
TRADITIONS SHAPING CONTEMPORARY PROTEST CULTURES

When thinking about the traditions and the cultural heritage of contemporary protest movements, it is worth noting that East Central European history in the twentieth century has not been very rich in manifestations of political protest. Despite recurrent political upheavals, revolutions, wars, and so on, protest as understood in the present paper—that is, public mobilization of support for specific demands—is not very widespread in the countries of the region. The attitude of the Habsburg Empire towards spontaneous initiatives from below


2. The present paper is based on a cross-national comparative study which sought to analyze characteristic features of post-1989 political protest in the former GDR, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. For the purposes of empirical investigation, 'protest' was defined as not-fully-institutionalized collective action which attempts to mobilize wide public support for the goals of the protesters. 'Political protest' was understood as collective action publicly mobilizing non-institutionalized power and support in pursuit of specific, publicly articulated demands. The purpose of the study was to analyze the size and quantity of protest events, the issues which they posed in political terms, the organizational framework of the movements, the characteristics of the participating actors, and the forms of action. Data collection was based on reports on various protests during 1989–1993, as they appeared in four processed volumes of three daily and one weekly newspaper in the respective countries. The extensive data collection and data processing were done by national research teams, led in the GDR by Christiane Lemke (Hanover University), in Poland by Grzegorz Ekiert (Harvard University) and Jan Kubik (Rutgers University), in Slovakia by Darina Malova (Comenius University, Bratislava), and in Hungary by Máté Szabó (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest). Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik were the coordinators and leaders of the entire project. The basic assumption of the study was that, in the different countries of East Central Europe, a new protest culture is emerging which is based upon the traditions of both the communist and pre-communist pasts. With its non-violent character, the emerging peculiar mixture of traditions is conducive to the democratization of these countries. For a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and the major results see: G. Ekiert, and J. Kubik, 'Contentious politics in new democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989–1993', World Politics 50, No. 4 (1998): pp. 547–82.
was extremely negative: the regime maintained tight control over social movements and public mobilization in order to defend the Empire against national and socialist protests. The inter-war political systems—the authoritarian Horthy regime in Hungary, the unstable monarchy of the South Slavs in Yugoslavia, and the stable democracy of Czechs and Slovaks in the united Czechoslovakia—imposed sharply differing institutionalized frameworks within which political protest was permitted. Protest was allowed to some extent everywhere, but strong state intervention—sometimes justifying the epithet ‘police state’—frequently brought protest movements to a halt (except, until its dissolution, in the Czechoslovak Republic). Long decades of totalitarian repression, both castic and communist, stunted the growth of protest politics even more than the previous systems had done. Strict political control over all ‘nonconformist’ politics pushed the traditions of pre-communist protest culture underground. Liberalization of the communist regimes from the 1960s onwards, however, established a framework and at least some opportunity for protest against communist rule. These opportunities were never institutionalized, however, and so protest was always heavily dependent on the good will of the Soviet and domestic powerholders. Temporary changes in the political climate—as in Hungary before 1956, and in Czechoslovakia before 1968—generated new forms in the subculture of protest that managed to survive until the collapse of the communist regimes. The dissolution of the earlier regimes in 1989—largely due to protests and to new opportunities to mobilize them in institutionalized form—provided new opportunities for establishing a protest culture under the aegis of democratic politics, both regionally and nationally. In fact, protest in this region over the last century has generally been based upon traditions of mobilizing people within the framework of recurrent unstable political situations. Thus, the emergence in 1989 of political opportunities for mass mobilization and the development of a protest culture should be seen as a new beginning. The abolition of the communist system lowered the social costs of all types of interest-representation and especially of those articulating claims in the form of protest. Institutional arrangements for civil participation have emerged, as have non-institutionalized or not fully institutionalized forms of political participation. Changes in the political culture and in the institutional representation of diverse political aims are intertwined in post-communist systems of government. A dense web of conflicts has arisen and mass mobilization occurs frequently, sometimes bringing to the surface traditional differences, and sometimes new ones.

The political protest movements which initiated the systemic transformation have been institutionalized as political parties or have taken other organizational forms within the institutional framework of the new democracy. At the same time, new social movements have emerged with new forms of protest in order to give voice to new conflicts.

---