antifascists, anarchists from the Czechoslovak Anarchist Federation (CSAF), people editing the *A-Kontra* magazine and women from the anarcho-feminist collective and anarchists that were not affiliated with any group but played important roles in preparations for the counter-summit in Prague in 2000 and the Global Street

Party in 1998. In Poland, I spoke to activists from the Anarchist Federation, Inicjatywa Pracownicza trade Union, Pracownicza Demokracja, the Young Socialists association, Active Society (Społeczeństwo Aktywne) and the Lepszy Świat association. In Hungary, I talked to people from the Zöld Fiatalok and Védegylet groups and to activists that were previously involved in the Centrum squatting group. I also interviewed people who avoided any group affiliation and later became involved in the LMP political party. The activists belonged to all kinds of groups: from loose structures (mostly the anarchists), through collectives, associations, foundations, NGOs to political parties. Coalitions were usually formed to deal with a specific campaign (such as the anti-radar / anti-missile shield campaigns) or protests (countersummits). Constant deliberation took place within coalitions, resulting in numerous splits and divisions and a very fluid composition of these coalitions.

I tried to find my respondents by consulting publications (mostly online), using my own contacts with Polish activists, and attending protest events and activist gatherings such as the European Social Forum (I went to Malmo and Istanbul). In the Czech Republic and Hungary, I also benefited from the help of two gatekeepers and relied on the snowballing technique, trying to maintain gender balance and sustain ideological diversity that would reflect the movements' composition.

The countries were chosen according to their similar paths of development after the regime change in 1989: peaceful transition to democracy, integration with NATO and the EU, and consequent building of parliamentary democracies. I am fully aware, however, that they are not homogeneous. Each of the countries has its characteristics when it comes to the 1989 transitions, the times that followed (such as emerging ethnic cleavages, different trajectories of electoral choices), and their socialist pasts. One of the turning points in Poland was the emergence of the Solidarność movement in 1980 and the introduction of martial law in 1981; Hungarian communists have promoted 'goulash communism'; and in Czechoslovakia after 1968, the times of 'normalization' resulted in rigid treatment of any sort of opposition. This results in different genealogies of social movements and a different composition of the alterglobalist movement in the region.

In this paper, I will try to characterize the alterglobalist movement and highlight the features that characterize it. I will present the history of the movement in Central and Eastern Europe by outlining the major protest events in the region that made the movement visible. Later I will highlight the features of the movement in Central and Eastern Europe and focus on transnational diffusion and local reception of the movement's ideas. In the next part of the paper, I will discuss the movement's connections to subcultures and counterculture and how these might affect our understanding and analysis of the alterglobalist wave of mobilizations. After this theoretical discussion I will try to show that some of the reasons for the shape of contemporary radical grassroots activism in CEE—including its genealogy and general hostility towards the left—lie in the past of the region. In the last section I will summarize and conclude my findings.

## **Alterglobalism in Central and Eastern Europe**

In this section, I would like to address the emergence of the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe by focusing on major protest events in which the alterglobalist coalitions were most visible. I will later point out the most characteristic features of the movement in this region and describe the role of diffusion of tactics and ideals in shaping the movement.

Jeffrey Juris and Geoffrey Pleyers wrote about the new class of social activists that they call alter-activists: “Despite their different backgrounds and political contexts, each of the young activists expressed a profound critique not only of neoliberal capitalism, but also of the hierarchical organising practices of the traditional left. A litany of common themes emerged: horizontal organisation, collaborative networking, grass-roots counterpower, alliance building, and creative direct action” (Juris and Pleyers 2009:3).

Activists in Central and Eastern Europe picked up many of these issues and debates in the mid-1990s. Because of the complicated history of the region and the general rejection of leftist groups and claims, these issues were taken up mostly by anarchist groups, who emphasised the aspects that were most attractive to them: horizontal modes of organization, anti-capitalism combined with anti-authoritarianism and hesitations towards mainstream politics. In this part of the paper, I will present the major protest events and campaigns of the movement and briefly sketch its characteristic features: low levels of (political) mobilization and a different composition when compared to other parts of the world.

### **Major protest events**

Protest events are one of the few times when the alterglobalist movement, understood as a network of groups and individuals (della Porta and Diani 1999: 14-15), becomes visible to the public. Generally, the best way to describe a social movement is also through its most important protest events. In between the peaks of activities, in the so-called ‘submerged phase’ (Melucci 1989), movement actions are much less spectacular, much less oriented towards the public (and sometimes even exclusive). Even networking is much less intensive during that stage. Protest events are often the turning points for activists in terms of recruitment, mobilization and the choice of tactics.

