

The Politics of Protest

Understanding political protest in Central Europe

Project description

The project examines recent popular protest movements in six Central European countries. Selected scholars, experts and journalists will be invited to six expert seminars to be held in Warsaw in spring and summer 2015. The debates serve to examine protests taking place recently in the following Central European countries: Bosnia, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Invited country experts will discuss the political background, sociological causes and motivations of protests as well as organizational forms of current mobilizations. The case studies of marches, riots and demonstrations will help us to develop a common analytical framework for understanding political protest in the region.

Our hypothesis is that we are currently witnessing something like the return of "rebellious civil societies". In less formal and more political ways protest movements mobilize the dissatisfied and angry both on the left-wing and right-wing of the political spectrum. We want to find out a specific central European "factor" in recent wave of contentious politics. We argue that protest movements in our countries more and more reflect and influence mainstream politics and that in order to understand our political systems we need to pay attention to protest. Our assumption is also that understanding how protests are socially and politically embedded in several contexts of various countries of the region will enable us better to understand Polish case.

After each meeting a short country paper in English and Polish language will be made available in electronic form on our website. In the second half of the year a longer essay presenting policy recommendations and putting the analysis into the wider context of popular protest and populist politics will be published. A final academic debate summarizing the project findings will be held in Collegium Civitas in late autumn 2015.

Justification of the project

When it comes to awareness concerning the nature of the protests in other countries, in Poland we are faced with a serious lack we intend to remove. While similar to the protests in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the United States a few years ago, images of the Orange revolution and the various Maidan events in Ukraine are rather familiar to a general interested public, protests in the wider region beyond Ukraine are far less publically known or discussed even when it comes to circles of political and academic experts. Polish readers rather did not take much notice, for example, of the wave of street protests in Bulgaria or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the increasing political schism in the Visegrad 4 group is commented upon, serious background information about mobilization in Hungary (both by the Orban government and its opponents) is scarce. Although the latest protest phenomenon with European significance – the PEGIDA movement active mainly in Eastern Germany and symbolized by its Dresden street marches – has been commented upon in Polish mainstream media, we rarely neither find a deeper and more sociological understanding of these events, nor a reasonable assessment of the possible impact on the future development of European democracies and EU politics.

These cases are interesting to us, because in recent years also Poland itself witnessed a recurrent rise of its "rebellious civil society", embodied among each other in the Independence Day Marches. Even if one is personally far from the specific claims of such a "protesting civil society", in many ways it represents a necessary vital sign of a functioning democracy. Contrary to some strands of popular opinion, it can be argued that in order to solve some of the most burning social challenges and important political questions ahead of us we might not need more, but actually less of acclaimed social peace. Such an understanding, though, would have major implications for our thinking about civil society and its specific role for European democracy. "Non-institutionalized" protests are often complementary with traditional political institutions.

We are convinced that in all of these images we can find a genuine democratic character. In the course of our project we will take a closer look at them, establish an integrated framework of understanding and draw conclusions about the more general changes we are currently witnessing in our societies.



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