

■ International Conference in Munich

"The State is Us ..." – Protest against Large-Scale (Construction) Projects in Southeast Europe

Organizer: Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG)
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□ On 4 and 5 November 2015 the conference '„The State is Us ..." – Protest against Large-Scale (Construction) Projects in Southeast Europe', organized by the Southeast Europe Association SOG, took place at the IBZ / Internationales Begegnungszentrum der Wissenschaft in Munich.

25 years after the democratic transition the countries of Southeast Europe have not achieved a consolidation of their democratic institutions. Corruptive structures being evident in interdependencies of state, economy and organised crime are still undermining the principles of rule of law. At the same time the region is homeland to manifold preserved landscapes which are often the subject of conflicting interests. Private stakeholders try to exploit natural resources for their personal business interests while corrupted state institutions support their actions against the existing law. These circumstances call protest movements into action. Despite the lack of a strong developed civil society and despite low political participation in the former communist countries, strong protests have been noticed in the recent past directed against this specific combination of ecological devastation and democratic deficiencies.

Some overall questions were introduced from a more theoretical perspective by Dr. *Sonja Schüler*, also being the initiator of the conference, Prof. *Christopher Rootes*, Prof. *Christian Giordano* and Dr. *Anna Krăsteva*. The social scientists discussed the general meaning of protest movements. Consequently the question was illustrated whether the masses of protesters in fact represent big parts of society or whether they hold the view of a minority although they come up in big numbers. The thesis that protest movements usually fail and that an evolution of protest movements never happened in history was discussed. Actors of movements always had to become part of the system to gain real influence on politics, as the example of former Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor of Germany, Joschka Fischer, shows. Evidence mentioned

against this thesis is the Occupy movement, which at first view didn't have any direct effect on the capitalist system but with its slogan "We are 99 %", which is now all present in the collective knowledge, it managed to change the hegemonic narrative of neoliberalism. It was stated that through the impact on public discourse social movements could in fact be very successful and that in the theoretical sphere of protest research a debate about the criteria of success and the framework conditions of success has to be conducted.

During the introduction of the conference general difficulties protesters are facing nowadays while fighting for their interests were analysed and it was discussed how results could be achieved all the same. A big problem is that local communities and environmental organizations usually have limited resources, thus the way for local communities to resist is through knowledge. Participants of the protest movements have to become experts to get access to the decision-making process. Using existing networks and building new ones also play a big role for social movements to be effective.

As for social movements in Southeast Europe it was asserted that during the transition period they had grown and multiplied and nowadays mostly ecological movements can be seen as a stimulating motor for changing the corrupt and non-democratic political systems in the region. The specific linkage of environmental and democratic movements constitutes a real threat for the political status quo. Typical for the situation in Southeast Europe is the fundamental change of meaning concerning political participation after the democratic transition, given that during socialism an obligation of participation, commitment and engagement existed, which was taking shape in regular manifestations. When the obligation for citizenship was omitted after the system change, people experienced the freedom of non-participation. Nowadays this freedom of non-participation is defining the perception of citizenship in former socialist countries. This transformation from ascendant public citizenship to descendant private citizenship may lead to political apathy and disengagement and represents one of the biggest obstacles the young democracies in Southeast Europe have to face.

Following the introductory part of the conference selected country and case studies from Romania, Bulgaria and Albania were presented by environmental activists and researchers on social movements from the region.

Romania

The Romanian activists and researchers *Roxana Pencea* and *Victoria Stoiciu* highlighted the case of Roşia Montană, where the largest open pit gold mine in Europe threatens landscapes, residential areas, jobs in agriculture and tourism as well as archaeological sites in the Carpathian Mountains. The mining project has triggered the largest civil and environmental movement in Romania since 1989, which stands out with the good organization of their protest. Protesters are rebelling against the ecological destruction caused by the mining but also against transferring the ownership of the project from Romania to Canada, which goes along with the slogan "We don't sell our state!"

For the social movement connected with the Roşia Montană issue, a high social diversity is characteristic. The movement includes people from all social classes, even people from rural areas, older or lower educated people as well as nationalists and anarchists. There is no pre-existing identity for the members of the Roşia Montană movement like for example 'the working class'. The protesters' claim, to be apolitical, is a result of the differentiation from the corruptive political class of the status quo and bears new emerging patterns of politics coming along with flatter forms of organization (in contrast to hierarchically organized

common parties) and resonance instead of representation, which is not trying to replace the representative democracy but challenges it. All in all, a trend can be noticed towards 'liquid democracy'.