The alterglobalist movement became known to publics throughout the world after the November 1999 riots (the ‘Battle for Seattle’), when thousands of protesters blocked the ministerial round of negotiations of the World Trade Organization on a Multilateral Agreement on Investments. However, another mobilization—the Global Street Party—had already taken place in 1998. With the biggest demonstration and riots taking place in London City (Notes From Nowhere 2003: 184-95) and catching the attention of mass media, many people missed a similar event that took place in Prague. The Global Street Party in Prague was the first anti-capitalist protest in the Czech Republic. It displayed

most of the characteristics of the future protests: horizontal organization, response to a global Call for Action, multiplicity of claims and groups participating in the event. In the organizing committee were groups supporting legalization of marijuana, anarchists, leftists, and antifascists. One of the organizers of this protest, with a long history of activism in anarchist-inspired groups and an organizer of many other events, told me:

I don't know if you saw the leaflets and the poster for the party... There were all sorts of issues and all sorts of problems there. There was marijuana [...], and there was tekno<sup>2</sup>, so there were many things. And it was exciting and we went there and the demonstration changed into this radical confrontation with the police, but it was a very exhausting day. It started in the afternoon in the square with the party and then we marched which was very exhausting. We marched for several kilometres and there were fights on the way.

The whole protest resembled a street carnival with dancing, music and a subversion of social order (such as taking over the streets), which are key characteristics of alterglobalist protests (Notes From Nowhere 2003: 94). The idea of street parties came from the Reclaim the Streets movement in the UK. Originally oriented against plans to build motorways, it later developed into a broader, capitalist-critical perspective (Notes From Nowhere 2003). The ideas came to the Czech Republic in two ways. One was that some of the activists went abroad (mostly to the UK), usually for university exchanges and scholarships (like the informant quoted), saw what was happening on British streets, and wanted to do the same in their home country. The other way coincides with the development of ICTs (Internet-based Communication Technologies). Some of the activists (including those who came back from abroad) wanted to be in touch with initiatives in other countries and signed up for mailing lists, listservs (now completely abandoned) and later social media.<sup>3</sup> In that way they could be up-to-date with discussions and take inspiration from foreign examples about how to use new techniques and tactics. Mediated diffusion (Giugni 2002) seemed to be the most popular trajectory for ideas of the movement to travel to Central and Eastern Europe with some of the activists acting as brokers (especially the ones that went abroad in the late 1990s and early 2000s) who shared their contacts and information about tactics and possible information sources. These were usually the people with higher social capital (i.e. language skills).

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<sup>2</sup> Tekno is a sub-genre of techno music with harder beats. It was very popular in the Czech Republic in the mid-1990s. A music festival called Czech Tekk was not only a music event but also a political one. It was also one of the spaces where activists and potential participants would meet.

<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, for a long time social media were used mostly for private purposes and activist websites and services relied on independent hosting. Only recently one can observe a new trend of proliferating fanpages of activist groups on Facebook.

The peak of activities of the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe was the meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Prague in September 2000. It was an international protest with many people from abroad (not only from Central and Eastern Europe, but also from the US, for example) and some of the activists came months in advance to teach their Czech friends new tactics and strategies. The demonstrations that lasted for a few days turned into riots and – in the end – to a closure of the summit. For many activists it was a turning point in their lives. One activist from Budapest, shared this – rather typical – story:

In 2000 in Prague, huge demonstrations against the World Bank and the IMF took place, and this was the biggest thing in my activist life. That was very important to me because everything that I have previously read about the activities of the system in the books, was visible there during the demonstration. It was shocking for us, for our group from post-communist countries to see there how many more such leftist groups exist and operate in the West. [our group] did not want to be classified politically, we were neither conservatives nor the left, we did not belong to any option ideologically. And anarchism as an ideology worked for us [...]. In that our mode of operation was also anarchist, we haven't had a head or a leader of this group. It was more horizontal, and this was rare in those days.

Other events of an alterglobalist nature in the region included the counter-summit in Warsaw at the end of April 2004 that was organized to accompany the European Economic Forum, and the demonstration during the United Nations Climate Change conference in Poznań in December 2008 (called COP14). There were also protests during the biggest mobilization in the world: on February 15th 2003 millions of people went out to the streets to protest against the coming war in Iraq. Over time the activists in the region began to adapt the repertoires of action developed by the alterglobalist movement to their home turfs and local initiatives. The presence of activist groups at different meetings of the WTO, the IMF, and so forth, was nicknamed 'summit hopping' or 'protest tourism' because many people combined it with their holidays, and the protest was only one of the items on their agenda. Moreover, as Richard Day summed it up, "Participation in the summits is expensive and is beyond the range of marginalized groups" (Day 2009: 139). For activists from CEE the financial barrier was often impossible to overcome and the idea of going abroad for mass protests was abandoned (as they told me) soon after the Heiligendam counter-summit of 2007. Mass gatherings under alterglobalist slogans allowed the activists to meet, exchange ideas and finally get to know each other. One of the Polish activists (active in feminist, anarchist, artistic and many other initiatives over the years) told me, when we spoke about the importance of demonstrations in Prague for the whole movement:

This was the first big thing that the Polish alterglobalists organised. There were

anarchists, few reds, some collectives; they [...] even organized some coaches or something. This was the first such common trip; it also allowed people to get to know each other. Because if a movement is to get organized somehow, one must see that there are, let's say, 120 people that there are anarchists, leftists, whatever. It seems kind of obvious, but as it forms common ranks, it seems more real. So that I think was a very important moment. It was so because, of course, various groups already operated, but it was the first time to see that 'oh, there are so many of us!'

