

Contentious Actions in Comparative Perspective: Is East Germany a Special Case?¹

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Contentious actions in the form of protest are an essential part of politics in most developed democracies. In the former Communist-ruled countries, where collective action and mass protests are fairly new forms of political behavior, however, contentious actions emerged only very recently.² During the dramatic months of October-December 1989, thousands of people protested peacefully in the streets of Leipzig, Dresden, Berlin, and other German cities. In other countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, popular protest likewise challenged the power of Communist regimes. In fact, the rise of mass protest in these countries accelerated the crisis of legitimacy and the imminent collapse of the Communist regimes everywhere in the region. These protests were the beginning of new forms of political action. Little is known, however, about contentious actions which occurred *after* the regime changed. While most studies on political participation in post-Communist countries and the former GDR have focused on institutional changes and conventional forms of politics, such as voting or party membership, I argue that contentious actions are an essential feature of the process of democratization. Who are the contenders in the transition? Which forms do contentious actions take in societies that have little or no tradition of political conflict, contending claims and public protest actions? How do contentious actions influence the transforming of the political system?

I will first address the comparative dimensions of the East German case within the transition literature. Then I will present some empirical findings about protest behavior as the most

prominent form of contentious actions in four post-Communist societies: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and East Germany. More specifically, I will chart out three domains of protest: actions centered around the process of changing the territorial state (e.g. the dissolution of the GDR and the creation of the Slovak state), contentious actions deriving from economic conflicts and protest in connection with the building of new institutions, such as unions. The main thrust of the argument is that there are distinctly different paths to democratization despite the shared legacies of Communist rule. The comparison highlights the similarities as well as the differences between the countries.

The Comparative Perspective

Contentious actions constitute an essential element of all modern democracies (Barnes and Kaase, 1979). In post-Communist societies, however, these actions are comparatively new, and they are closely linked to the question of democratization, since the opening of political space allows for a variety of actors to voice demands and engage in political action. The literature on regime transition and democratization can be broken into two groups. From a global perspective, the transition in East Central Europe represent the "third wave" of the recent democratization process, to use Huntington's language. The surge to democracy ("freedom") began in Southern Europe in the mid 70s, spread to many parts of the world, including Latin America in the 1980s, and then culminated in the decline and ultimate implosion of Soviet-type Communism in East and East Central Europe. All three waves are viewed as part of one groundswell movement resulting in the establishment of

democracy. The transition in post-Communist East Central Europe thus represents one variation in the overall development towards democracy. The other group of regime transition literature stresses the uniqueness of the implosion of Communist regimes in East Central Europe. German social scientist Claus Offe, for example, stresses the distinctly different features of the "triple transformation" in Eastern Europe, involving the introduction of markets, the restructuring of political institutions, and the creation of civil societies. From this perspective, it is useful to distinguish between "transition(s)" (in Latin America) and the "transformation" (in Central and Eastern Europe), a term that is widely used in the German social science literature for the newly emerging field of "*Transformationsforschung*". Depending upon the assessment of the overall features of regime change, the first group of scholars stresses the similarities of these different ways to democratization, whereas the second group focuses on the differences between the Southern European and Latin American transitions on the one hand, and the East European regime change on the other.

Recent research on post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe suggest a great variation in the paths leading to the institutionalization and stabilization of democracies in the region (Welsh, 1994). It is therefore useful to analyze the transition in this region *sui generis*. Empirically-rich description of countries as different as Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, or East Germany, are necessary for an in-depth analysis of these varying ways to establish open, pluralist societies. The following analysis proposes an approach that is based on a limited case study method in order to compare and contrast contentious actions as part of the political changes occurring in post-Communist societies. The case study method offers an opportunity to study political change in-depth.

Before the collapse of the Communist regimes, contentious political behavior typically took the form of dissent or opposition, or in some cases, such as East Germany, it resulted in emigration. The opening of the political space due to the establishment of pluralist institutions after the peaceful revolution resulted in a broad range of political actions, including unconven-

tional political behaviour and mass protest. Protest behaviour provides important tools for analyzing the political and social fabric of a society in transition from authoritarian state socialism to pluralist democracy. The significance of protest politics can be viewed in three aspects.

First, on a *political cultural level*, protest indicates an end to the alienation that characterized individual behaviour during the Communist era. To engage in protest actions requires individual risk taking and a certain amount of public engagement. Contentious actions in the form of mass protest indicate a significant change in the political culture of formerly Communist-ruled countries.

