Process tracing:
between the polished guidelines and the vagabond practice¹

(working name)

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Original conference abstract
In recent years, process tracing as a method (e. g. Beach, Pedersen, 2013; Bennett, Checkel, 2014) has attracted much attention and raised hopes for improved qualitative research. Importantly enough, it has also provided grounds for qualitative researchers to reclaim a methodological paradigm independent of “quantitative dominance” installed in political science by the book Designing Social Inquiry (King, Keohane, Verba, 1994). However, despite several methodological publications and circulation of polished teaching materials, surprisingly few studies exist which could rightfully claim to be at least close to the suggested best practice. In my contribution, I will look into the possible reasons for the wide gap between the polished guidelines and the vagabond practice. Further, I will propose a list of commonly available sources of empirical evidence relevant especially to my area of interest, namely political sociology and social movement studies. Finally, I will present for discussion one or two of my own process-tracing-based research designs. My contribution will have built upon my participation in a course of Advanced process tracing (ECPR Winter school, 2015), my own teaching of a research workshop which includes process tracing (Charles University in Prague, 2015/2016) and participation in a course on “Process Tracing, Ethnography and Discourse Analysis” at the University of Oslo, to which I have been invited by one of the instructors (March/April 2016). In my conference paper, I will bring together experience of multiple scholars including my own for discussion with the aim to assess real potential of process tracing as well as its pitfalls.

PART 1 – GENERAL NOTES ON PROCESS TRACING
Quick intro to process tracing
What’s the buzz, tell me what’s happening

It is not the goal of this paper to provide a detailed account of process tracing as such. Instead, I want to discuss some of the disputes and controversy concerning its application and develop my own applications of process tracing in context of studying social movements and advocacy activism. However, I will start with briefly recapitulating, in this section, what I think are the most important cornerstones of process tracing as a method.

Process tracing (PT) is a tool of analysing causal inference in a single-case research design. The burgeoning methodological literature on process tracing (Collier, 2011; Beach & Pedersen, 2013; (A. Bennett & Checkel, 2014); Beach & Pedersen, 2016) has achieved at least two things. It has

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systematically strived to establish the best practice for conducting process tracing and it has contributed to the rise of a qualitative methodological paradigm independent of the quantitative dominance fortified in political science by the book Designing Social Inquiry (King, Keohane, Verba, 1994). Indeed, a self-confident qualitative research “culture” (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Mahoney, 2010), which is non-interpretive\(^2\), seems to stand relatively strong in today’s political science and process tracing is one of the pillars it stands on.

To be sure, causality in process tracing is understood quite differently from the (still) dominant quantitative approach. The core of causal inference in the quantitative approach is the analysis of covariance grounded in experimental design: if the outcome in the treatment group is different from the outcome in the control group on condition that the assignment of units to treatment and control groups is random (or all confounding variables are controlled for), then the difference observed is the causal effect of the treatment. Therefore, Beach and Pedersen (2016) call this approach the difference-making causal inference. In contrast, causality in process tracing is conditioned by understanding of the process how the cause leads to the outcome.

For a quick illustration, imagine you press a switch and the light goes on. You repeat this with another similar switch and then a hundred times more and some light always goes on. Hurrah, we’ve got causality. But what is really the cause here? We are in the dark about what happens between pressing the switch and the light going on. According to the process-tracing qualitative approach, it is not until we closely examine the electric circuit, the bulb, its wolfram thread and their propensities that we can claim to understand the causality. The full set of these individual items and their specific arrangement is called causal mechanism and this is what we need to discover in order to be able to make what Beach and Pedersen (2016) call mechanistic causal inference.

There is a practical implication of the difference between mechanistic and difference making inference. If we have only been able to make the difference making inference and we come across a switch which does not make the light go on, we do not know what to do to make it work again. On the contrary, if we have made inference based on knowing the causal mechanism, we can easily identify the places where to look for an error. Similarly, knowing causal mechanism in social sciences can better inform policies, see Waldner (2010).

Indeed, defining the causal mechanism which connects a cause and its effect and providing persuasive evidence to substantiate it is the very core of process tracing. While the literature on causal mechanisms is abundant (Glennan, 2002; Mahoney, 2003; Mayntz, 2004; Norkus, 2005; Gerring, 2010; Waldner, 2010; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010), the debate about the best conceptual grasp of causal mechanisms is not closed in the philosophy of science (Glennan, 2002; Waldner, 2010; Gerring, 2010). However, I will not go too deep in this debate. Instead, I will simply consider causal mechanism a detailed explanation of how a cause leads to an effect by focusing on what is happening in-between (George & Bennett, 2005; p. 141; Beach & Pedersen, 2016, chap. 3).