The slow decline of the alterglobalist movement has its roots in its organizational form. Most of the networks and collaborations take place for big protest events and campaigns and in between these peaks of activities there are almost no stable organizational structures. The only space through which they exchange ideas and recruit new people is the 'scene' - an "array of bars, pubs, squatted social centres" (Leach 2008). In Central and Eastern Europe, the scene is very much influenced by subcultures and therefore attracts a certain kind of people. And although there is an array of bars and pubs, squatted social centres are definitely missing from the picture: there are none in Hungary, few in the Czech Republic and less than a dozen in Poland. Many of the bars are also too commercialized for the activists' taste or simply too expensive. Alternative music is also not present at clubs to the same extent as it is in Western countries. Lack of stable organizational structures and dependence on inter-personal (instead of inter-organizational) networks - in particular in the case of international networks - is often perceived (together with the lack of a clear positive program) as the biggest challenge for the alterglobalist movement (Krzemiński 2006). For some of the activists, foreign roots of the movements and the tendency to use non-local patterns of protest and mobilization were also a problem. One activist with a long history of belonging to anarchist and feminist groups told me:

I have the impression that the movement in the region takes over the patterns of the movement from the West. For example, it includes Food Not Bombs and this is an idea imported from there, even squatting is also imported from abroad. And this is the weakness of the movement in that region, because it draws the traffic patterns from the West.

Whereas the lack of structures and a positive program is a general trend within the alterglobalist movement, the weak movement infrastructure – the scene – is a CEE phenomenon.

### **Characteristics of the alterglobalists in Central and Eastern Europe**

One of the main characteristic features of the movement in Central and Eastern Europe is its small scale. When compared to mobilizations taking place in other

parts of the world, those in the region are visibly smaller (with the exception of the S26 protests in Prague). The WA29 protest against the European Economic Forum in Warsaw gathered around 10,000 people, The COP14 in Poznan in 2008 attracted no more than 1500 people for the final demonstration (in comparison to the next UN summit on climate change, the COP15, in Copenhagen one year later, when the final demonstration attracted about 30 000 people). Demonstrations on February 15th, 2003 against the war in Iraq were attended by no more than a few thousand people (in Warsaw and Prague, in Budapest there were less than a thousand on the Heroes' Square, in other major cities there were a few hundred participants). This social apathy is often the topic of conversations and discussions among the activists. For example when Polish Indignados organized a 'Day of Anger' in Warsaw, around 100 people came to the protest. At the same time in Poznan there was a concert of a hardcore group Apatia (pun not intended) known for their political involvement that attracted around 700 people from the 'scene'.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned, compared to Western Europe, the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe is much more dominated by anarchist groups than any other type of ideology. The horizontal structures are as important for these groups as being committed to their ideals. Hence politicians are perceived as enemies rather than potential partners, mainly because their actions are not seen as driven by any moral guidelines (as in the case of activists) but their own interests. In Czech Republic in 2008 activists were campaigning against plans to build a radar base for the US anti-missile shield project. One of the core activists of that campaign told me that it was only when some of them decided to go on a hunger strike - in order to get media and public attention – that the politicians of the oppositional party offered their support. The offer was refused for two reasons: the campaign would not benefit much from such an alliance and it was the opposition party that started the negotiations about the missile-shield project. He told me:

Just a minute ago, I received an SMS from the ex PM, Paroubek, of the social democratic party and he wants to come here tomorrow, so he'll just come [checking mobile and replying] I guess he wants to gain some capital on this, because he knows that 2/3rds of the Czech people are against this, and he's now in the opposition so he has to say what the people want. Or he doesn't have to but he wants to.

When in 2008 a coalition of activists was organizing protests against climate change that would accompany the COP14 meeting, internal conflicts emerged, initiated mostly by anarchists. They provoked public opinion by saying that

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<sup>4</sup> This situation sparked a heated discussion about the role and the position of alternative music and social movements in Poland which can be followed here:  
[http://cia.media.pl/apatia\\_zamiast\\_gniewu\\_czyli\\_powrot\\_do\\_dyskusji\\_polityka\\_a\\_subkultura](http://cia.media.pl/apatia_zamiast_gniewu_czyli_powrot_do_dyskusji_polityka_a_subkultura)  
a [accessed 16.01.2012]



‘anything could happen’ and that one could not eliminate the possibility that some violent demonstrators may also arrive to take part in the protest. When their actions were met with negative responses by other organizers, they launched several statements accusing the other groups (the Greens, Young Socialists and Young Social-democrats) of being nothing more than groups of career-makers and suggested that they were organizing the demonstration only to gain political capital for themselves. This is also why in most of the demonstrations the ‘no logo’ rule is implemented: no party, group flags or banners are allowed. Only those that represent the whole coalition (the anti-war, anti-missile shield coalitions etc.) are permitted. In most of the cases, however, this rule is not respected, which results in arguments and internal divisions. This was the main line of conflict in the INPEG – Initiative Against Economic Globalization - coalition that organized the Prague 2000 protests. The arguments resulted in excluding some groups from the coalition and led to a major split in the coalition. As one of the members of the INPEG coalition told me:

Afterwards [after the counter-summit] we were completely tired and exhausted, and we split up and went to our homes. And then after – I don’t remember the exact dates – there was another INPEG meeting. And actually there was one huge conflict between anarchists and this socialist solidarity because there was an agreement within the INPEG that all the work we did and all propaganda was signed as the INPEG coalition

### **Transnational diffusion of ideas and their local reception**

Transnational diffusion resulted in the spreading of alterglobalist ideals in the CEE region. In this part, I will try to analyse how the alterglobalist movement adopted protest and organizational tactics from its western counterparts and what were the results of this process.

