

## **A Blueprint for Anti-Government Protests in Eastern Europe**

Published on 25. January 2017 by [Anna Pelova](#)

I am staying at my friend's house in Poland when something on the TV grabs my attention. I look at my friend in utter confusion as the Polish news shows people demonstrating in freezing temperatures. I don't understand the language and I am curious to know what is happening. They say: 'Our government has gone crazy,' he explains and 'They are violating our constitution. Things are getting really bad here. Our government is trying to bring communism back.' What outraged and mobilised Polish civil society, I understand, was a whole series of measures by the ruling Law and Justice party which threatened to undermine Poland's 27-year-old democracy. First, the government proposed to make abortions illegal. Then they restricted the access for media to the parliament building to specially accredited journalists. The next plans concerned restrictions on peaceful demonstrations and the last straw that broke the camel's back was the government's procedure to vote next year's budget somewhere outside the main chamber of the parliament and without the presence of the opposition. What happened was that the governing coalition used the situation that members of the opposition were obstructing the main chamber, demonstrating for press freedom.

The demonstration I saw on the Polish news reminded me of events I had seen and participated in – of the two anti-government protests in Bulgaria that ended with the governments resigning. I witnessed a similar scenario in Romania. The Polish situation almost feels like a *déjà vu* – as if I know already how all this will end. Citizens will sooner or later win their fight, even if it means they will have to demonstrate every single evening for more than a year – which is what happened in Bulgaria in 2014.

The massive anti-government protests may have something unsettling about them when seen on television, but I think they have proven to be vital for eastern democracy. Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Hungary, Croatia, Moldova, Albania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Belarus, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Poland – for the past few years there has been a rise of anti-government demonstrations all over eastern Europe. They seem to be a continuing trend. I believe that these protests are healthy for our post-communist nations. They are an opportunity for citizens to become stronger and more united and show authoritarians that they won't let them abuse their power. For decades, our civic spirit has been suppressed by communist dictatorships. The concept of active citizens as a corrective to governments is still relatively new for all of us. But people seem to be learning fast. It is interesting to observe the dynamics of these protests and investigate if there are repeating patterns.

### **What makes anti-government protests in Eastern Europe successful?**

Each of these anti-government protests in Eastern Europe was born out of a series of absurd events. To provoke our civic spirit and raise our voice in the streets, we have to get to a point where we are outraged and appalled to an extreme. Focused as we are on our own national problems, it seems that something that absurd can happen only in our country – which, of course, is not the case. The Ukrainian government sabotaged the signing of the European Union Association Agreement; the Macedonian President decided to halt the investigation of the former Prime Minister and other politicians involved in a wiretapping scandal; in Albania, an electoral fraud led to 18 months of continuous protests.

Nowadays, the social media makes organising protests easy, fast and cheap. Within hours, a single individual can bring together hundreds or even thousands of people sharing a common cause. Facebook events and profiles of known civil activists are often monitored by the police. Those in power can respond to demonstrations with fabricated counter demonstrations in support of their leaders. We currently see this happening in Poland but it happened in most other countries where there were anti-government protests.

In some countries governments have paid ‘their own’ demonstrators or dug for incriminating evidence against the main activists. ‘Who pays you?’ is a question that follows every protest in Bulgaria. The wisest move for activists is to avoid reacting on this question. I have to laugh every time I see headlines that George Soros is funding a demonstration, an accusation which was made against many Bulgarian, Polish, Romanian, Ukrainian or Macedonian civic protests. Soros’ Open Society funding demonstrators or oppositional NGO’s seems to be a globally spread conspiracy theory, probably because it works and influences the opinions of the masses. But there is not much to these stories: a demonstration does not need funding since spreading the news on social media is free and activists can create their own posters to go out and make a statement.

The staging of clashes with the police seems to be another trick those in power like to resort to, because it is easy. A provocateur is easily found and a single person throwing a rock at the police can cause an escalation of violence from both sides and discredit peaceful demonstrators.

### **The power of persistence**

But perhaps the most critical component of the successful anti-government protest is persistence. Bulgaria is a good example of how being persistent as citizens pays off in terms of defending our interests. For 421 days, we were out in the streets every single night, demanding the resignation of an authoritarian government that also posed a danger to our membership in the European Union. During these 421 days people showed their creativity. Going out on the streets became more than just a protest. It was an occasion to meet with each other, drink coffee in front of the black fence that had been raised to protect the parliament building and those inside, or think of new and fun ways to express that we wanted the government’s resignation. It became more than just a protest and we were more than just a bunch of people shouting in the streets. We became a community with a sense of togetherness. The protest became a social event; it felt good to be a part of it. ‘Now what?’ we asked ourselves when the government finally resigned, although we were celebrating. In a way, the news about the resignation created a vacuum because it took away the reason why we united in the first place. Although such protests are strictly civic and not linked to any political party, to fill this vacuum, activists could unite in a new way or find a place within current political structures keeping in mind that resignations are followed by new elections.

It is interesting to observe the protests in Eastern Europe and notice that there are common patterns. But if they show anything, it is that people here cannot and will not tolerate illiberal democracy. We have finally grown into the role of active citizens and we want to be involved in governance – both on the outside through referendums and public hearings and on the inside by creating better alternatives.