Beach & Pedersen (2016, chap. 3 & chap. 8) suggest “unpacking” causal mechanism into its individual parts and specifying for each part the entity (noun) and the activity (verb). In the subsequent step, each part of the causal mechanism should be tested against empirical evidence. Doing this in a thorough and transparent manner should, according to the authors, provide grounds for claiming a

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\(^2\) By non-interpretive, I mean not based on the premise that the reality is fully dependent on people’s perception of things. In other words, process tracing is primarily developed as a method rooted in the mind-world dualistic methodology as defined by Jackson (2010). This means that process tracing strives for explaining things by making valid causal inference rather than understanding meanings which social actor attribute to things. But see Pouliot (2014).
strong causal inference, and not just a “plausibility probe” or congruence, which only show that there is some evidence supporting the causal mechanism, but does not test each of its individual parts. A diagram of such process tracing is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A simple scheme of causal mechanism in process tracing

Source: Adopted from Figure 8.1 in Beach and Pedersen (2016)

It is useful to think of causal mechanism as of a theory or a set of hypotheses. In other words, causal mechanism is a description, not the arguments to substantiate it. These arguments need to be delivered in form of empirical evidence, which is tested against the logic of sufficient and necessary conditions. This testing logic is an important part of the process-tracing tradition and it has been formalized in a four-field table, which circulates in different forms. See a modification of Collier’s version in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Typology of logical tests of evidence in process tracing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is the evidence...</th>
<th>... necessary for affirming the causal mechanism (or its part)?</th>
<th>... sufficient for affirming the causal mechanism (or its part)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... necessary for affirming the causal mechanism (or its part)?</td>
<td>(I) Straw-in-the-wind</td>
<td>(III) Smoking gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(II) Hoop-test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(IV) Doubly decisive test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passing the test may slightly fortify the hypothesis, but does not confirm it.</td>
<td>Passing the test confirms the hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failing the test may slightly weaken the hypothesis, but does not disprove it.</td>
<td>Failing the test may slightly weaken the hypothesis.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Passing the test may slightly fortify the hypothesis, but does not confirm it.</td>
<td>Passing the test confirms the hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failing the test eliminates the hypothesis.</td>
<td>Failing the test eliminates the hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table adopted with modifications from Collier (2011), who adopted work by Van Evera (1997, s. 31–32) and Bennett (2010, s. 210). See also Rohlfing (2014) for a more elaborate account.
If a piece of evidence qualifies as only a straw-in-the-wind, neither finding it nor showing its absence enhances our knowledge much. If, on the other hand, it qualifies as doubly decisive, finding the piece of evidence confirms our hypothesis while showing its absence disconfirms it. The hoop-test only performs well at disconfirming and its mirror image, the smoking gun, performs well at confirming hypotheses. However, it is better to perceive this table and the test typology as an ideal type. In reality, there are (almost) no once-and-for-all conclusive tests which would eliminate any doubts. But the formalized thinking about the confirming and disconfirming power of evidence should help researchers make transparent arguments about the inferential power of their evidence. For example, researchers should not be happy to only find evidence which is in concordance with their theory, but they should argue why the evidence could have hardly been caused by other than the theorized factors.

In process tracing, a terminology of theoretical uniqueness and theoretical certainty is sometimes used (Beach and Pedersen, 2016) instead of the notion of sufficient and necessary conditions. In fact, the two can be directly translated into each other. If some evidence is theoretically unique, it means that it could not have been caused by any other cause than the hypothesized one. Hence, it fulfils the demand of a sufficient condition. If some evidence is theoretically certain, it means that if the hypothesized cause had been in play, there is no way how the evidence would not have been produced. Hence, it fulfils the demand of a necessary condition.

Process-tracers also pay much attention to the reliability or accuracy of evidence (Beach & Pedersen (2016; ...). As social scientists, we often collect data from stakeholders, who are not neutral in their accounts of events. Besides, people err. It is up to the researcher to critically evaluate how likely is some distortion in the data. To make an analogy, imagine a detective finding suspect’s fingerprints on an object in the crime scene. The detective should ask herself two questions. First, is it plausible that the suspect had some other reason to be in the crime scene which did not involve committing the crime. This question is in line with the test logic in the table above: If the suspect is a stranger, the fingerprints may be a smoking gun. If she is the victim’s sister, the fingerprints may only be a straw-in-the-wind. But second, the detective should also inquire into the reliability of the dactylographic test, about possible manipulation of the environment (could have someone brought in the object later?) as well as the trustworthiness of the person conducting the dactylographic test: You do not want to entrust it to the second suspect in line, but in social sciences, we often have to rely on accounts of people strongly involved.

To sum up, it is detailed focus on causal mechanisms, careful collection of data to substantiate each part of the causal mechanism while leaving no logical holes in the story and rather formalized evaluation of the mostly qualitative evidence along the notion of necessary and sufficient conditions which constitute the backbone of process tracing.