Even if the wave of mobilizations under alterglobalist slogans is over, its impact on activists in Central and Eastern Europe is unquestioned. Although there are now almost no groups that would label themselves as alterglobalists, many of the tactics that activists use are still influenced by the previous alterglobalist protests. Creative ways of protesting were adopted unevenly throughout the region due to different protest cultures and opportunity structures. Some of the tactics were either forbidden or their legal consequences were so serious that activists did not want to use them. This was the case with squats and occupations, which are not perceived and used uniformly throughout the CEE countries. The alterglobalist movement has not developed homogeneously because although its protest repertoire was inspired by transnational ideas, it was translated and adapted to local contexts where some ideas fitted better than others. For instance large puppets – similar to those seen in Seattle and Genoa – are popular in the Czech Republic but are not seen in Poland or Hungary.

Although it was often other movements that had developed some of the tactics used by alterglobalists, it was the latter who diffused them. One such tactic was the use of barrels filled with concrete. They have a tube inserted into them where an activist could attach him/herself to a metal rod mounted inside. Such a human barricade could not be removed without destroying the barrel, which takes time. British radical environmentalists from Earth First used this tactic during blockades of highway construction sites. In the East, however, they proved less useful since the policing cultures of law enforcement agencies were different. In one case in Belarus the police simply decided to ram through such barricade resulting in broken (or even ripped off) arms among activists.<sup>5</sup> In Central and Eastern Europe police actions were less drastic but the activists claim that they have difficult access to legal procedures such as filing complaints about police actions.

Many of these tactics survived the decline of the alterglobalist movement. One of them is the splitting of a demonstration into a few marches in the way it was done in Prague, which completely surprised the police. Furthermore, clustering people into affinity groups improved activists' security (as potential agents provocateurs were easier to spot and in case of arrest of some of the activists, others knew immediately who was missing). Some of the tactics were adopted by other kinds of movements such as the emerging 'autonomist nationalists' – right wing, anti-capitalist groups opposing neoliberalism and promoting ethnic exclusiveness and nationalism. These tactics could also be observed in the winter of 2012 when a wave of protests against the ACTA treaty (against production and selling of counterfeited goods and internet piracy) spread all over Europe. Many of the protests were organized in a similar fashion to the alterglobalist events but the coalitions behind them were even more diverse.

One of the main novelties of the alterglobalist movement – besides the tactics mentioned above – was its acephalous and horizontal way of organization. What Jeffrey Juris derives from works of Deleuze and Guattari and calls 'rhizomatic networks' (Juris 2008: 157) combined with the growing importance of new communication technologies, resulted in a completely different kind of a social movement. Lacking structures, hierarchies and leaders (to some extent, as informal leadership is an imminent part of every social group), the alterglobalist movement was much more flexible when it came to self-organization, and much more difficult to infiltrate by the police and political parties seeking alliances that were perceived as threats to the movement. It was also much more inclusive compared to previous social movements. In 1999 in Seattle, dozens of different groups joined the coalition organizing the protests. The same happened in 2000 in Prague. A few years later the coalition against the plans to build a US anti-missile shield base in the Czech Republic was composed of approximately 60 groups (for more see Navratil 2010). For David Graeber (2009: 11) such organization modes are at the core of the groups' ideologies; in

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in a samizdat publication of memoirs of Grzegorz Kuśnierz who described the struggles during the campaign to save a forest on St. Anna mountain in Poland, downloaded from <http://www.anna-akcja.eko.org.pl/> [accessed 17.01.2012]

fact, they are their ideologies. This is because more often than in Western Europe and the Americas, in Central and Eastern Europe anarchists are the dominant group in coalitions and during protests (della Porta 2005).

A different situation may be observed in Hungary where green groups seem to dominate and some of the activists joined the leftist LMP (Politics can be Different) party that entered the parliament. In Hungary, LMP continued to promote the ideals of alterglobalism. At the same time, the anarchist group that was connected to this message disappeared. Usually the anarchist groups were only a small part of the alterglobalist movement, which was instead dominated by green NGOs that stood closer to a liberal ideology of civil society and its function than any anarchist or leftist ideals. Anarchists not only reject power structures of the state and society, but are also try to avoid them within their own groups. That is why deliberative practices and the consensus rule are the sine qua non requirement for most coalitions in the region.

At the meso level, the consensus rule is played out in long-lasting discussions and e-mail exchanges, which at times could be quite detrimental to the group's efficiency. Once I followed an exchange of more than 120 e-mails sent by around 20 people that wanted to go to another city for a demonstration. They were discussing means of transportation and time of departure. In other, more conventionally organized groups, this would be announced by one of the leaders and the problem would be solved. But the point is that everybody had the right to say something, could participate in the whole decision-making process and felt empowered and a part of the group. When compared to discussions taking place in real meetings, more women took part in the e-mail exchanges than spoke during meetings. Although nearly all of the groups that I came across supported feminist ideas and gender equality, a rather harsh and aggressive way of holding face-to-face discussions resulted in many women remaining silent. Similar practices can be found at the macro-level when one analyses the functioning of coalitions and looks at interactions between different groups. Endless debates, e-mail exchanges, statements issued or controversies over slogans or banners are very common.