Second, on a *social level*, protest leads to the formation of group identities. Given the former weakness of both social differentiation and group identity articulation, collective action that fosters the formation of group identity is crucial to strengthen those intermediary organizations obligatory to pluralist polity. Depending upon the salience and the duration of protest activities, such group identities may develop into group formation — a precondition for interest representation in the new institutional establishment.

Third, on a *political level*, protest activity contributes to the re-creation of civil society since it opens a space for the articulation of independent interest between the state and the established political society. The rebuilding of civil society is an essential feature in the consolidation of new democracies, particularly pertinent for former Communist-ruled societies in which civil society was only vaguely developed. Typically, groups with little or no connection to the institutional setting engage in protest politics. Contentious action becomes a way to participate in politics and create new organizations.

In the former GDR, mass protest played a significant role in challenging the SED-regime in 1989-90 (Albrecht, 1996; Lemke, 1997; Pollack and Rink, 1997). The fall 1989 mass movement did more than merely speed up the crumbling of the regime. The protest activity actually shaped the restructuring of the regime. Protest actors emerged as contenders for power and established themselves as transitional political elites, for example as negotiators at the "Round Table" or as participants in the dismantling of the repressive *Stasi* apparatus. The "rush

to German unity" soon replaced this revolutionary momentum. The dissolution of the GDR as a state and the accession to the Federal Republic fundamentally altered the political structures and frames of action. Because of this unique transition to democracy, East Germany represents a special historical case ("*Sonderfall*") among the post-Communist Central and East European countries. The former GDR progressed through a dual transition: from authoritarian to democratic rule, and from independent statehood to integral participation in the German Federal Republic.

Features of East German Contentious Actions: What is Special?

Shortly after the first "founding" elections in post-Communist countries in 1990, a wave of mass protest arose in East Germany and in other countries, challenging the rapid establishment of market economies, the rewriting of constitutions, legal arrangements, as well as other measures introduced by the new leadership.³ Our empirical research shows that protest is an important feature in all four post-Communist societies under investigation.⁴ The concept applied to the analysis of contentious actions is derived from social movement research. Sidney Tarrow (1991) proposes that the waves of mobilization in Communist countries in 1989-90 be interpreted as a collective response to a favourable political opportunity structure. In Tarrow's view, those consistent parameters encountered by social and political activists which either encourage or discourage action determine the political opportunity structure. Tarrow differentiates among the following factors for classification: degree of openness of formal political institutions with regard to political participation of peripheral or marginalized groups; stability or instability of political affiliations; existence or nonexistence of influential non-governmental associations (the church in non-democratic systems like Poland or the GDR, for example), conflicts between political elites.

Following this system, one finds that particularly unfavourable conditions for the emergence of collective action were evident in the GDR through the mid-1989. Only in September of 1989, under the pressure of mass departures ("exit"), did the role played by protests and dem-

onstrations increase ("voice"). The transition to democratic rule once again changed the political opportunities of collective action. These opportunities originated within the context of the GDR, but integrated into the West German parliamentary system after the first, and last, East German free election in March 1990. German unification can thereby be viewed as a "critical juncture," because the institutional setting of West Germany repositioned itself in East Germany, radically reshaping the political context for protest politics. Regime change and transition to democracy witnessed distinctly different political opportunity structures for protest.

Ekiert and Kubik (1996) suggest that the situation after the implosion of Communist regimes can be described best as a phase of "unstructured opportunities." Institution-building was still in flux, political actors had not yet established themselves, political coalitions were fluid, and contending claims shaped the conflicts of transformation. In this situation, a variety of political choices were available, and protest politics was a way to influence the decision-making process. The empirical results of our study show that the frequency and intensity of protest in the four researched nations that were investigated varied considerably. In the following section, I will discuss contentious actions that occurred after 1989 along three dimensions: conflicts involving state building, conflicts involving economic issues, and contentious actions connected with the building of new political institutions, including the nascent civil society.

State-building

Two countries in our sample underwent fundamental changes in their state structure: East Germany, due to the dissolution of the GDR as a state and the accession to the Federal Republic on October 3, 1990, and Slovakia seceding from the Czechoslovak Federation as an independent Slovak Republic in January of 1993. In both cases, the changes resulted through elite negotiations and the process itself took only a few months. No popular referendum took place in the case of Czechoslovakia or the Slovak Republic. In the case of the GDR, the outcome of the vote in March 1990 was read as a mandate for quick unification with West Germany,

but here, too, no referendum took place. The GDR were incorporated into the Federation without yet having a new constitution drafted for the united Germany.