The well organized protests of the Roșia Montană movement attract attention with very creative forms of protest such as photo bombing, flash mobs and the relatively famous "fan fest", a festival in Roșia Montană, which attracts not only activists but also brings normal citizens, tourists and school classes to Roșia Montană.

Bulgaria

In the panel about Bulgaria the green activists, politicians and experts *Petko Kovachev*, *Andrey Ralev* and *Borislav Sandov* gave an overview on the Bulgarian environmental movement from socialist time until today. Still back in 1988 the network Ecoglasnost was founded, from which after the fall of the socialist system the first green party in Bulgaria emerged. In the 1990s the first green NGO activities started and campaigns against the Nuclear Powerplants in Kosloduy and Belene were initiated and first activities for the preservation of protected areas in the Bulgarian national parks took place. The building of infrastructure, such as highways, but also waste disposal became issues of environmentalists in the following years.

Since 2005 one can speak of the third green wave of Bulgarian environmentalism. Far-reaching protests, e.g. against fracking or against construction sites on the Black Sea coast, in forests or other preserved territories, are raised. One of the most significant environmental campaigns in Bulgaria during the last years was the demonstration at Eagles Bridge in June 2012. The catalyst for these protests was a new forestry law which allowed land in preserved territories to be converted easier into construction ground. From this moment on the environmental movement in Bulgaria was assumedly building a critical mass even for protests on non-environmental issues such as the anti-oligarch protest which led to the resignation of the last two Bulgarian governments in 2013 and 2014.

Other impacts of the green movements in Bulgaria on the political situation in the country are new more informal and horizontal forms of political organization, although most environmental activists in Bulgaria wouldn't call themselves political, similar to the Roșia Montană activists in Romania. Another effect of the activities in the last years is that time for reaction – from the moment an ecological issue appears on the agenda to the moment of some form of protest – decreased dramatically. Five out of five local referendums held in Bulgaria in the recent past were on ecological issues. And last but not least this development exerts some effect on the public opinion. Official opinion polls show that 97 % of Bulgarians are against GMO and that the Bulgarians are the European nation which is most aware about 'Natura 2000'.

Albania

The experts and activists *Edvin Pacara*, *Dr. Emirjeta Adhami* and *Lavdosh Ferruni* presented the special issue of protests against small hydropower plants (SHP) in Albania. A first overview on Albania's geological situation reveals that there are 15 national parks, five protected landscape areas, four strict nature reserves and 26 managed nature reserves besides other protected areas. The country is homeland for 30 % of the flora found in Europe. A lot of rivers and streams build the basis for hydropower, on which the country's electrical power supply depends.

Currently more than 500 hydropower plants (HPP) are being planned in Albania and the trend to build SHPs in protected areas and national parks cannot be ignored. Although hydropower is classified as a renewable energy source, it destroys nature and rivers. Previous experiences with damming rivers in Albania led to a loss of biodiversity, cut the migration of trout, salmon, eels and other migratory fish and caused coastal erosion, which in turn leads to the rising of sea level. One of the core problems is the deficiency in the legal framework. As countermeasure environmental organizations such as WWF and EcoAlbania started lobbying activities to resist against building the huge number of new SHPs. Many awareness-raising activities in visual and written media were performed to address the public participation in environmental projects. Expecting the legal framework for the HPP construction to be improved by the government, conferences were held and studies were conducted. Numerous protests were organized by the communities.

Another important topic coming into the focus of protests in Albania during the last years was the storage of chemical weapons and the importation of hazardous and non-hazardous waste. Environmental activists collected over 65,000 signatures in support of a national referendum, which finally became irrelevant because the government elected in 2013 decided to stop the import of waste, thus fulfilling the referendum's demand. Except the organization of protests, different strategies were used to reach the goal such as building ad hoc groups and inviting key people and media as well as talking to decision and policy makers.

In a final conclusion *Radosveta Krăstanova*, once again highlighted the question: 'What kind of change is wanted by protesting people?' The case studies discussed during the conference showed that social movements defend common public goods that are not treated accurately by the state and its institutions, as can be perceived in all former socialist countries in Southeast Europe. The mixing up of ecological and social as well as judicial issues demonstrates once again that environment which is protected by protesters consists not only of fresh air and clean water but also of the quality of the legislation and the possibility to participate in decision making processes. Thus, the movements introduce a new way of politics by putting on the agenda what is neglected by the official representatives.