Process tracing in practice
If you strip away the myth from the method

There are diverse and often fascinating theoretical debates about process tracing. Many of the key contributions to the debate are available in Beach and Pedersen (2013), Bennett and Checkel (2014) and Beach and Pedersen (2016). For example, Bennett and Checkel (2014, s. 21) offer ten recommendations to guide the best practice in process tracing and authors throughout their book go back to those recommendations to specify or adjust them. In addition, throughout the literature, authors seek to bind process tracing to Bayesian thinking, both in a less formalized (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, chap. 6) and a more formalized way (Humphreys, Jacobs, 2015; Bennett, 2014). Many contributions address the difference between inductive theory building and deductive theory
testing in process tracing (e.g. Bennett & Checkel, 2014b; Beach & Pedersen, 2016, chap. 6 & 9). Scholars also further elaborate on the typology of process tracing tests (Rohlfing, 2014), explore possible alliances of process tracing with other methodological approaches such as interpretive tradition (Pouliot, 2014) and discuss the role for process tracing to play in mixed-method design (Dunning; 2014). Teaching materials become freely available and circulate (Collier, 2011a; Collier, 2011b; CDI, 2015).

However, a wide gap between the increasingly polished guidelines and the less formalized, even vagabond practice can be found in many studies. The recent book on process tracing by Beach and Pedersen (2016) gives a handful of examples of studies where, from the perspective of the two methodologists, improvements are desired. For example, they focus their attention on the work by Tannenwald (1999) about the causal effect of taboo talk on non-use of nuclear weapons after the World war two. While others have praised her work as a “good example” providing “direct, process-tracing evidence” (Bennett & Checkel, 2014b, p. 34), Beach and Pedersen (2016, chap. 6) disassemble a part of her study and discuss in great detail shortcomings in interpreting some of the evidence used. Their reflection boils down to the argument that process-tracers should be explicit in stating not only their main proposition, but also the lower level propositions, that is individual parts of their causal mechanism. Furthermore, scholars should explicitly address theoretical importance of their evidence, which includes both theoretical uniqueness and theoretical certainty. In other words, they should make it clear how they interpret their evidence, also in context of other possible explanations, and what their considerations behind these interpretations are. Last but not least, scholars need to explicitly address theoretical accuracy. In other words, it is necessary to make an argument why or to which extent a piece of evidence can be held reliable.

In my opinion, it is very important for process tracing in order to legitimize itself as a method to insist on the transparent, explicit and formalized approach to these demands. If, on the contrary, the debates about theoretical uniqueness and certainty, about accuracy of evidence and about different process tracing tests should only be understood as a metaphor, then process tracing is at risk of becoming an empty shell. As Gerring (2010) reminds us, the requirement to specify a causal mechanism does not meet almost any opposition, because it has been “integral to the conduct of science (natural and social) for some time” (p. 1503). Or stronger yet, “[i]t seems unlikely that anyone has ever published an article or book in any field that merely announces a covariational result as causal without any discussion of possible causal mechanisms” (ibid., p. 1504).

Indeed, the main innovation of process tracing, compared to previous endeavours at making causal inference, is the formalization of the requirements we have long known are good. Beyond that, there is not much new to the method. But it does not make it any less worthy. If process tracing is formalized using schemes and templates (see for example Beach & Pedersen, 2016) which reduce the number of important omissions by authors in building their arguments, it is a way forward towards a clearly defined method. On the contrary, as long as we are not willing to rather stringently delineate what qualifies as process tracing, it is no wonder that process tracing is becoming a buzzword quickly invoked anytime when a scholar wants to make a causal argument in a case study.

Saying this, I do not claim that process tracing, once clearly defined, should be the only legitimate way to proceed in a case study. Not even in a positivist case study with primary ambition to take account of an event rather than mediate understanding of specific actors. For example, Szulecka and Szulecki (2013) offer a very readable and interesting case study of an environmental conflict in Poland. In the paper, they claim to be doing process tracing. They, indeed, give account of the process, breaking it down into four phases and providing data to show specificities of each of the phases. However, they do not explicitly address almost any of the cornerstones of process tracing:
they do not clearly unpack the hypothesized causal mechanism of rhetorical coercion, they do not systematically address neither theoretical importance nor accuracy of their evidence. In effect, we learn much interesting information about the Rospuda river conflict, but we do not get the feeling of a court trial dedicated first and foremost to assessing individual pieces of evidence, both separately and together. It is not easy, in the paper, to identify the key arguments substantiating the causal theory and either accept them as valid or criticize them.