### **Politicized subculture or a social movement?**

The main challenge with comparative analysis of social movements is to find a way to explain the differences and similarities across cases. In this section, I propose a different perspective for analysing the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe by referring to its genealogy. Many of the groups that were central to the alterglobalist coalitions and campaigns in the region had strong connections to and had evolved from subcultures. Here I would like to evaluate alterglobalism in the CEE region from a subcultural studies perspective.

One of the key issues for subcultures is the preservation of the purity of subcultural groups and their members, since any sign of diversion from the imagined model of the subculture member is seen as treason. Such practices

reinforce the groups and their members' sense of belonging, which might be surprising, considering how much individualism is stressed in their statements. Subcultures are more oriented towards their internal dynamics (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003) and focus on building the groups' strength and unity. At the same time, groups that are more politically oriented are focused on the outcomes of their actions (Tilly 2004, Tilly and Tarrow 2006), on policy change and the like. Actions of the latter group concentrate on possible recipients of their claims and decision-makers and activists are more flexible in negotiating their positions. When one advocates a certain policy change (for example defends a local playground or some political dissidents in some country), the way in which one looks is far less important for potential allies. Also claims are more easily modified if demands are to be met. In the case of subcultures, there is an (idealized) image of the group and its participants. If one does not live up to it, they are excluded from (or not allowed into) a particular group (Marcus 1990). In other words, if one wants to become a punk but still feels more comfortable in suit and a tie, he or she will not be recognized as a punk by other punks and will not be allowed to enter their group.

The practices rooted in ideology influence activists' everyday lives in many various areas: diet (the majority of the activists I met were vegetarian or vegan), clothing style, avoidance of political participation (i.e. they refuse to vote in general elections), anti-consumerism, and use of public transportation or bicycles. When one academic working on the alterglobalist movement in Poland tried to arrange an interview with activists at McDonald's, the activists showed up only to ask him whether it was supposed to be a kind of social experiment or provocation and demanded that he would change the venue or else the interview would not take place. The researcher noted that he 'was surprised that the social resistance to the mainstream of today's (popular) culture is expressed in the most unexpected ways' (Pomiecinski 2010: 31). This shows that being an activist influences not only one's political choices but also (or primarily) one's everyday life. One is always a full-time anarchist or a leftist ('alterglobalist' almost never came up as a way of self-identification, but the activists fully agreed to alterglobalist principles and took part in alterglobalist events). As one of the activists I interviewed in the Czech Republic said:

“[When one can define oneself as a 'true' activist] it also depends on your lifestyle and I don't think I live according to anarchist principles. It's connected to being active in everyday life, not only anti-capitalist but also anti-authoritarian and I work for an NGO and I support it through [my participation in] this NGO system... I'm a leader of this organization and that doesn't fit my concept of anarchism”.

This is usually the case for radical social activists. Janusz Waluszko - an almost legendary Polish anarchist - wrote in his memoirs about the Movement for an

Alternative Society [Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego, RSA<sup>6</sup>] which he founded: “social activism is our way of living, not a social role after finishing of which one forgets about everything like an office worker coming back home with his salary” (Waluszko 2009: 31). For him, there is no distinction between the private sphere and political activism. For social activists their actions are a result of a calling. It stems from activists' moral obligations that manifest themselves in their actions. The differences between a subculture and politically motivated groups are presented in table 1:

Subculture	Political mobilization
Most of the actions directed TOWARDS the group	Actions focused on policy and/or political change
Restricted coalition forming on the grounds of groups' “purity”	Broad coalition forming with various actors
Stronger feeling of belonging to a group	Multiple belongings possible
Ideological orthodoxy, less likely to compromise	More likely to compromise / moderate the claims
Bigger effect on the lifestyle and everyday life practices	Stronger distinction between the public (political) and the private

*Table 1: Comparison of the approaches and practices of subcultures and politically oriented social movements<sup>7</sup>*

Based on the above, I suggest that the alterglobalist movement in the CEE region can be analysed in terms of sub-cultures. I recognise that they also have political interests, but claim that they are striving for political and social change in a subcultural manner. Greg Martin wrote: “Focusing on the relationship of social movements to the state and polity thus tend to ignore the hidden cultural dimension of social movements, which is significant because, among other things, it is the culture of movements – submerged in pre-existing networks of everyday life – that makes mobilization possible. In this way, the network of groups that constitutes a social movement serves as a platform for mobilization, since the movement network shares a culture and collective identity” (Martin 2013). The groups that are analysed in this paper put a lot of emphasis on prefigurative politics. Such zones can be observed during protests (Graeber 2009), in squatted social centres and other movement's spaces. This suggests that the movement's identity (or identities) is constructed in a different way compared to the classical theory of social movements. As Martin continues: “For

<sup>6</sup> RSA was the first group in Poland after 1945 that called itself anarchist and it is believed to be the founding group for the modern anarchist movement in Poland.

<sup>7</sup> In particular groups that belong to the third sector, political parties etc.