Our data-set shows that the question of state building (or state dissolution) involved protest actions in both cases. In the GDR, the slogan "We are one people" introduced in the winter of 1989-90, best signified the "rush toward German unity." Earlier demands (already in early 1990) included the freedom to travel and the introduction of the West German DM. However, several protest actions expressed opposition to unification. These actions were highly concentrated in the months after the opening of the Wall and continued through the spring of 1990. Over the summer and fall of the same year, however, they decreased significantly (except for the day of unification: October 3). In 1989 we coded thirteen protest events directed against Germany's unification; in 1990 ten events, and thereafter none directed against unification. Protest was rather directed against specific policies of unification, such as property rights regulations, unemployment or plant layoffs. Once the two states merged, the unification issue was no longer contested and even lost its mobilizing power. This is a remarkable development, given the sweeping and fundamental changes resulting from the restructuring of the state. No single group remained as contender, not even the PDS, which was most deeply rooted in the history and the culture of the GDR. Despite the frictions that arose during the merging of the two countries, there was a lack of alternatives to the restructuring *within* the frame of the Federal Republic. Even those who questioned the "western" mode of capitalism could not propose a viable alternative. Instead of opposing unification, protest unfolded in subsequent years along new social and political cleavages. It was directed against specific policies during the decision-making phase such as rapid privatization, the "Abwicklung" of higher education, or the renaming of streets, for example.

In the case of Slovakia, protest activity increased before the break up of the two republics. Malova (1997) argues that the national issue in Slovakia became a mobilizing force for the increase in contentious actions. Collective

protests there were mainly mobilized by politicians and leaders of the Slovak national movement demanding national recognition and the country's independence. Protest actions in Slovakia culminated during the years 1991-1992. Once the Slovak Republic was formed, contentious actions decreased. So far, no popular protest evolved demanding a revision of the decision.

In both cases, the processes of state dissolution and state-building were peaceful. Mass protest actions preceded and accompanied the actual process of the creation of the new state entity. This fundamental transformation took place in a context of "unstructured opportunities" in which contentious actions represented an important avenue of voicing political demands. In the case of East Germany, the national issue was part of a "hidden agenda" before 1989. Feelings of belonging together were mobilized during the peaceful revolution and gained the upper hand in the search for political alternatives. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the fringe Slovak National Party succeeded in mobilizing for the separation from the federation. Protest actions were not the root-cause for the creation of new states, but actors mobilized a large number of people for the national cause appealing to the oldest collective identity, the national identity (Malova, 1997). In both cases, however, we see a fading of the issue of state building from the protest agenda. Due to the lack of alternatives, the creation of the new polity was no longer contested.

Economic Conflicts

The introduction of a market economy in East Central Europe proceeded with dramatic speed. Partly due to political decisions made by the new political elites to dismantle the centrally planned economy and partly induced through outside actors, such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the EU, all countries in East Central Europe implemented free market reforms. Poland was boldest, introducing the liberalization of prices and other measures to induce the establishment of free markets through a "shock therapy" in 1990. In our sample, East Germany was the other country proceeding rapidly in implementing far reaching market reforms. The introduction of the

currency union — a decision motivated largely by politics — became “shock therapy” for the former GDR, resulting in an immediate crisis for East German industrial and agricultural products. Privatization was organized by *Treuhand Anstalt*.⁵ Although a large-scale transfer of resources prevented, at least partly, the impending collapse of the east German economy, it could not, however, solve the structural problems of what once was East Germany.⁶ As a result, the united Germany witnessed an unprecedented rise of labor unrest in the years following unification.

Our analysis of demands shows that contentious actions were most often centered around issues such as plant layoffs, the rising unemployment caused by rapid privatization, and other conflicts arising from specific policies of economic restructuring. East Germany is not a special case in this respect. Poland, which has a longer tradition of strikes due to the “Solidarity” movement, likewise saw a rise in labor unrest. The two countries with the fastest track of economic reforms experienced a similar intensity of economic conflicts. However, important differences can be noted. First, labor unrest in Poland was directed against the national government or plant owners in the country, and issues were defined in the context of Poland, without references to other countries. In the case of East Germany, labour unrest included a two-fold strategy. Actions were directed against layoffs and the like. These problems were particularly important during actions carried out in the metal, chemical, mining, and shipbuilding industries.⁷ Another set of demands during these collective actions focused on the equalization of living conditions in East and West Germany (“*Angleichung der Lebensverhältnisse*”). Demands to adapt to West German standards mobilized large sectors of society and included issues such as income and seniority principles. This was important in key industries as well as in the public service sector, especially among teachers, nurses, and postal workers.

