

## Contention in Times of Crisis

This is the first comprehensive overview of the waves of protest mobilization that spread across Europe in the wake of the Great Recession. Documenting the extent of these protests in a study covering thirty countries, including the issues they addressed and the degree to which they replicated each other, this book maps the prevalence and nature of protest across Europe, and explains the interactions between economic and political grievances that lead to protest mobilization. The authors assess a range of claims in the literature on political protest, arguing that they tend both to overstate the importance of anti-austerity sentiments and underestimate the relevance of political grievances in driving the protest. They also integrate a study of the electoral and protest arenas, revealing that electoral mass politics has been heavily influenced in protest mobilization, which amplified the electoral punishment at the polls.

Hanspeter Kriesi holds the Stein Rokkan Chair in comparative politics at the European University Institute, Florence.

Jasmine Lorenzini is a research fellow at the Institute of Citizenship Studies, University of Geneva.

Bruno Wüest works at the research center Sotomo in Zurich. He was postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Political Science of the University Zurich.

Silja Häusermann is professor of Swiss politics and comparative political economy at the Institute for Political Science of the University Zurich.

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# Contention in Times of Crisis

*Recession and Political Protest  
in Thirty European Countries*

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*Edited by*

**Hanspeter Kriesi**

*European University Institute*

**Jasmine Lorenzini**

*University of Geneva*

**Bruno Wüest**

*University of Zurich*

**Silja Häusermann**

*University of Zurich*



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## Contributors

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ARGYRIOS ALTIPARMAKIS is a research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, studying political conflict and contentious politics.

ENDRE BORBÁTH is a postdoctoral researcher at the Chair for Political Sociology at the Free University of Berlin and at the Center for Civil Society Research at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

BJÖRN BREMER is senior researcher in Comparative and International Political Economy at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne.

MATTHIAS ENGGIST is a PhD researcher at the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich.

THERESA GESSLER is a postdoctoral at the Digital Democracy Lab and the Institute for Political Science of the University of Zurich.

SILJA HÄUSERMANN is professor of Swiss Politics and Comparative Political Economy at the Institute for Political Science of the University of Zurich.

SOPHIA HUNGER is a PhD researcher at the European University Institute in Florence and a research fellow of the Center for Civil Society Research at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

SWEN HUTTER is Lichtenberg professor in Political Sociology at the Free University of Berlin and vice director of the Center for Civil Society Research, a joint initiative of Free University and the WZB Social Science Center.

HANSPETER KRIESI holds the Stein Rokkan Chair in Comparative Politics at the European University Institute in Florence. He is also affiliated with the Laboratory for Comparative Social Science Research, National Research University Higher School of Economics, the Russian Federation.

## xiv List of Contributors

THOMAS KURER is a Weatherhead postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University.

JASMINE LORENZINI is a research fellow at the Institute of Citizenship Studies, University of Geneva. She leads a four-year research project on food activism.

PETER MAKAROV is a PhD researcher at the Institute of Computational Linguistics, the University of Zurich.

JULIA SCHULTE-CLOOS is a post-doctoral assistant at the Geschwister Scholl Institute of Political Science, LMU Munich.

CHENDI WANG is a PhD researcher at the European University Institute in Florence.

BRUNO WÜEST is a researcher at Sotomo in Zurich. He was postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Political Science of the University of Zurich.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

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*Contention in Times of Crisis* presents key findings from a joint effort of the project ‘Political Conflict in Europe in the Shadow of the Great Recession’ (POLCON), funded by the European Research Council, and the project ‘Years of Turmoil: The Political Consequences of the Financial and Economic Crisis in Europe’, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Our joint effort focuses on the development of European democracies and political conflict in the context of the Great Recession. Since the world entered the Great Recession with the breakdown of Lehman Brothers in autumn 2008, commentators have been worrying about the political repercussions of the economic crisis. The spectre of the 1930s has been haunting many observers of European politics, and the most pessimistic among them have been wondering whether democracy is going to survive in the face of the grave economic consequences of the crisis.

To tackle this question empirically, POLCON has studied the structuration of political conflict in Europe by analysing contestation in the electoral arena, in the protest arena, and in policy-specific contentious episodes. The main research question has been whether the Great Recession and its consequences have changed the long-term trends in the development of political conflict in Europe as they were previously assessed in *West European Politics in the Age of Globalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *Political Conflict in Western Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). These long-term trends include, above all, an increasing importance of the cultural dimension in the two-dimensional political space in western Europe and its reinterpretation as a deepening divide between those who embrace further integration and those who favour demarcation and nationalism. The ‘Years of Turmoil’ project has also studied the repercussions of the

<sup>1</sup> The project was supported by ERC grant Nr. 338875 and by SNF grant Nr. 100017\_146104.

economic crisis on democracy, but with a focus on linking aggregate patterns of conflict and competition with democratic engagement, participation, and choice at the level of individual citizens.

The present volume follows up on POLCON's first major book publication, *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). While the previous volume lays out our answers to the questions of whether and to what extent party competition has been restructured in Europe since the onset of the Great Recession, the present volume studies the impact of the Great Recession on the mobilization of protest across Europe.

The present volume has been long in coming. We have had more than the usual difficulties in getting it completed, but are all the happier to be finally able to present our key findings to the public. It was unusually risky to embark on a study of protest across no fewer than thirty European countries for a sixteen-year period in the first place. To limit the risks involved in collecting such an ambitious set of data, we relied on a well-established tool – protest event analysis – but also made an attempt to innovate by applying new methods from the toolbox of automated content analysis to this type of research. As it turned out, our initial hopes regarding the versatility and capacity of these new kinds of tools were too high. These tools are constantly improving, but, at the time when we applied them, they fell short of our expectations: While we were able to quite reliably identify texts with a high probability of containing a protest event, we were not able to develop an automated scheme for coding them as we had originally hoped. As a matter of fact, we ended up coding the texts – which we had classified using automated procedures – in the old way, i.e. manually. As one can easily imagine, it was a time-consuming and costly experience to manually code the more than 30,000 protest events that we identified for the period covered. The database on which this study builds proves to be all the more valuable. It is unique in its kind and so is the story we are able to tell based on it.

Social science today is teamwork. All the members of the two project teams have contributed to the construction of the database, but we have also relied on external support. Most notably, we benefited from the support provided by Michi Amsler, Klaus Rothenhäusler, and Gerold Schneider from the Institute of Computational Linguistics at the University of Zurich; Patrice Wangen from the European University Institute; Ondrej Cisar and his team from the Charles University in Prague; and a large number of coders at both the European University Institute (where the POLCON project was located) and at the University of Zurich (where the Years of Turmoil project was located).



At the European University Institute the team of coders included Gulzat Baialieva, Ieva Bloma, Reto Bürgisser, Alves De Almeida, Feike Fliervoet, Nisida Gjoksi, Ieva Grumbinaite, Inkeri Haavisto, Nodira Kholmatova, Grzegorz Krzyżanowski, Joldon Kutmanaliev, Hugo Leal, Michal Matlak, Radek Michalski, Chiara Milan, Trajche Panov, Svetlana Poleschuk, Javier Ruiz Soler, Sanna Salo, Daniel Schulz, Lev Shilov, Lisa Volpi, Andrea Warnecke, and Agata Wiącek. At the University of Zurich, it included Özge Akyol, Alessandra Biagioni, Lino Bruggmann, Camilla Frei, Lena Hochuli, Ahmet Köken, Blerlan Kurtisi, Sandro Lüscher, Kim Mendelin, Yannick Schiess, Lucian Seebacher, Anna Staubli, Raffael von Arx, and Jenny Yi.

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