Brast’s (2015) case study of a state-building intervention in Sierra Leone goes further. It presents a clear causal mechanism based on regional cooperation with propositions about evidence explicitly attributed to each part of the mechanism. However, Beach and Pedersen (2016, chap. 9), who take much effort to analyse this paper and how it treats evidence, object that Brast does not “engage in an evaluation of the individual pieces of actual evidence produced in terms of certainty, uniqueness or accuracy.” In the subsequent discussion of individual pieces of evidence, Beach and Pedersen explain why many times deeper discussion of the presented evidence would be welcome.

But if empirical case studies which claim to be doing process tracing so frequently fail to deliver a sufficiently substantiated causal argument, is there a problem with the method itself? Is it realistic in its expectations? Can the demand of in-depth focus on each piece of evidence be reconciled with the demands of providing also a literature review, a readable narrative, an analytical conclusion in dialogue with the theory, and yet fit it all into the standard six to nine thousand words per paper? Beach and Pedersen (2016, chap. 9) suggest using an online appendix in situations when all the material cannot be fitted into a standard paper.

PART 2 – PROCESS TRACING IN STUDYING PROTEST AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
Process tracing only seems to be a well-established method in political science and international relations. The question is, why has it not been adopted by other social sciences such as sociology, economics, anthropology and others? There may be both historical and practical reasons for it. For example, economics has historically been influenced by Friedman’s ... Sociology, on the practical side, often works with individuals as the basis of its analysis, while process tracing is better designed for analysis of events with multiple agents contributing different activities.

Clearly, both these reasons are only partial and do not constitute a very big obstacle to adaptation of process tracing beyond political science. Not all economists are in agreement with Friedman, in fact, many have long realised that understanding the underlying causal mechanisms may be the best way forward in developing theory and making better predictions. Many fields in sociology do not restrict themselves to quantitative analysis of individual-level data. In fact, it may be about time to start offering process tracing to other social sciences. Hence in this second part of this paper, I will try to re-contextualize process tracing for studying protest and social movements, a subfield on boarder between sociology and political science. I will proceed in the following steps...

Assessing impact of social movements
TO BE COMPLETED, literature:
- Lorenzo Bosi (Editor), Marco Giugni (Editor), Katrin Uba (Editor) (2016): The Consequences of Social Movements

Evidence on social movements
Prove to me that You’re no fool, walk across my swimming pool
Beach and Pedersen (2016, chap. 6) suggest a typology of evidence available for process tracing. They distinguish pattern evidence manifested in statistical patterns, sequence evidence based on succession of events in time, trace evidence, which is “evidence whose mere existence provides proof” (p. XXX), and finally account evidence, that is evidence which accounts of what happened such as interview, documentation or direct observation. In the following paragraphs, I will try to go beyond this general classification and catalogue various sources of evidence we social scientists may want to consider when studying outcome of social movements.

**Interviews.** Interviews are and probably should remain the cornerstone of most social movements research, also when using process tracing. Using interviews, we can learn about activists’ motivation, their way of thinking, their values as well as their strategies, their repertoire of action tools etc. We can use both in-depth interviews and standardized questionnaire-based interviews depending on our research goals. We usually conduct interviews with individual activists and often consider them representatives of individual organizations, even though this may be unfounded. At least I am not aware of any study, which would show that different people within one organization give a very similar account of things.

Yet the biggest shortcoming of interviews is that our respondents have a stake in the researched object. We can assume that activists will want to depict themselves as more rational, organized, planned and above all successful in their account of things. Having an activist say that their organization pushed through a piece of legislation, for example, is not a very strong evidence of causality. Rather, it is a first step for further research. One of the other steps may be conducting interviews with the opponents, often the politicians. If, for example, politicians also give the account that it was the activists who pushed through a piece of legislation, it may together constitute a strong piece of evidence. However, politicians will often have a different interest in explaining an event and will want to take credit for new legislation themselves. Or they will not want to be seen as someone too strongly influenced by activists. Other times, we may not be able to acquire the interviews we want. One way or the other, good process tracing will rarely rely solely on interviews.

**Documents.** Documents can be an excellent source of evidence for process tracing. Social movement organizations often produce yearly reports on their activities including sources of funding and other information potentially relevant for our research. Press releases, often available online long time after the event, can give an account undistorted by bad memory. They can provide valuable sequence evidence and they can be source for preparing interviews. Sometimes, documents can substitute interviews entirely, depending on our research goal.

**Media outlets analysis.** Today, many countries have an online searchable database of all or nearly all relevant media production. Media analysis can have different forms. Sometimes, we are more interested in quantitative approaches such as content analysis. For example, mere rise or decline of media presence of a specific topic or an organization could be a piece of evidence. We could also analyse if the treatment of a social movement organization in the media changes over time. Is the organization only mentioned, or are its representatives invited to share their view? Is the news about the organization, or is the organization asked their expert opinion while not directly being part of the news? Such dichotomies, for example when quantified over time, can be telling about the process we want to explain. Yet other times, we may need a more qualitative account of media production such as a discourse analysis. If an organization can introduce pieces of discourse which are then adopted by other actors, it is making impact and well-founded evidence of such impact can be valuable.