The second major difference between Poland and East Germany occurs in respect to the protest actors. In both countries, the unions played a special role as participants in the production and distribution conflicts. Differences occur in

respect to the timing and scope of union activity. Whereas Poland had seen union activity even before the collapse of the Communist regime, such activities became virtually nonexistent in the GDR since the 1960s. Our data show a high continuity of labor unrest organized by unions in Poland, whereas the GDR — as well as in the other countries — contentious actions organized by unions began only after the immediate collapse of the Communist regime. In this situation, it is surprising how fast unions gained influence in east Germany and how important they became as contentious actors. In our study we found that resource mobilization, e.g. the large-scale transfer of union resources to the new east German states, accounts for the rapid rise of union action. According to new social movement research, actors who can mobilize resources — material as well as immaterial (organizational experience and access to media, for example) — are more successful in organizing contentious actions. By the end of 1990, all the west German unions had established themselves in the new *Länder*, and the system of collective bargaining that was practised in the west was introduced in the eastern part of the country as well. In 1991 several unions, including the steel and metal workers, public transportation, and postal services, went on strike in the east. 1992 witnessed still greater strike activity and demonstrations on the part of unions in East Germany, thereby accounting for much of the increased protest intensity throughout this period. Union activity continued unabated through 1993 and 1994, and economic problems are most often cited as important issues by east Germans.

Which segments of the population protested most? Given the conflicts over privatization and the restructuring of the economy, we expected to find workers in the industrial sector to be the most active protesters. This initial hypothesis was only confirmed in the case of Poland. In East Germany, industrial workers were the second most important socio-professional group of protesters. Rather, employees and workers in the public service sector (health, education, transportation, and public administration) were most often engaged in protest activities during the transition period. This finding also holds true for Hungary and Slovakia.

Institution Building

Restructuring political institutions to create open pluralist societies is another key feature of the East and East Central European societies. The literature on transformation generally agrees that the building of civil society is among the most important, but also most complicated, challenges for these societies, which typically had rather weak civil societies before the regime change. To our surprise, however, we found that in the countries we studied, protest actions were typically not "spontaneous," but initiated by existing organizations. These findings suggest that the image of the weakness of civil society is only relative.⁸ In fact, the revolutionary activity propelled the formation of a variety of different, albeit small and short-lived groups. The field of "unstructured opportunities" was soon filled with more stable civic organizations. Moreover, our findings suggest that the protest milieu was continuously changing as a variety of groups and organizations emerged as spin-off movements or as successors to the former oppositional, civic movements. The field of contentious actions was expanding to include several partially overlapping but different movements. This diffusion of protest issues was accompanied by a differentiation of protest actors.

In the case of Poland, a variety of labor organizations emerged, often competing among themselves for power and influence. The "Solidarity" movement broke into various unions and groups. New non-governmental organizations emerged quickly. In Slovakia and Hungary, old forms of associations were revived; the national issue promoted group formation as well. East Germany set itself apart in two respects. First, indigenous east German associations could survive in the united Germany due to a set of state policies securing funding for voluntary associations and project groups. Second, since west Germany has long been characterized by a vibrant new social movement sector, several of these organizations expanded into the east, supporting the nascent environmental or peace groups, for example. Thus an important set of actors organizing protests were groups found in the social movement sector. These actors contain three distinct groupings: the former civic movement in East Germany, new social groups (formed

around women's, environmental, and peace issues), and local and neighbourhood organizations concerning themselves with rent, housing problems, urban planning, and local historical concerns. These groups were the most common organizers of protest during the period of political, social and economic transformation. Furthermore, the rise of right-wing extremism and xenophobia generated counter-movements in East Germany, as well as in the west. The opening of political space allowed for a variety of actors to mobilize and coalesce. As in the case of union activity, the resource mobilization model can best explain the relatively rapid evolution of civic groups which articulate themselves through collective actions.

None of the four countries we studied experienced the formation of anti-system movements or movements directed against the newly emerging pluralist structure. Contentious actions, therefore served to supplement the building of new institutions. Their major goal was to influence the policy-making process, but not to revise the general direction of democratization. The repertoire of contention included a broad range of strategies to disrupt the public order, to draw attention to certain issues, the dominant protest strategy in all these countries has been peaceful.⁹ In this respect, the transformation of post-Communist countries of East Central Europe clearly differs from transitions in other regions and societies.

