

Networked protest for a populist age

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In the autumn of 2016, the parliament in Poland was presented with one of the most restrictive anti-abortion bills in the modern world. Proposals included jail terms for women terminating pregnancies, the possibility of persecution for miscarriages and provisions posing legal risks even for performing prenatal diagnostics on the foetus. It understandably provoked wide outrage in society. This began through the usual social-media channels and soon the spark had ignited into the explosion of mobilisation – it culminated in a nationwide women’s strike that involved around 100,000 people not showing-up at schools and offices and instead taking to the streets in protests that spanned the entire country and went beyond the borders of Poland, with demonstrations of solidarity taking place in Berlin, London and Brussels among other places. While demonstrators in Poland formed a human chain around the headquarters of the ruling party, those in solidarity with them outside the country picketed Polish embassies in European capitals with banners in Polish, English and French.

It did not take long after the protests began for my phone to start beeping – friends, fellow journalists and activists requesting information and up-to-date assessments of the situation. Although that quickly changed later, I found out, to my surprise, that there was really next to no information about the situation as it unfolded. No wonder, since the scale and intensity of the protest came as a shock in Poland as well. “What is going on?”, “Translate this for us”, “Do you have some pictures” – requests poured in. Of course, subsequently, respected European news organisations either sent their correspondents to report on the issue or provided their readers with detailed accounts post-factum. But at the very moment, timely, passionate and potentially viral messages were what was

demanded. Those few who provided it benefitted clearly – retweets and likes went into the thousands worldwide. Thanks to that, the protests indeed gained worldwide attention and were noticed globally.

If this example would conclude with the usual thesis on the strength of social-media and the “networked individual”, there would be little to ponder. Multiple examples from the past, of situations of extreme importance for communities and nations – like the Maidan in Kiev or Tahrir Square protests in Cairo – have been embedded in our collective imaginations for years already. The Polish Black Protest is however important in the way it contradicts some prevailing narratives, not in the way it reinforces them.

What happened quickly after the national strike dissolved and the organisers, as well as participants, went back from the streets to online debates – as well a number of televised ones, thanks to the broad interest the protests got – is that knowledge sharing, gestures of solidarity and support and inspiration created networks where there previously were none. Coincidentally, the same week the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church came forward with an idea to restrict abortion, which had until then been legal in Russia. Images of protesters against this proposal in Moscow, when they surfaced online, showed an image very familiar to those who had seen the protests in Poland from a few days before. Protesters were spotted bearing placards with an easily identifiable illustration: a sketch of an uterus with ovaries crossed to show a “fuck you” gesture – the same image that came to symbolise all of the earlier protests in Poland this year, including of course the last one. How did this come about? The usual means of exchange between the liberal opposition in Russia and Polish civil society – foundations, exchanges and scholarship programmes – of course exist, but here was a clear example of peer-to-peer, community-to-community, protest-to-protest exchange in the absence of any meaningful dialogue on the official level.

This by no means is an argument against traditional media and the need for sustaining and fostering real face-to-face debate whenever possible to help social movements in Europe and beyond. On the contrary: it is an argument for media and civil society to utilise all forms of communication and inspiration and new networks, for they most often spring from the bottom up. Images, slogans and ways of organising from one country or community prove themselves most useful and universal when they can be utilised elsewhere.

Sometimes one can see herself or himself best in somebody else's struggle. And let us put the notion of "cultural" or geographical proximity as a necessary condition for that to flourish aside – it seems that initiatives inspired (at least in part) by the Polish Black Protest are taken from initiatives in South America and South Korea. And the Black Protest and national women's strike were also in themselves modelled and inspired by different historical and political influences – the idea for a strike was directly based on the women's strike in Iceland in the mid 1970s when women, outraged about the lack of political rights, practically brought the country to a halt when they took to the streets. Black, which became synonymous with the Polish protest, as a symbol of indignation, anger and mourning is a clear reference to traditions as diverse as the Catholic Church and the anarchist movement. Like many successful initiatives this was also a brainchild of many diverse influences. And a profoundly networked idea.

One can learn a couple of things when the Black Protest and Women's Strike are put in the broader European context of conflicting narratives, contrary political responses and institutional impasse that is troubling the continent. It is true that it is next to impossible for the European Institutions – the Commission, Parliament and Council with their PR departments and communications strategists – to put forward a progressive idea or image that will genuinely involve and inspire people across the EU and possibly beyond. For good and bad even the best (or worst) single idea or message conceived between the corridors and in the back rooms in Brussels or Strasbourg is bound to lose traction, dilute and eventually disappear among broad discontent with European elites and political institutions. What is painfully true for the institutions however, does not hinder or stifle ideas and initiatives that spring from the bottom up. Grassroots ideas, conceived by people not belonging to the transnational caste of professional politicians and lobbyists, have the attribute of authenticity, universality and intuitiveness to them that so many PR efforts of parties and political bodies lack. It would be unwise and ill-informed to only look to nationalist and xenophobic surges in Europe to discover that, especially in times when so many ideas are bubbling under the surface of mainstream politics and discourse and the vast majority of them are neither violent nor anti-European.

The international media, too, are learning just that – that however good their coverage and message is, it will be harder for them to fully participate

in social and political processes unless they, instead of only reporting, take the effort to amplify the messages that are already there and work along the lines of popular demand. Nothing will obliterate the need for good reporting and the necessity of having correspondents wherever something important happens. But there is a visible change – from institutions to individuals, from established trademarks to alternative sources, from just covering issues to participating in them.

That is what my beeping phone made me think of, on the day of the protest – that there is some aspect of media and political verticality that is coming to an end. All of those who called or messaged me that day wanted, in principle, one thing: to know what the protest – the community or multitude – was saying right here and now. They did not want to know what was being said to the protest by the politicians and experts, neither did they want to wait for what the reporters had to say about what they thought of it. What was prized most was timely and networked transmission of the most accurate messages, the relaying of the demands and giving space for visions that are present at the moment – is that not what today's journalism should be about?