**Public opinion data.** A lot of social movement research is rooted in contextual analysis. In fact, the political process approach or the political opportunity structure (POS) approach constitute one of the
dominant research traditions in social movement studies. Knowing the public opinion, its changes over time and possibly showing that important actors publicly addressed the public opinion may be a piece of supplementary evidence for showing the role of political opportunities, or, in other words, context. Knowing the context can be crucial for producing cumulative knowledge based on many case studies.

**Relational data.** With the proliferation of social network analysis (SNA) literature (XXX) and spreading of available SNA software, relational data have become a standard research alternative. If our causal mechanism is based on cooperation among organizations or between organizations and other actors (such as in Petrova & Tarrow, 2007), acquiring relational data about this cooperation may be the best way to substantiate our hypothesis with evidence. Some authors (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; XXX) have used automated data collection from the web to show links among organizations. For example, whenever one organizational website has an active reference to another, a link is established. Acquiring information about links among many organizations tell us about the structure of a whole network, it helps to identify central actors, subgroups and more (XXX – generic SNA literature). If our causal mechanism assumes some specific structure of cooperation among actors or centrality of specific actors, SNA can provide the evidence. There are some tools available to conduct automated data collection of links among specified websites based on different criteria. Some examples are Webometric Analyst 2.0,3 or ... For smaller tasks, see some tips by Smarty (2010).4 Useful tips can also be found in Rogers (2015), Munzert, Rubba, Meißner and Nyhuis (2015) and other more general books on collecting digital data. However, not all relational data are best acquired by automated data collection. Tomáš Diviák and I have used online questionnaires to ask organization representatives about variously defined links to other organizations in a larger initiative (Mazák & Diviák, forthcoming). This enabled us to acquire qualitatively distinct kinds of relational data and construct multidimensional network within one initiative.

**Social network sites.** As social movements organizations and activists move their PR and organizational tools online, and specifically to different social network sites (SNSs), it becomes more rewarding to use this data. On Twitter, hashtags help not only to organize large public debates and campaigns for the participants, but also track it for the researcher. For example, we can analyse the frequency of a hashtag use over time. Much of the data stays available online, allowing for analysis in retrospect without having to fully rely on someone’s memory. To protect users’ privacy, some SNSs may be rather restrictive in the access to data they allow. In case of Facebook, for example, data about individuals can only be retrieved with users’ consent using the platform’s application programming interface (API); see Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, and Stillwell (2015) for a detailed account of how to use Facebook as a research tool. Anyway, mining data from SNSs increases demands on technological skills of the researcher. To make things easier, some applications for social science research are available, for example Netvizz, which extracts useful data from Facebook groups and pages, but not individual profiles. Some of the data, such as mutual “likes” among pages, provide relational data to be used in SNA. The current version of Netvizz also provides statistics for links shared on Facebook.5 However, sometimes a very banal piece of information can serve as evidence, for example a mere number of fans of a page.

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5 See [https://apps.facebook.com/netvizz/?fb_source=bookmark&ref=bookmarks&count=0&fb_bmpos=0](https://apps.facebook.com/netvizz/?fb_source=bookmark&ref=bookmarks&count=0&fb_bmpos=0) (7. 7. 2016).
Legislation. The goal of many social movement campaigns is a legislation change. Hence tracking development of individual pieces of legislation can provide useful evidence of social movement’s impact. For example, when a specific wording first appears in a movement’s document and then in a legislation proposal, it can indicate movement’s impact on the legislation process. Today, administrations in many countries further their efforts to develop tools of e-government and transparency. This means opportunities for the researchers as well. For example, in the Czech Republic, legislation proposals are available online including amendatory proposals as they appear throughout the legislation process. It is also possible to witness the process first-hand as a member of the public.

Previous research. Obviously, review of previous research is an integral part of almost any scientific work. Most research papers start with a review of literature as a take-off to their own analysis. Some papers are centred on conducting an extensive review of literature as their main contribution. A method called meta-analysis is employed to organize and analyse all available evidence confirming or disconfirming a disputed hypothesis in order to make a more robust conclusion about the empirical (non)support for the hypothesis. In this paper, I will show how previous research can be used as evidence for a more macro-level process tracing. I argue that process tracing ideas can be used to guide a meta-analysis of its own kind.