Melucci (1989, 1996), contemporary movements mount symbolic challenges to dominant homogenizing cultural codes by communicating to the rest of society the message of difference. They do that by living out alternative lifestyles. In this sense, the “medium is the message.” In order to communicate a clear and coherent message, movements must generate a collective identity” (Martin 2013).

When looking at the alterglobalist movement, especially in CEE, which is a rather hostile environment for grassroots social activism and leftist ideas in general, analyzing the movement’s identity building through the perspective of subcultural studies can yield interesting insights. Core activists seem to put pressure on the movement to maintain its ‘purity’, which is expressed in hesitation towards alliances and cooperation with other actors. The stress on prefigurative politics as well as close connections (mainly genealogical) to counterculture, suggest that the subcultural perspective is worth considering.

Close connections of alterglobalists to subcultures and counterculture go beyond the background of the activists; they are their paths of recruitment into social movement activism. Most of the time the activists come from punk rock and hardcore music scenes, which were the main channels of spreading new political ideas (mostly anarchism and radical environmentalism) among Central and Eastern European societies in the 1980s (Urbański 2009).

## **Historical legacies**

Genealogies of social movements play an important role in their formation. In the CEE countries groups that formed alterglobalist coalitions were successors of the movements that developed in the mid-1980s, in particular the anarchists and the environmentalists. In the following section, I would like to argue that the history of this development has significant consequences today and that the development of the social and political environment in which the groups are active (which include the history of anti-communist struggles as well as the post-1989 transformation) plays an equally important role.

Grassroots social activism using confrontational repertoires of action developed in CEE in the mid-1980s in opposition to the communist authorities as well as the pro-democratic opposition (Piotrowski 2010). The past plays an important role in the functioning of today’s social movements in the CEE countries. Despite more than two decades of functioning democracies, the legacies of the communist past are still strongly influencing social mobilizations and movements in Central and Eastern Europe. This gives the movement some distinctive features as compared to its Western counterparts. Social movements are often excluded from mainstream political discourse and debates for being not reasonable enough. This is reinforced by the legacy of the communist past, when pro-democratic struggles were taken seriously. In the late 1980s, the newly emerging social movements began to use carnival-like methods of protest and ways of mobilizing new supporters (Kenney 2002). They were the domain of youth and student movements. Revolution was to be achieved in a fun way,

with laughter. This image, however, did not fit the self-image of dissidents as intellectuals, people leading struggles for national independence and as defenders of the working class. The latter were very wary of grassroots initiatives that used carnival methods of protest, preferred not to take part in them and excluded members of these groups when it came to negotiations with the authorities. Social movements and young people participating in them were regarded as not serious enough for politics. Their demand for joy and carnival was perceived as a need 'to let off steam'. The founders of the Situationist-inspired Polish movement Orange Alternative [Pomarańczowa Alternatywa], for example, were thrown out from a group that organized a students' strike at the university of Wrocław because they were not 'serious enough'. According to such an imagery that is still present in Central and Eastern Europe, politics is a serious thing, for serious (often older) people, acting in serious ways.

Because of the rejection of socialist parties during the Autumn of Nations in 1989 (DuVall and Ackermann 2001), leftist political ideologies are associated with the former regime. Thus, 'cultural anticommunism' began to be the dominating frame. Anti-communism is still one of the major frames used not only by politicians but also football hooligans and other groups. It not only targets real communists, but also feminists, ecologists and members of other progressive groups that fall into the category of 'leftist ideologies'. When asked about the support for old left parties in the region, an activist from the Czech Republic told me:

Most of the people are still the same as they were in 1980. They just replaced the leaders and, you know, the party is the same. They have some new faces, for the last 5 years, just a few people, and they're basically based on the support of old people.

As the same activist said later in the interview:

Leftism has been considered non-democratic, authoritarian etc. Concepts like solidarity, equality or even social justice have been publicly denounced as being communist utopias and [...] competition, extreme elitism and free market are the basis of present ideology. Saying "I'm an anticapitalist" is translated in a very similar way to "I'm a terrorist", or "I'm an old-fashioned communist" etc. Capitalism is considered as the natural system of relations of production and parliamentary democracy as the best-ever political system with no alternative.

When analysing the situation of social movements in the CEE countries, one has to look at the genealogy of its political systems and social movements. In CEE, 1968 brought about a new wave of critical Marxism with humanist tendencies, which became the dominant trend among intellectuals. By the end of the 1970s, leftist ideals began to be replaced by liberalism, a trend that was accelerated in the mid-1980s when signs of weakness of the eastern bloc and Western support

for the dissidents became more visible. The “radical” groups that emerged in the 1980s can be seen as a critique of the earlier elites, reinforced by some kind of subcultural basis. Punk music served as one foundation for it; environmentalism (often connected to Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies) as another. A similar process took place in the West where New Social Movements (peace, environmental protection etc.) have moved away from Marxist thought and towards liberal models of civil society. Within the late Cold War context, the ideologies of human rights, civil society and liberalism (both political and economic) were strongly supported by the West in the CEE countries. In that setting, subcultural groups of the 1980s were a manifestation of an anti-hierarchical critique of both repressive socialist states and dissident elite discourses.