Conclusion

The four cases under investigation show that protest is an important feature during the process of democratization. Even after the peaceful revolutions that took place in 1989, contentious actions opened the space for political activity and continue to do so. East Germany represents a special case when viewed from the perspective of creating new institutions, since this process proceeded not through indigenous changes, but was rather induced through the unification with the more stable and powerful West Germany. The transfer of political institutions from West Germany created the opportunity for the comparatively rapid and smooth establishment of pluralist institutions. However, this hurried merger also produced severe political and economic

conflicts, and in the case of east Germany there was a widespread feeling of being "colonized." Within a relatively short period of time contentious political participation has become an important way to voice political concerns, even though traditions of contentious actions were not well developed before the mass protests in 1989-90. The decline in protest movements by 1994 indicates that the east German transformation is reaching the phase of "habituation," a time of gradual rather than abrupt change.

Although East Germany, like the other formerly Communist ruled countries had to manage the "triple transformation" of economic, political, and civil society, it did so in a political and socioeconomic environment that was different from the other post-Communist countries. This sets East Germany apart from the rest of East Central Europe. Viewed from the perspective of regime transformation, however, similarities with the other countries prevail. East German society has to cope with the legacies of Communist rule much like the other societies. Since some of the new political institutions and groups in this part of Germany, such as the PDS, have roots in the pre-1989 period, the issue of how to cope with historical legacies in the new democracies continues to take a centre stage in politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the current debate centres around the question of common historical legacies and differences that exist between East Germany and the other former Communist states.

Notes

1. A former version of this paper was presented at the German Studies Association Conference held in Washington, D.C., from September 25-28, 1997.
2. The concept of contentious action was introduced by Doug McAdam and others in new social movement research describing protest politics and other forms of collective action used in non-routinized, disruptive ways to voice political demands publicly.
3. Empirical research on the former GDR (East Germany) was conducted at the Freie Universität Berlin. The research project was developed in collaboration with Grzegorz Ekiert (Harvard University) and Jan Kubik (Rutgers University). For more details see Lemke (1997a).
4. Our protest study is based on a content analysis of newspapers. In our coding system, a protest event is considered to be any collective action in which at least three people take part. Extreme acts of protests carried out by individuals, such as hunger-strikes or self-immolation, were included due to their rarity. The action must be public, i.e., it must be reported in at least one newspaper. The action must have

pertinence to a public or political issue and make this clear through its demands. Radical right-wing protests are thus included due to the political character of their actions. Finally, the protest must have the character of an action, i.e., it must contain a non-routinized, unconventional, and disruptive behavior. Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this article are based on the Lemke, Ekiert, and Kubik protest event data base.

5. By the end of 1994, with the conclusion of the *Treuhand's* privatization efforts, 3/4 of all jobs in the former GDR state enterprises were lost. About 80 percent of these firms were sold to west German employers. East Germany's dependency on West German capital generated a mentality of "colonization" among east Germans. This perception hampered the political dialogue between east and west Germans and remains one of the most troublesome post-unification issues.
6. In contrast to other post-Communist transformations, the economic restructuring in East Germany included large scale transfers of resources to buffer the economic "shock therapy" of merging the two incompatible economies. Financial transfers included about 35 billion DM per year, (1991 to 1994) out of the Fund for German Unity, unemployment insurance (between 2.45 and 15 billion DM per year, 1991-94), a pension fund (between 4.5 and 15.0 billion DM per year, 1991-94), and resources in the form of investment funds for East Germany (See *Deutschland Archiv*, 12/1995: 1334).
7. A major conflict in 1992 involved the shipbuilding industries under *Treuhand* supervision in Rostock and Wismar in northern east Germany. Because of the merger of these plants with the west German shipbuilding firm *Bremer Vulkan AG*, workers in East Germany organized several large protest actions.
8. In her history of the GDR from 1949-1989, historian Mary Fulbrook (1995) rightly points out that protest and dissent existed throughout the history of the GDR, but the level of compliance with the regime was also high.
9. In the former GDR, however, violent protests occurred at a greater frequency than in the other countries due to the rise of militant right-wing extremism. About 13 percent of all protest actions involved somekind of violence. In our definition of protest events, right-wing actions included those in which at least three people were involved and the actors, most often Skinheads and neo-Nazis, were identified. The political significance of extreme acts such as murder, fire bombs or arson necessitated their inclusion in the coding schema of definition. Even if specific demands were not made, attacks against foreigners were generally coded as right-wing actions due to their political nature.

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