Process tracing in social movement studies – empirical examples
In the remaining part of the paper, I will present my ideas on studying advocacy activism using process tracing developed into two research designs with some preliminary results. The examples do not constitute conclusive process-tracing based case studies, but rather illustrative real-life examples from my own research boosted with some preliminary results. In the first design, I am focusing on a case study of a single advocacy campaign by “the Reconstruction of the State” initiative. Before the Parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in 2013, the initiative was largely successful in pressuring political candidates to pledge themselves to support nine anti-corruption laws in case they get elected. When the votes were counted, 166 of the 200 newly elected MPs had signed the pledge. I call this research-design a micro-level example since it focuses on a fairly well delimited one-time event, however important for the Czech political reality.

In the second design (UNFINISHED IN THIS VERSION, but see some outline at the end of this paper), I take account of the development of advocacy activism in the Czech Republic in the past 25 years with emphasis on the more recent years. I focus on phenomena including the role of foreign patronage and recent reflections of NGOs themselves about their losing ties to constituency. This second empirical example uses process tracing ideas on a macro level to analyse evidence of causality within a larger and a more general process. While also this second example is based on some primary research of mine, it largely draws on existing literature introducing a process-tracing based approach to meta-analysis.

Micro-level example: The Reconstruction of the state initiative
The Reconstruction of the State is a joint non-governmental initiative which strives for implementation of nine anti-corruption laws into the Czech legislation. Before the Parliamentary elections in 2013, the initiative was largely successful in pressuring political candidates to pledge themselves to support the anti-corruption laws in case they get elected: 165 of the 200 MPs in the Chamber of Deputies elected in 2013 signed the pledge. This draft of a case shows how process tracing can be used to assess impact of a social movement campaign. While the draft is not conclusive at this point, it is based on a real-life example.
This draft only focuses on the election campaign of the initiative, yet in fact, the election campaign was only the first of four steps towards the initiative’s goal as identified by the initiative itself, see Figure 3.

**Figure 3 The Reconstruction of the state in four steps**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Campaign: 165 of the current deputies have pledged to support anti-corruption laws that will increase transparency and control of public money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Expert work: Before each vote, our experts inform the politicians about which law proposals or amendments are in line with their commitment in the pledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Monitoring: After each vote, we monitor and show how each MP has voted on the issue. Based on their previous commitment, we also assess whether or not the MPs have kept their word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Engagement: As voters and citizens, we have a right to know how our MPs vote on the issues that matter to us. The more people are interested in how the MPs vote on anti-corruption issues, the more likely it is that the politicians will raise their hand for these laws.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Reconstruction of the state (http://www.rekonstrukcestatu.cz/en), names of the individual steps added by author.

While the literature distinguishes between theory-building and theory-testing, Beach a Pedersen (2016, chap. 6) argue that such distinction does not fit well the common research practice, which is often an iterative process going from the data to the theory and back again, rather than a clearly organized process where either the data or the theory comes first and then the other. Also my research is based on this iterative-process, but for the sake of clarity, I present my causal mechanism first and then I discuss the evidence.

My research question is straightforward: What caused the unprecedented success of the campaign, in which so many political candidates pledged themselves to the activists’ demands?

My causal mechanism, drafted in Figure 4, is following: The context of the campaign was extraordinary and played a crucial role in the campaign’s success. So much so that I put in at beginning of the causal mechanism. I distinguish three important contextual components. First, the anti-corruption sector had been growing and developing quickly prior to the initiative. This enabled the activists to build on a lively and developing community. Second, the political scene was very turbulent with new parties entering the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in 2010 and 2013. This made politicians anxious about their political future and more susceptible to pledge themselves...
as individuals to the Reconstruction of the state to secure credit with the public. This relates to the third contextual component: Corruption in public opinion was perceived as one of the most serious problems.

The context was perceived as an opportunity for the organizations participating in the initiative to adopt a more aggressive campaign then they did previously. This new strategy may be broken down into two main features: the organizations attempted to engage the public and openly pressure the politicians. This new strategy demanded reaction from the politicians and political candidates running for a mandate in the 2013 General elections. Either they decided to resist the pressure and criticize it as an unacceptable political interference from someone without a political mandate, or they seized the opportunity, declared ownership over the anti-corruption proposals of the Reconstruction of the state and pledged themselves to the initiative’s goals.

*Figure 4 Causal mechanism of the successful campaign*

Once the causal mechanism is presented, the next and crucial step is to substantiate it with evidence. Before we do it, I suggest a quick comparing look at the template in Figure 1, as suggested by Beach and Pedersen (2016, chap. 8), and the example in Figure 4. Beach and Pedersen and most process tracing literature suggest that we should clearly define the cause and the effect. Such guidelines are didactically helpful, but may be hard to follow in the complex social reality where things happen in a flow and causes and effects intermingle. For example, my effect (or outcome), that is politicians pledging themselves to the Reconstruction of the state, might as well be an intermediate step for a researcher more interested in the resulting legislation. Indeed, it could also be the starting point for someone studying how political promises turn or not turn into reality. Bennett and Checkel (2014b, s. 21) give a recommendation to always make a justified decision on where to start the process tracing (find exact wording and cite). However, such a decision does not have to be objective or even logical on its own. It will only make sense in relation to one’s research question and its logic will also be influenced by specificities of the research field, epistemological and ontological grounds of the researcher and, last but not least, pragmatic reasons.