During the 1980s social movements were replaced by pro-democratic dissidents whose main agenda was to overthrow communism, leaving many other issues (such as compulsory military service) aside. Moreover, many of the activists from the 1980s went to new positions in state administrations or the newly established NGO sector, or they started their own businesses (Ekiert and Foa 2011). For alterglobalists this grant-based system was an attempt to de-radicalize political contention and the rebellious potential of society. More radical social movements were either isolated or lost members who went to work in NGOs and state administration. This transition created a generational gap that was not filled until the mid 1990s by activists who referred more to experiences of social movements from other parts of the world. When they were talking about the history of struggles (against capitalism or for a clean environment), they referred to examples from Western Europe or the US more often than to local ones. One informant – a sociologist, activist, and employee of an environmental NGO from Wrocław (Poland) – drew my attention to this fact:

This is interesting, [Piotr] Żuk did research on new social movements in Poland; and it was published in 2001; and he asked activists about the traditions to which they refer. The Western tradition was more important to them than the tradition of the 1980s in Poland, about which they knew very little.

They not only adopted new tactics and repertoires of contention, but also organized their actions around ideas that came from abroad. This was the case with the squatting movement that played an important role for the alterglobalist movement providing autonomous spaces for their actions.

According to some authors (Ost 2005), abandoning leftist positions by dissidents began earlier - in mid-1980s - when they turned towards more conservative and neoliberal positions, especially in Poland and Hungary. Forming a leftist group is therefore a problem. One of the leaders of the group Pracownicza Demokracja (Workers Democracy), a leftist group from Poland, told me the story how he wanted to establish a left-leaning group and how it failed:



It cannot work in Poland - running around with a red flag and talking about communism. Perhaps in Italy it has completely different connotations but in Poland it isn't associated with freedom but reminds people of a history of oppression.

This legacy has had a huge impact on the formation of the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, left-leaning groups are the majority in the movement. Such is the case with the European Social Forum, for instance (della Porta 2005). In the CEE region, the movement has a different structure. The dominating activists within it are anarchists who tend to use more radical tactics and have different organizational ideas, and are much more anti-hierarchical compared to the traditional left. Even if they do not label themselves as anarchists, there might be 'anarchist strains' observed in the majority of alterglobalist groups in the region. They are also rather hesitant towards being called 'leftists', partially because of their involvement in the anti-communist opposition in the 1980s. In Poland one can observe stencils sprayed on walls by anarchists with the slogan 'Not left, nor right – freedom' ('Ani lewica, ani prawica – wolność'). Some of them told me that they are trying to break from the burden of the leftist past. The strong anti-communist sentiment within the alterglobalist movement is also reflected in the rejection of potential cooperation with leftist groups and/or parties. One of the Czech anarchists who was involved in the preparation of the 2000 protests in Prague, told me:

there were some stupid Turkish communists who looked like Ku Klux Klan, really [laughs]. They wore red flags. They made hoods out of them, [they had] huge red flags with hammers and sickles and it was a problem. The new left, it was coming out from the new left, the old left that is discredited in this country. It was a problem.

The alterglobalist movement had to look for another type of language and a way to rationalize their claims and positions – a way that would be beyond the left versus right distinction. However, failing to find a discourse that would be easily understandable by the public, the whole movement has not managed to mobilize on a massive scale and sustain itself. One of the spokespersons of the Czech anti-radar campaign told me that this could be seen in media coverage:

There is a big difference between the Czech media and the foreign media. The Czech media tends to be pro-radar so they tend to portray every opponent of the radar to be either extremist or communist, or some other kind of a crazy person.

Anarchism and radical environmentalism - the two most important currents on the social movement scene - were re-introduced in Eastern Europe through subcultures - mostly through punk rock music (Urbański 2009, Piotrowski

2010). It was a result of the dissident groups not meeting the demands of the young people, especially their demand to solve the problems of compulsory military service and environmental pollution. It coincided with a growing popularity of punk rock. Nowhere was the punk slogan 'No future' closer to reality than in Central and Eastern Europe (as noted by Ramet 1995). Similarly, the anti-fascist movement in Eastern Europe grew out mostly of the hardcore and punk rock music scene (Kubarczyk 2009, Koubek 2010).

Radical environmentalism (radical in a way that it includes direct action, such as occupations, blockades etc., up to physical confrontations with opponents) is also closely linked to subcultures and there are big overlaps between radical environmentalists and alterglobalists in CEE, particularly in Hungary.

Environmental groups seem to be particularly important in Hungary (where the Danube Circle was one of the first big grassroots mobilizations after 1956), but the Chernobyl catastrophe (and many other local disasters) sparked a number of protests throughout the entire region. These were not only protests against environmental destruction but also against information policies of the authorities that kept such information secret. By demanding access to information, these groups were turning out to be anti-systemic, deepening the divide between society and authorities.

The environmental protection movement shows a lot of common features with the alterglobalist movement as far as its development and diffusion of tactics is concerned. It emerged in Eastern Europe together with the growing grassroots social activism. The catastrophe in Chernobyl might be the breaking point in the development of this history. It was occasionally connected with Buddhist ideas, a growing popularity of vegetarianism and other lifestyle choices.

