The New Face of Contentious Politics

During our discussion of contentious politics for this course, an article written by Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik was assigned. It focused on the protest activities of four Eastern European countries and theories as to why, how, who, and when these activities occur. We found this article to be very interesting, especially in light of what is currently occurring in a country in that part of the world, Ukraine. Ukraine recently held its presidential elections, a race that was predicted to be very close. A possibility of fraud was predicted, and has all but been confirmed in the past several days. A clear winner has not yet been chosen, and a second election is being considered. Besides this however, a political action group called PORA, translated to “It’s time,” has been holding protests since the day after the election. PORA is a group that is new to Ukraine, and one of a several groups rising out of former Soviet Republics that are new to the world. These groups are of a different breed than we have ever seen before, and they are changing the way the world views contentious politics.

One of the first questions that must be asked when discussing contentious politics is simple. Who are these groups? What do they stand for? While PORA may be the one in the spotlight right now, it is certainly not the only one of its kind. One needs only to look to its neighbors—Serbia, Georgia, Albania, and Belarus to discover four other advocacy groups that have missions parallel to that of PORA.
In Serbia, OTPOR started changing things in 1999, with a simple slogan that its founders spray-painted on the walls of major Serbian cities. The slogan, “Resistance until Victory,” was just the start of a movement that would eventually demand, and receive, the resignation of Slobodan Milosevic. They have grown from a mere 4,000 members in 1999 to a total of 100,000 today. The Kmara (Enough) movement in Georgia is also playing a prominent role in Georgian politics. One of the main backers of Georgia’s “revolution of roses,” they were responsible for the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze, the president since 1995. In his place, Mikheil Saakashvili and the National Movement Party have taken the lead in the development of the country.

The MJAFTI Campaign in Albania, also meaning “enough,” is a national campaign to educate Albanians about its current social problems. It focuses on eight problems, concentrating its forces to make a large, sustainable impact. This year, the organization was awarded the UN International Award for Civil Society, the first recipient since 1997.

What do all these groups have in common? How are they so effective? How do they communicate with tens of thousands of members directly? These are all questions that arose during the course of our research. As a possible solution, we have focused on the conclusions made by Ekiert and Kubik. In their summary of conclusions, they state that, “collective protest in new democracies is best explained from an institutional perspective that combines the concept of resources in a broad sense…” (authors’ emphasis). These new groups are so effective in activating large groups of people because they are so adept at maximizing their resources.

One of the resources given by Ekiert and Kubik was traditions. Surely, these countries have plenty of tradition. As former republics of the Soviet Union, they have been subject to suppression and corruption. These groups appear to have learned from their experiences. All
five of these organizations focus solely on the preservation and extension of their democratic rights, nothing less. Nothing will distract them from their purpose. A quote from PORA’s website, www.pora.org, states that they will accept money, but with the condition that the provided support “does not give any right to change our goals, strategy, and tactics.” Compared to organizations in the United States, this is almost an exact opposite. Here, organizations are bound to their contributors, and thus will enact almost any change the donor would like to see happen. PORA is the equivalent of a politician who would accept money from Exxon-Mobil, yet blatantly oppose drilling in Alaska.

These groups also have symbols. They have mission statements, mottos, anthems, seals, and posters. All of these serve to promote the goals of the party and get its message out to the people. MJAFT has dozens of posters on its websites able to be downloaded. ZUBR’s seal, a charging bull, is worn on arms, cheeks, and backpacks in Belarus. Indeed, Otpor may be the best of these organizations at using symbols for its benefit. Its slogans, which change with the political happenings, are constantly being plastered across city streets, continually making their presence known.

Ekiert and Kubik also talk of organizational resources. This is when these action groups really begin to impress. With the help of cell-phones, internet, and other forms of mass communication, these groups are able to assemble themselves like never before. Within hours, thousands of members of PORA took to Kiev’s streets. These organizations are able to tell each member what to do, where to be, and when. Their websites are constantly updated with new information. Through list-serves, thousands of emails can be sent instantaneously. Cell-phones, beepers, and other personal electronic devices allow members to be directly contacted. In almost every aspect, these groups have maximized organizational resources to give every member the
latest information. However, beyond the aspect of resources, something else about these organizations sparked our curiosity. Why is it that they are all in the same area of the world?

Institutional opportunities have been defined as the openness, or lack of, in a government’s institutions. Kubik and Ekiert in their article proved that the more established a government’s institutions, the more likely protest activities would occur. This is relevant to former republics of the Soviet Union because only now are these nations beginning to have a sense of identity and stability in their new formation. In the formative years of a democracy, nothing is there to place upon. There are few identifiable problems. However, we believe that now these countries are realizing what is wrong, and working to fix the problems.

Clearly, these action groups are of a different breed. They utilize technological resources to be fast, smart, tight, and well coordinated. They rely heavily on the youth movement. Young adults who are educated, passionate, and ready to put their beliefs into practice make up the majority of these group’s members. They have ideals. Certain goals are in place that can’t be sacrificed. And perhaps what is most impressive is that they want it now. These people are tired of waiting and compromises. It is our conviction that these groups are the future of contentious politics. Groups across the world, even here in the United States, can learn much from what these groups have accomplished. By fighting for their beliefs, it becomes clear that their vision of democracy is one of a living, breathing, and functioning government. It is a concept too many of us seem to have forgotten. Yet, it is not too late. We can change things. Luckily, groups like PORA are here to prove that. We only have to follow their lead.