Second, I implement context directly in the causal mechanism. This is unusual. Most process tracing studies I have seen discuss context along the core causal mechanism. That is perfectly fine, but I believe that it can make sense to place the context as the first step of the causal process when the causal mechanism is, as I believe it is in my case, directly initiated by the context.
Third, I comply with Beach and Pedersen (2016) in that I use dashed line for boxes containing theoretical components of my causal mechanism and solid line for boxes with indicators. Now at last we can proceed to substantiate our causal mechanism with evidence. Since I stress the context a lot and even put it at the starting point of my causal mechanism, I should first put forward evidence of the three elements composing the favourable context and argue why these components make the context favourable. Summary of this evidence is in Figure 5.

To show that the anti-corruption non-governmental sector was growing prior to the Reconstruction of the state initiative and that this fact had bearing on the initiative, I propose to look for two pieces of evidence; first, the presence of new NGOs in the initiative and, second, that the activists themselves consider this an important factor for the rise of the initiative. Further, to support the claim of the turbulent political scene, I draw attention to the new parties gaining influence on the Czech political scene and I suggest to support the claim with evidence of unprecedented exchange of individual MPs in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2010 elections and the 2013 elections. Finally, to show that corruption was perceived as one of the most serious problems of the Czech society, I simply propose to look at public opinion data.

Figure 5 Evidence of the special context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Anti-corruption sector</th>
<th>Turbulent political scene</th>
<th>Public opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E1*: New anti-corruption NGOs in the initiative</td>
<td>E3: New parties entering the political scene</td>
<td>E5: Bad and worsening level of perceived corruption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2: Activists acknowledge the role of growing anti-corruption sector</td>
<td>E4: Instability of MPs’ mandates between elections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*short for Evidence 1
Source: Author

Further, I should discuss the relevance of the individual pieces of evidence. For illustrative purposes, I will only focus on new parties entering the Parliament (E3) and the instability of MPs’ mandates between the elections (E4). In 2010, two new parties succeeded in the General elections achieving the 5 % quorum. (They were “Věci veřejné” a “TOP 09”). In 2013, when the campaign was underway, other new parties were polling enough to be serious candidates for election success. In fact, two other parties entered the Chamber of Deputies for the first time in 2013, namely “Úsvit” and “ANO”, the latter of them won the second biggest proportion of votes and mandates. Besides, Christian Democrats (“KDU-ČSL”) re-entered after failing to gain 5 % in 2010. I argue that these obvious and easy to verify facts contributed to specificity of the context in which the political candidates were more susceptible to signing the pledge as a way of securing themselves a mandate in time of greater instability.

To support this claim, I formulate a hypothesis that there was also a bigger instability of individual MPs’ mandates in the elections in 2010 and 2013. This is relevant because it was the individual MPs who signed the pledge. After collecting and analysing data⁶, I can show the following: Among the 200 Czech MPs, there were 109 newcomers in 2006, 118 in 2010, and 123 in 2013. This is some increase, but not quite as dramatic. It would be far-fetched to claim that this was a fundamentally new context. However, there is another evidence to inspect. Czech voters can circle candidates on party ballots, by which they give them preference votes. If a candidate is circled by at least 5 % of the

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party’s electorate, his or her preference votes have priority before the order of candidates on the ballot, which is decided by the party. Before the election in 2010, there was a change of legislation which resulted in this relatively easy way for the voters to reverse party’s recommendation and select MPs as individuals. The change of legislation was accompanied with a civil campaign. As a result, while the median of preference votes for each elected MP was 2.7% of the party’s electorate in 2006, it rose to 5.8% in 2010 and further to 6.0% in 2013. This was huge, because as a result, 47 of the 200 MPs who won a mandate in 2010 were able to win it thanks to the preference votes. It seems safe to assume that many if not most political candidates were aware of this power of individual votes and took it into account when deciding about pledging themselves to the highly visible initiative. In a similar manner, the other contextual aspects should be discussed while stressing why this is important for understanding our case.

In the next step, I will turn to the core of the causal mechanism, that is the activists adopting a more aggressive strategy of public pressure and the politicians reacting either by taking an opposing stance or trying to take ownership of the anti-corruption claims and pledge to the initiative. Again, I will start with a summary of possible evidence to collect in Figure 6.