## **Conclusions**

This paper described the distinctive features of the alterglobalist movement in Central and Eastern Europe, and tried to suggest some explanations for the shape that it has taken in this region. Even though the CEE countries are far from homogenous, they still share a few commonalities that have influenced the development of social movements. The movement emerged simultaneously with its counterparts in other regions and CEE was not at the periphery of events (in particular Prague in 2000). I claim that the movement in Central and Eastern Europe is different than its Western counterparts in the following respects.

Firstly, the movement is much smaller than in other parts of the world. In the region that according to some observers was one of the laboratories of neoliberalism (Klein 2007) and where economic transformation has left large parts of the population with the presumption that they had lost because of the transition, social discontent was not channelled through alterglobalist slogans. The region was also a field for rapidly emerging post-politics. Its anti-ideological discourse and emphasis on governance instead of politics might have weakened the highly ideologised slogans of the alterglobalist activists. In the region where

economic globalization and neoliberalism were seen at work, radical anti-capitalist slogans failed to become an effective frame to be used by the alterglobalist movement.

Secondly, the movement is composed of fewer currents than in other parts of the world, with anarchists and radical environmentalists being the strongest ones. This has the following consequences: the alterglobalist movement is more radical (in terms of repertoire of contention, tactics and rhetoric) and much more committed to its practices –in particular to deliberative democracy. For these activists, consensus decision-making is more than just a way to organize themselves. It is an important part of their ideology and as such it cannot be compromised, which limits the number of potential allies. The movement also seems to be exclusive and less prone to form alliances with political parties and other actors (NGOs, foundations, associations, trade unions) than in Western Europe or the Americas.

Thirdly, the movement is closer to subcultures and counterculture than in other parts of the world. It stems from the history and genealogy of social movements in the region, in particular the emergence of many grassroots groups in the mid 1980s that were not only opposed to the authorities, but also critical of the pro-democratic opposition. One of the main channels for disseminating their ideals included youth subcultures such as punk rock music. It is the milieu out of which today's social movements emerged. The subcultural origins of social activists go beyond their looks and musical tastes; they created a blueprint for the model grassroots activist. When comparing the practices of social activists from CEE with subcultures one can see that they share the feeling of orthodoxy when it comes to their self-image. Any 'impure' behaviour (like taking part in popular elections or, for some, eating meat) excludes the individual from the group and the movement. In my opinion, this is the reason why so many alterglobalists avoid cooperation and coalitions with political parties, even in situations where social movements could benefit from that. The generational gap also caused fewer structures supporting social movements to develop. This is particularly the case with the so-called scene, which is an in-between space where activists meet with supporters, potential newcomers and recipients of their claims (Leach 2008). It is the scene that preserves social movements between the peaks of its activities. This is where members of different groups can meet and exchange information or plan something together. In the CEE countries the movement's infrastructure is much less developed than in other parts of the world.

Finally, the last characteristic can be summarized in relation to the postsocialist heritage of the region, that is: deep distrust towards the state but also to any form of organization and self-positioning of activists as leftist. The left – despite more than two decades of fully functioning democracy – is still associated with the former regime and the communist past. This also makes it problematic to make leftist arguments, in particular those that attack and criticize the capitalist system.

Many of the activists that I spoke to referred to the concept of world-systems and applied Wallerstein's theory not only to economic and mainstream politics, but also to power relations concerning activists from abroad. Many of my interviewees were highly educated young people. They had often participated in academic exchange programs. This 'outsider (expat) perspective' allowed them to assess the cooperation with foreign groups and activists more critically, as in the case of an activist I encountered in Budapest. Born in Germany, with family ties to the US, and having been active for nearly a decade in Budapest and Prague in environmental and bicycle initiatives, he told me:

I noticed it, and it bothered me, if you have people from the West coming here. They have this automatic assumption that because they're doing whatever they've been doing for years, and because the East has just been released from communism, then anything that person from the West that comes here will say will be like 'wow' - grabbed like some hot food, in the sense that the idea comes from the morally superior side – from the West.

One of my informants, who was living and working in Budapest, and of Romanian descent, told me the following story:

Basically, they [activists from the West] were here to organize the Balkan PGA communication network or something; and I remember one guy, Michael, who took out his notebook and started: 'so, what are your problems here? This and that. So, you have problems with women issues. And with this and that' and hey, hey, I mean we were talking about these things earlier- about how things are different here and what is our approach, and there were five of us who organized their reception here and we didn't even think the same things about these questions. It was just like imposing this framework upon us. Maybe it was only because of the day, they were tired or something.

In her eyes, the problems stemmed from the fact that Western activists did not know the local conditions and their organizational structure was more hierarchical than the ways of organizing that she was familiar with:

It's basically because of the top-down structure. If you basically make this kind of framework, you could say that the biggest problem was with the word capitalism. You take it and you go to different places and you ask the question 'is capitalism a problem here?'

The top-down structures among activists reinforced the belief that the CEE region belongs to the periphery, which might discourage activists from further cooperation with their counterparts from abroad. Many of the activists decided to focus on local problems (even though they acknowledge their global origins)

on their own terms instead of framing them as a(n) (alter)global struggle. And finally, the unreflective construction of the alterglobalist movement's agenda around the word capitalism - which has a different meaning and different feelings attached to it in the post-socialist world - resulted in the failure of alterglobalist political mobilizations in Central and Eastern Europe.

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