*Figure 6 Evidence of the core causal mechanism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activists adopting a more aggressive strategy</th>
<th>Politicians react</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Going public</strong></td>
<td><strong>Engaging the public</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E6: Media coverage of the initiative compared to the individual organizations</td>
<td>E11: Pooling organizations’ supporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E7: Press releases of the initiative compared to individual organizations</td>
<td>E12: Invoking so-called ambassadors from outside of the participating organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E8: Staging happening</td>
<td>E13: Viral material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E9: Much focus on branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E10: Interviews with organizations’ representatives about the</td>
<td>E14: Interviews with organizations’ representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it may be easy to identify a large number of pieces of evidence, we do not need to look for all of it. For example, if we want to find evidence for the part of the causal mechanism where some politicians react to the aggressive campaign with criticism, it seems redundant to make conduct interviews if we can find enough statements confirming this part of the causal mechanism in the media.

Again, for illustrative reasons, I will pick one piece of evidence and elaborate on it. For example, we are told by the activists that they engaged the public to exert bigger pressure on the political candidates. This is a very weak piece of evidence, because NGOs will almost always claim that they want to engage the public. They are aware that public support is their best source of legitimacy. Hence we start looking for other evidence to substantiate such a claim. For example, we can formulate a hypothesis that if engaging the public is important to the initiative, the participating organizations will pool their supporters to a focused platform where they can address them. I have checked the number of fans on Facebook for pages of the initiative and the three biggest organizations within it at the beginning of April 2016. While the number of fans was 19,800 for the initiative, it was only 4900, 4300 and 2800 for the three most dominant participating organizations.

Why is this evidence? If an initiative much younger than most of the participating organizations attracts much more attention and engagement, it informs us about the public focus of the initiative. (As long as we can consider clicking a like button engagement, of course.) What is the accuracy of this evidence? We can assume that it is very high. It is unlikely that Facebook would have the numbers wrong. What is the theoretical importance of the evidence? I would argue that the theoretical certainty is high. If the initiative’s coordinators repeatedly mentioned that they have managed to leave the position of invisible experts and engage broad public in a highly visible campaign, it would be very surprising and contrary to such statements to find no strong online platform of supporters. In other words, finding evidence of a strong online platform is an almost necessary conditions for the claim that the initiative has successfully engaged the public. What is the theoretical uniqueness of the evidence? I argue that it is medium. It could be that a one-time big paid campaign on Facebook has attracted all those fans, but the initiative was not dedicated to engaging the public beyond that point. On the other hand, sustained focus on engaging the public, as reported by initiative’s representatives in interviews, seems the most plausible explanation of the numbers. Additional evidence could improve the confirmatory power for this part of the causal mechanism.

However, there are some difficulties with theoretical importance. First, not only is it subjective to say if the theoretical uniqueness and certainty is high or low. This is not such a big problem, as it can be contested when transparently argued. But it may also be hard to say if the evidence was found or not. What would be the cut-off point between a strong and a weak online platform? In this specific example, as in many other real-life research situations, we work with a continuum where we always get some result; in our case some number of fans. Four times as many fans as there are on the Facebook page of the most popular (on Facebook) participating organization seems a lot to me, but would it seem enough to make a case to everybody?

In addition, while I have handled theoretical uniqueness and certainty equally in the theoretical part, they are not equal in practice. This is not because confirming evidence would be more than disconfirming evidence or the other way around. It is because it does not make much sense to consider theoretical certainty once we have found the evidence. Why should we consider what
would absence of some evidence mean when we already know it is present? In other words, once we have found some evidence and we want to assess it, it often makes sense to disregard theoretical certainty and only assess theoretical uniqueness. In other words, theoretical certainty is only useful for studies conducted in a strictly deductive way.

Once we have assessed all the evidence we are able to use or we consider worth using, we evaluate the overall support for the causal mechanism. At the end, we can also think of a name for the causal mechanism to make it more memorable and offer it for further use or modifications in other case studies. This is may not be particularly easy, because different agents are active in our causal mechanism. We could focus our attention on the activist and call our causal mechanism public pressure. We could, on the other hand, give priority to politicians and call the causal mechanism, for example, opportunism. Indeed, politicians used the momentum created by the activists in a specific context and complied with the anti-corruption demand to make political points.

**Macro-level example**

Using process on macro-level for assessing long-term developments. I have not managed to elaborate this section before the conference, so I only enclose a scheme I would like to discuss in the panel. The main idea here is that the process tracing logic can be transformed to a meta-analysis of its own kind improving reliability of standard literature review and making sense of a bulk of scholarship on a specific phenomenon.

*Figure 7 Process-tracing advocacy activism in the Czech Republic since 1989 till today*

**Literature (unrevised version > might be incomplete)**


